

Autofiction and Fictionalisation: J.M. Coetzee's Novels and *Boyhood*

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How are they to be figured, this man and he? As master and slave? As brothers, twin brothers? As comrades in arms? Or as enemies, foes? What name shall he give this nameless fellow with whom he shares his evenings and sometimes his nights too, who is absent only in the daytime, when he, Robin, walks the quays inspecting the new arrivals and his man gallops about the kingdom making his inspections?

J.M. Coetzee, 'He and His Man'

Introduction: Coetzee's Fictionalised Trilogy

Boyhood (1997), like *Youth* (2002), is J.M. Coetzee's fictionalised 'autobiography'. In this work, Coetzee – in a novelistic fashion – uses third-person narration and present tense to trace the development of his protagonist, John Coetzee, from boyhood to youth and question the formative impact of such years on the protagonist's identity. The relationship between Coetzee the writer and Coetzee the character in the autobiographical memoirs is one of psychological doubling or mirroring. Therefore, and to borrow the title of Coetzee's 2003 Nobel lecture, 'he and his man' are paired in a problematically intricate relationship evading, yet inviting, parallels.

In his memoirs, Coetzee takes us through his protagonist's school years in Worcester and Cape Town in South Africa, family upbringing, religious and political anxieties, social hesitations, and university years in Cape Town. Moreover, Coetzee traces his protagonist's life in London as a computer programmer, attempts at writing poetry and reading literature, attempts at researching the works of the English novelist Ford Madox Ford, and failed love affairs. In *Boyhood*, we see Coetzee's boy as a school student between the ages of 10 and 13, struggling against his mother's influence and her stifling love and internalising the shame and guilt of his family's racist prejudice. The use of the third person to recount life details – with possible modifications to effect a middle ground between fiction and the search for self inherent in autobiographical writing – means using paradoxical styles. The term literary theorists use in this regard to describe this form of fictionalised autobiographies is 'autofiction'. The term was coined in 1977 by French writer and critic Serge Doubrovsky with reference to his novel *Fils*. Recently, this term has been used by critics like Karen Ferreira-Meyers to indicate the blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction in texts.¹ I suggest in this article that Coetzee's fictionalised memoirs can be called 'autofiction' just as his novels can be seen as somewhat autobiographical. Applied broadly, the term 'autofiction' can be used as a label for such genres, autobiographical novels and fictionalised autobiographies or memoirs, in the case of Coetzee. Although the term 'autofiction' is better applied to fictionalised or autobiographical memoirs, Coetzee's fictions treating autobiographical themes also partake in this genre, though to a lesser extent.

Since *Youth* and *Summertime* (2009) – as autobiographical works – are less relevant to my study, I concentrate more on *Boyhood*. In *Youth*, we see Coetzee's protagonist as a young man in his late teens and early twenties seeking a university degree in English and Mathematics at Cape Town University and then working as a programmer for IBM and International Computers in

¹ Karen Ferreira-Meyers, 'Historical Overview of a New Literary Genre: Autofiction,' *Auto/Fiction* 1.1 (2013) 15.

London while writing a Master's project on Ford and pursuing other literary interests. Although Coetzee's fictionalised memoirs like *Youth* and *Summertime* are as stylistically rich and thematically dense as his fictions, what I attempt in this article is an account of the interrelationship between *Boyhood* in particular and a representative sample from Coetzee's other fictions by way of suggesting intertextual links between autobiographical and fictional writings.

In *Summertime*, by contrast with the other two memoirs, John Coetzee, the character, is reportedly dead and different people who have known the late author give multiple accounts of his personality to a fictitious biographer, most of which turn out to be harshly critical of him at the personal level. This work is a portrayal of Coetzee's life in the 1970s in South Africa through interviews and fragments from Coetzee's notebooks. Whether we consider them memoirs, histories, or fictional autobiographies, *Youth* and *Summertime* – regardless of their truth or fiction values – are thematically less relevant to my focus. Nevertheless, and to draw on the work of Wayne Booth, *Boyhood* and *Youth* differ from *Summertime* in that they evoke the same 'implied author' or a similar author image. These works can be seen as two consecutive parts or volumes of the same memoir. By contrast, the multiplicity of voices in *Summertime* and its distant perspective of composition after the death of John Coetzee (the author/character) suggest a different implied author.

Autobiography vs. Autobiography

Readers of Coetzee's biography can easily see the relevance of these two works to Coetzee's life. What might be disturbing, however, is that Coetzee does not resort to past tense and first-person narration in these two works. Instead, he significantly uses present tense and third-person narration to recall his past as a lived experience in the present and fictionalise himself as an alien John Coetzee. Coetzee describes this distant or detached narrative technique, in an interview with David Attwell, as 'autobiography'),² and Margaret Lenta is one critic who explored this technique as one of 'delicate strategies of distancing'.³ To elaborate, the narrator in *autobiography*, is not close enough to the autobiographical *I* essential to autobiography. When this closeness is achieved, the result is autobiography in the first person rather than *autobiography*.⁴ This might mean that Coetzee is avoiding a direct confessional mode in the first person. However, Coetzee does communicate a truth about himself in the very act of conveying his reflections about his protagonist in the third person, which again reveals something about Coetzee the writer. The author, therefore, tells us something essential about 'his man' in such thinly disguised autobiographies. The essence of autobiographical writing, according to E. Stuart Bates, is 'a self-revealed personality, after thorough reconsideration'.⁵ Autobiographies are not expected to exactly reproduce the writer's past, for a degree of fictionalisation enters the best autobiographies. Commenting on the relationship between autobiography and fiction, Bates argues that there is 'no dividing line between autobiography and fiction'.⁶ Facts, Bates adds, are 'disputable and open to manipulation' because writers write about the self in a fictional manner

² J.M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* edited by David Attwell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 394.

³ Margaret Lenta, 'Autobiography: J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*,' *English in Africa* 30.1 (2003): 157.

⁴ Coetzee, *Doubling* 394.

⁵ E. Stuart Bates, *Inside Out: An Introduction to Autobiography* (New York: Sheridan House, 1937) 5.

⁶ Bates 9.

and select and organise things, reshaping some life material through recollection.⁷ A degree of life fictionalisation enters autobiographies when life details are not exactly reproduced. And when writers draw on personal experiences and influences in their fictions, one expects to find autobiographical elements in their novels or stories.

The work of the famous biographer Hermione Lee has established and consolidated the overlapping relationship between fiction and different kinds of biographical writings. In an interview for *The Literateur*, Lee argues that memoirs are but one aspect of ‘life-writing’, other forms being letters, diaries, biography, and travel writing. Lee argues that biography in general as life-writing and as a genre is becoming ‘much more fluid, and various, and less constricted by convention.’ There is a sense of overlap between different kinds of life-writing, especially between memoir and biography on the one hand and fiction on the other hand. As Lee contends, ‘the whole *huge* wave of interest in memoir writing has obviously affected the way that biography does its stuff.’ Asked about whether biographies can be read the way fiction is read, Lee answers: ‘We do look at biographies the way we would look at novels. We talk about procedures, endings and beginnings, tense, structure, the way in which characters are described ... It’s fascinating to see the biography as a constructed narrative, as of course it is.’⁸ In another interview for the *Paris Review*, Lee contends that such genres and narratives making up life-writing and listed above ‘can be thought of as distinct genres, but they can also overlap.’⁹ This can account for the fictional potential of Coetzee’s memoirs and the autobiographical relevance of his fictions.

Therefore, if we cannot ascertain the historical or factual truth of Coetzee’s narrative in the third person and the present tense, we can definitely follow Derek Attridge in his contention that the ‘truth that *Boyhood* offers, then, is first and foremost that of testimony: a vivid account of what it was like to grow up as a white male in the 1950s in South Africa’ who absorbs and internalises his country’s political and social milieu.¹⁰ The same logic applies to *Youth* in that it can be read as a ‘testimony’ of life in Cape Town and London in the 1960s, what it means to leave a mother country for another country, what it means to resist a life in computer industry to pursue an artistic vocation, what it means to be frustrated in love or in art, etc. ().¹¹ The blurred distinction between truth and fiction in *Boyhood* and *Youth* can be thought of as an extension of Coetzee’s treatment of this theme in novels like *Dusklands* (1974) and *Foe* (1986). In *Foe*, for example, Susan Barton wants her life story to be told as a memoir, i.e. as a truthful or historical account of her adventures on an island. The writer Foe, on the other hand, wants to add imaginative scenes of encounters with cannibals, quests, and reunions. In his 2003 Nobel Prize lecture, the story ‘He and His Man’, Coetzee also explores the intimate relationship between the writer and his fictional creations or the real people a writer would base their story on. Coetzee problematises our understanding of the relationship between the self that writes and the self being written into fiction. Writer and character here are paired. Both write different accounts and reports. He, Crusoe, writes of island adventures after he gets back to England while his man, Defoe, writes of London life, ducks, death machines, and the plague. In a sense, both writers become different sides of the same person or the same profession, not converging but moving in

⁷ Bates 11.

⁸ Hermione Lee, ‘The Life Biographic: An Interview with Hermione Lee.’ *The Literateur* 21 June 2012
<<http://literateur.com/hermione-lee/>>

⁹ Hermione Lee interviewed by Louisa Thomas, *The Paris Review: The Art of Biography No. 4*
<<http://www.theparisreview.org>>

¹⁰ Derek Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 155.

¹¹ Attridge 160

parallel lines. This affinity between Daniel Defoe the writer and Robinson Crusoe the character Coetzee plays with – against canonical eighteenth-century British fiction – can be suggestive of another intimate relationship between J.M. Coetzee the writer and Coetzee’s alter egos populating the memoirs.

Though there is no room for further exploration of possible connections in this regard, I think that Coetzee – in most of his fictions – is essentially pursuing an earlier preoccupation concerning the interplay of life versus art or fiction. Part of his writing project can be a life-writing attempt as I have already mentioned using the work of Hermione Lee. In Coetzee, life becomes material for fiction, for creative novelistic fictionalisation. This interplay between life and fiction is effected through a process of thematic doubling and mirroring, which this article attempts to elucidate.

Coetzee, it seems, manifests his reluctance to write about himself directly by writing in the third person in *Boyhood* and *Youth*. Because such an act makes these potential ‘memoirs’ more like novels, it gets difficult to ascertain their biographical accuracy. In this regard, Coetzee asserts in *Doubling the Point* that ‘all autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography’.¹² Hence, all fiction is autobiographical because writers include part of their personal experiences and life details into their writing. This should justify his resort to the third person in giving an autobiographical account. It is also axiomatic that Coetzee’s narrative technique of present tense and third-person narration gives a sense of immediacy and erases his adult or mature perspective on what is narrated. Moreover, Coetzee’s assertion indicates that his own novels as instances of writing are autobiographical in a sense; at least they are novels with autobiographical elements as this discussion will reveal in analysing themes of body/desire, animals, and farm life.

On the whole, one can safely claim that *Boyhood* and *Youth* have autobiographical value. From another perspective, Coetzee is continuing his earlier concern with the relationship between life and art as I stated earlier. If he fictionalised the Russian novelist F. Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) and, to a lesser extent, the English novelist Daniel Defoe in *Foe* (1986), he now turns to fictionalizing himself in *Boyhood* and *Youth* as an aspiring writer fleeing Cape Town to London.

Fiction (Novels) and Fictionalisation (Autobiographical Memoirs): Textual Doubling

Autobiographies account for and justify the self in question. According to H. Porter Abbott, ‘the pre-eminent peril of autobiography’ is an ‘orientation toward selfhood’.¹³ Our life stories, Abbott contends, should not be read ‘as if they were historically true, conveying to ourselves an image of wholeness and completion that we never had, screening from view what we don’t want to see.’¹⁴ Instead, autobiography for Abbott should be read ‘as a kind of action, taking place at the moment of writing, responding to the complex play of our desires, always changing, always incomplete’.¹⁵ Like novels and stories, autobiographies can be creative in terms of selecting, presenting, and ordering materials. Their historical truth is beyond the point, and thus their fictionalised treatment of their subject matter is relevant. If autobiographies have novelistic elements, it is no wonder that novels can also mirror and write back to autobiographies.

¹² Coetzee, *Doubling* 391.

¹³ H. Porter Abbott, ‘The Perils of Autobiography,’ *Sacred Heart University Review* 11.1 (1991) 25. <<http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview/vol11/iss1/2>>

¹⁴ Abbott 36.

¹⁵ Abbott 36.

In 'Confession and Double Thoughts', Coetzee argues that confessions, whether fictional or autobiographical, have the motive of telling 'an essential truth about the self'. Confessions characteristically double life histories. For Coetzee, such modes of writing are different from other genres like the memoir and the apology due to this motive of telling an essential truth about the self. As Coetzee explains in a footnote drawing on Francis Hart, memoirs are historical, apologies are ethical, and confessions are ontological in terms of their treatment of the self.¹⁶ Confessions treat the nature of the self and its being, memoirs try to reclaim the historicity of the self, and apologies attempt to articulate the integrity of the self. Since Coetzee fictionalises his works, he adds to the historicity of the memoirs ethical and moral dimensions. Regardless of the truth they tell about Coetzee or his fictionalised heroes, the works have a human dimension and a universal relevance beyond their reproduction of vague or specific details in Coetzee's life. Coetzee's fictionalised memoirs attempt to tell a truth about the self and do have a substantial autobiographical value. They construct a life story and, thus, build a history in terms of life details.

Highly important is the autobiographies' relationship with other Coetzee works and how they help us read Coetzee the writer of works like *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), *Foe* (1986), *Age of Iron* (1990), and *Disgrace* (1999). My study of the relationship between Coetzee's autobiographical memoirs and novels is not the first of its kind. For instance, Pieter Vermeulen considers *Boyhood* and *Youth* 'autobiographical novels' but reads them against the critical opinion influenced by Coetzee's own statements on the topic regarding confession and autobiography. Thus, he uses *Disgrace* to prove that the novels have 'pedagogical and poetical' dimensions similar to those in *Disgrace* and that they reconfigure a 'Wordsworthian program'.¹⁷ He tries, therefore, to discuss the relation between Wordsworth and Coetzee and autobiography and fiction. However, my study attempts a new direction of research, extending the analysis to particular aspects of three representative novels and drawing thematic parallels among them and *Boyhood*.

The Theme of Animals

Coetzee's *Boyhood* can be used to explain the preoccupation with animals, the problematic relationship of desire and the body, and the prominence of the farm theme in the fictions. In a sense, such a thematic fictional cluster interpreted in the light of the fictionalised memoir *Boyhood* endows the fictions with autobiographical import. Regardless of the truth value of this memoir, of what it says about Coetzee's childhood and his relationship with his parents, what we have is a sensitive boy being shaped by school experiences, religious encounters, friendships, childhood games, political views, etc. He dreads being beaten in class; and he is sensitive to teachers' canes based on family stories he would hear.¹⁸ Such memories are recollected just as the agony of toothache is remembered (SPL 27), together with what he likes or hates about his father's personal habits (SPL 37).

¹⁶ Coetzee, 'Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky,' *Comparative Literature* 37.3 (1985): 194.

¹⁷ Pieter Vermeulen, 'Wordsworth's *Disgrace*: The Insistence of South of South Africa in J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*,' *Journal of Literary Studies* 23.2 (2007) 179.

¹⁸ Coetzee, *Scenes from Provincial Life* (London: Harvill Secker, 2011) 8. This volume includes the three books *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* in one publication. It will be referred to hereafter in parentheses in the text using the abbreviation SPL.

In addition, the memoir treats three main themes I project in this article, and such themes are echoed in the novels treated here. The value of such themes is not only autobiographical but ethical and moral as well because they relate to the body and the otherness embodied in animals. For example, the memoir has the boy see his mother cut out the horny shells under the tongues of some hens after an advice from her sister that they can return to laying eggs after this. The boy comes to witness the suffering of such birds and develops an aversion to meat as well: ‘The hens shriek and struggle, their eyes bulging. He shudders and turns away. He thinks of his mother slapping stewing steak down on the kitchen counter and cutting it into cubes; he thinks of her bloody fingers’ (SPL 3). He likes meat, ‘yet after seeing Ros slaughtering sheep he no longer likes to handle raw meat’ (SPL 85). Like the vegetarian Elizabeth Costello in Coetzee’s novel of that title, the boy develops an aversion to processed meat and factory animals. Besides birds and animals, other insignificant forms of life attract the boy’s attention just as they do in the case of Michael K in *Life and Times of Michael K*: ‘There are ants in Worcester, flies, plagues of fleas... He has a ring of fleabites above his socks, and scabs where he has scratched’ (SPL 4). One day a car hits a dog before the eyes of the observing boy. Because the dog’s hind legs become paralysed, it ‘drags itself away, yelping with pain’ (SPL 26). Even dogs in family photo albums suffer and die. For example, in one exchange between the boy and his mother over family photos, the mother explains that her dog in one picture died of poisoned meat the farmers put for jackals (SPL 41). Another dog his mother has eats ‘the ground glass someone has put out for him’ (SPL 43). The dog suffers and dies although the boy runs to bring him medicine. He then helps bury him. As a result, the boy ‘does not want them to have another dog, not if this is how they must die’ (SPL 43). Diseased and crippled animals, especially dogs, are the victims of much violence in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. Most these animals are disposed of via lethal needles and then incineration. Lurie gives up a crippled dog at the end of *Disgrace*. He opens the cage and carries the dog with the ‘crippled rear’ in his arms ‘like a lamb’.¹⁹ Such crippled dogs and sacrificial animals in the memoir and the novel testify to the fact that Coetzee might be drawing on autobiographical elements in his fictions.

The boy watches one day the event of taking the inside parts of the sheep just as he watches the castration of lambs and cutting their tails (SPL 83). He watches as the lambs ‘bleat in terror’ and each is left with ‘a bloody stump’ (SPL 83). Lambs get castrated before his eyes: ‘At the end of the operation the lambs stand sore and bleeding by their mothers’ side, who have done nothing to protect them. Ros folds his pocketknife. The job is done; he wears a tight, little smile’ (SPL 83). Such portions of the text can be read against relevant ones in *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*: both novels treat cruelty to animals and mass slaughter for factory production of meat.

The boy is concerned for the farm sheep and their fate. His concern for animals becomes an ontological one: ‘He does not understand why sheep accept their fate, why they never rebel but instead go meekly to their death’ (SPL 85). In *Disgrace*, David Lurie thinks in similar terms. Lurie develops sensitivity to animal life because he works in an animal clinic. He is so concerned about the fate of two sheep his black neighbour will slaughter for a party. Just like the magistrate eying the buck he is about to hunt in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Lurie examines the sheep: ‘*He stands before them*, under the sun, waiting for the buzz in his mind to settle, waiting for a sign’ (D 126; my emphasis). It is because ‘A bond seems to have come into existence between himself and the two Persians, he does not know how. The bond is not one of affection. It is not even a bond with these two in particular, whom he could not pick out from a mob in a

¹⁹ Coetzee, *Disgrace* (New York: Viking, 1999) 220. Further references to this novel will be included in the text using the abbreviation D.

field. Nevertheless, suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him' (D 126). In *Boyhood*, the boy wonders why buck run to save their lives while sheep submit to their fate submissively (SPL 85): 'They are animals, after all, they have the sharp senses of animals: why do they not hear the last bleatings of the victim behind the shed, smell its blood, and take heed?' (SPL 85). The sheep Lurie is concerned about and which Petrus, Lurie's neighbor, will kill to feed his guests are described as 'slaughter-animals' (D 126), which robs them even of the capacity pondered by the boy to resist their fate. During a hunting encounter with a waterbuck in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate and the animal gaze at each other. Both are paralysed for a moment. The magistrate is not able to bring himself to shoot the ram: 'Behind my paltry cover I stand trying to shrug off this irritating and uncanny feeling, till the buck wheels and with a whisk of his tail and a brief splash of hooves disappears into the tall reeds.'²⁰ Unlike the slaughtered animals in *Disgrace*, *Boyhood*, and *Life and Times of Michael K*, the buck here is spared the disgrace of death. Such encounters between humans and animals are a thematic link between the memoir and a number of Coetzee's novels. Like the fictions, *Boyhood* the memoir offers 'an intricate account of the interrelationship between the animal and the human'.²¹ Therefore, influence relations between Coetzee's fictions and memoirs welcome an intra-comparative, intertextual approach that pays attention to their autobiographical elements and ethico-political concerns.

Every Friday the boy's uncle and family members slaughter a sheep and flay and skin it (SPL 82-83). In *Life and Times of Michael K*, K finds wild goats at the farm in Prince Albert and instinctively chases them with his knife, possessed by the 'urgency of hunger'.²² Unlike the boy in the memoir and Lurie in *Disgrace* who develop an aversion to slaughtered meat, Michael K catches one goat near the dam and drowns it under the mud, hurling 'the whole weight of his body upon it' and pressing through until he 'could feel the goat's hindquarters heaving beneath him; it bleated again and again in terror; its body jerked in spasms' (LTMK 53). Driven by the urgency of hunger, it suddenly comes to his mind that 'these snorting long-haired beasts, or creatures like them, would have to be caught, killed, cut up and eaten if he hoped to live' (LTMK 52). The lesson he learns from this experience is 'not to kill such large animals' (LTMK 57), which triggers Michael K's interest in what we can call 'minor forms of life'.²³ In the earth around his fire pit in the mountains, Michael K finds that minor forms of life thrive, 'a multifarious insect life drawn by the benign, continuous warmth' (LTMK 115). In the silence of the mountains, he pays attention to the 'scurrying of insects' around him, the buzz of flies (LTMK 66-67), and the twitter of birds in the trees (LTMK 69). Like Michael K, the boy in the memoir is a keen observer of farm life with all of its minute details. In this regard, the socio-political and moral ramifications of the use of animals in Coetzee's fictions build on and revise the biographical content of *Boyhood*, the memoir and the life experiences of Coetzee the boy.

²⁰ Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (London: Vintage, 2000 [1980]) 43. Further references to this novel will be included in the text using the abbreviation WB.

²¹ Shadi Neimneh, 'Coetzee's Postmodern Bodies: *Disgrace* between Human and Animal Bodies,' *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 4.8 (2014) 1572.

²² Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K* (London: Vintage, 1998 [1983]) 55. Further references to this novel will be included in the text using the abbreviation LTMK.

²³ Neimneh and Fatima Muhaidat, 'The Ecological Thought of J. M. Coetzee: The Case of *Life and Times of Michael K*,' *Studies in Literature and Language* 4.1 (2012) 15.

Desire and the Body

Besides the rich insights we can get from this memoir regarding the theme of animals, we can find a rich ground for the theme of desire and the body that permeates Coetzee's fictions. For example, the boy in the memoir has to deal with the puzzle of bodily desires: 'Of all the secrets that set him apart, this may in the end be the worst. Among all these boys he is the only one in whom this dark erotic current runs; among all this innocence and normality, he is the only one who desires' (SPL 48). In *Disgrace*, Coetzee projects the issue of sexual desire that blights Lurie at the very beginning of the novel. The body is presented as the protagonist's main problem. The novel's first sentence reads: 'For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well' (D 1). As the novel proceeds, David Lurie is often presented as a man who pleads the authority of Eros over his life, a man whose heart 'lurches with desire' (D 20). After charges of sexual harassment, Lurie presents himself to the university committee investigating the case as 'a servant of Eros' (D 52). The boy in the memoir is fascinated by his own body and its 'dark desires' (SPL 51). While sexual desire for the boy in the memoir is a secret unknown realm he vaguely knows about from rumours from friends and books (SPL 125), Lurie describes himself as desire's servant. By contrast, the magistrate has a desire problem with the barbarian girl: 'From the beginning my desire has not taken on that direction, that directedness' (WB 36). Unable to penetrate the body of the other, he visits prostitutes. 'Occupied in these suave pleasures, I cannot imagine what ever drew me to that alien body' (WB 45). The magistrate is not able to understand his vague desire for the barbarian girl his distance from his own bodily desires: 'There is no link I can define between her womanhood and my desire. I cannot even say for sure that I desire her' (WB 46). The body with its desires is as problematic in the memoir as it is in the fictions. Such diverse texts belonging to different genres mirror each other in their treatment of the body and the problem of desire.

In *Boyhood*, Aunt Annie, the boy's great aunt and godmother, does not seem to be aware of his revulsion for bodily processes and aging: 'She does not seem to be aware of the disgust he feels for her, wrinkled and ugly in her hospital bed, the disgust he feels for this whole ward of ugly women. He tries to keep his disgust from showing; his heart burns with shame' (SPL 98). This shame of ageing and bodily functions that Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron* feels and the titular Elizabeth Costello faces recurs here. It is also the shame of ageing experienced by the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* who complains: 'I guzzle my food like a dog. A bestial life is turning me into a beast' (WB 87). The magistrate further complains, 'I am now no more than a pile of blood, bone and meat that is unhappy' (WB 93). When he flees his cellar and enters a room of lovers and hides under the bed while they make love, he sinks 'further and further into disgrace' (WB 105). What he shrinks from is 'the shame of dying and befuddled as I am' (WB 103). Seeing sleeping naked bodies on a bed and comparing their youth with his 'heavy slack foul-smelling old body' (WB 106) makes the 'tide of shame' sweep over the magistrate 'with redoubled force' (WB 106). Reduced to a body and bodily functions, the tortured magistrate says: 'In my suffering there is nothing ennobling. Little of what I call suffering is even pain' (WB 126). The magistrate experiences 'agonies of shame' when made 'to come out of [his] den and stand naked before these idlers or jerk [his] body about for their amusement' (WB 128). The state of disgrace dogs die in and encounter in *Disgrace* and the humiliation of mass emasculation lambs encounter in *Boyhood* are mirrored in the fate the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* meets when he is tortured by the Empire he serves for treason: 'There is no way of dying allowed to me, it seems, except like a dog in a corner' (WB 128). As with the fictions, the boy in the memoir becomes aware of the shame contingent on embodiment and aging. He feels

shame at his revulsion from the normal ageing process of others. By contrast, the fictions often stage the main character's shame about getting old and humiliated. Lurie, the magistrate, Elizabeth Costello, and Mrs Curren are clear examples of the disgrace of embodiment and getting old treated in the fictions.

The Farm Theme

Like Michael K in *Life and Times of Michael K* who finds in farms an escape from civil wars and bad politics, the boy in the memoir finds in family farms a sanctuary. The boy's grandfather's farm, called Voëlfontein (Bird fountain), is a place he loves: 'he loves every stone of it, every bush, every blade of grass, loves the birds that give it its name' (SPL 67). On the farm, he is one with nature: 'He wants to be a creature of the desert, this desert, like a lizard' (SPL 70). Like the starving Michael K, the boy is 'proud of how little he drinks' (SPL 70). He is surprised that 'On the farm, it seems, there is no decay' (SPL 70). Water, meat, pumpkins stay fresh. Near the farmhouse is 'a stone-walled dam' (SPL 70) providing water for the farm and the garden through a wind-pump. The boy feels secure there and believes that no harm can happen to him (SPL 70). In the boy's imagination, 'Voëlfontein is a kingdom in its own right. There is not enough time in a single life to know all of Voëlfontein, know its every stone and bush. No time can be enough when one loves a place with such devouring love' (SPL 77). We can read the abundance of flowing time in *Life and Times of Michael K* against such a quote. In the mountains, Michael K loses track of time. He 'had kept no tally of the days nor recorded the changes of the moon' (LTMK 115). Time is ceaselessly poured on him from all directions. In each case, farm life does not seem to conform to regular temporal relations. It is also a place free from much of life's tensions and frustrations.

Moreover, the hard soil trampled in *Life and Times of Michael K* finds an echo here in the memoir in the following quote: 'The kraal walls ramble for miles up and down the hillside. Nothing grows here: the earth has been trampled flat and killed forever, he does not know how: it has a stained, unhealthy, yellow look' (SPL 77). When shearers arrive on the farm, the boy is surprised by their thick accent and strange native-like looks. He wonders: 'Where do they come from? Is there a country deeper even than the country of Voëlfontein, a heartland even more secluded from the world?' (SPL 78). This reminds one of Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* with Magda dwelling on a remote South African farm in the heartland of the Karoo. Moreover, the 'old, slow ways' of the farm in the memoir (SPL 80) after a hectic time of shearing also remind us of the routine life on a deserted Karoo farm in the novel *In the Heart of the Country*. However, the positive form of belonging to the farm in the memoir – 'The secret and sacred word that binds him to the farm is *belong*' (SPL 80) – is juxtaposed against feelings of loss and being adrift on the part of Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*. Under the negative influence of her father and her utter solitude, Magda – unlike the boy in the memoir – fails to find a counter to life's disorientations through which the farm emerges as an identity builder.

The farm in the memoir is viewed by the boy as what consolidates one's identity. It exists 'from eternity to eternity. When they are all dead, when even the farm house has fallen into ruin like the kraals on the hillside, the farm will still be there' (SPL 81). The boy has conflicting feelings of belonging to his mother and the farm and it 'does not escape him that these two servitudes clash' (SPL 81), whereas Magda belongs to her father and the farm. While the farm serves as the mother for the motherless Magda, the farm similarly serves as a second mother for the boy. He thinks how he has 'Two mothers and no father' (SPL 81). Therefore, it is

no wonder that Michael K finds fatherhood a strange idea in this camp area that is ‘the heart of the country’. Michael K

thought of the camp in Jakkalsdrif, of parents bringing up children behind the wire, their own children and the children of cousins and second cousins, on earth stamped so tight by the passage of their footsteps day after day, baked so hard by the sun, that nothing would ever grow there again. (LTMK 104)

Interestingly, the boy wants to be buried on the farm if he dies (SPL 82) or – if he is denied that – ‘to be cremated and have his ashes scattered here’ (SPL 82). This is what actually happens with Michael K’s mother once he takes her ashes from the hospital and returns to her birthplace. In Stellenbosch and en route to the country of Prince Albert, Michael K’s mother becomes very sick, and he takes her to a hospital. The hospital nurse gives Michael K a parcel containing his mother’s ashes and tells him that his mother was ‘cremated’ that morning (LTMK 32). Once he is living on a farm in the country, Michael K distributes ‘the fine grey flakes’ of his mother’s ashes ‘over the earth, afterwards turning the earth over spadeful by spadeful’ (59). In the memoir, the veld is the boy’s passion and a formative influence on him. Dams, trees, bees, and sheep dominate the boy’s farm experiences just as they do for Michael K in the novel.

In the memoir, poor rain in the veld killed grass and bushes. The boy’s uncle begins to fence it and cut it to smaller camps so that the land is given time to recover: ‘He and Ros and Freek go out every day, driving fence posts into the rock-hard earth, spanning furlong after furlong of wire, drawing it taut as a bowstring, clamping it’ (SPL 84). In *Life and Times of Michael K*, one farmer Michael K works for during his stay in the labor camp commends K’s fencing ability and tells him that ‘There will always be a need for good fencers in this country, no matter what’ (LTMK 95). As Michael K flees the camp and sees fences everywhere around him – an image of socio-political stratification – he finds it difficult to ‘imagine himself spending his life driving stakes into the ground, erecting fences, dividing up the land’ (LTMK 97). Captured for not having a permit, Michael K is driven in a train to the railway yards along with other strangers. They passed miles of ‘bare and neglected vineyards circled over by cows’ (LTMK 41). The labour camp Michael K is sent to is described as an impenetrable landscape, a ‘stone-hard veld’ (LTMK 95). The land is fenced, and Michael K wonders if ‘there were not forgotten corners and angles and corridors between the fences, land that belonged to no one yet’ (LTMK 47). Under apartheid, land was demarcated, manipulated, and surveyed. Michael K finds a special pleasure in tending the seeds he has planted near the dam, a pleasure in making ‘this deserted farm bloom’ (LTMK 59)

A simple gardener, Michael K takes his sick mother to a farm in Prince Albert, fleeing from a future South Africa torn by civil war where ‘the careless violence, the packed buses, the food queues, arrogant shopkeepers, thieves and beggars, sirens in the night, the curfew, the cold and wet’ spoil people’s lives to return to the countryside where ‘if she was going to die, she would at least die under blue skies’ (LTMK 8). This life – which is a dramatisation of life conditions under Apartheid and the emergency years of violence in the years following the novel’s publication – is the opposite of the freedom country life can provide. The contrasting images of freedom and imprisonment highlight the divisions and limitations of stratified political systems like Apartheid. By contrast, farm life in the memoir stands for freedom, openness of vision, and wholeness. If the land is fenced or kraaled in the memoir, it is to restore vitality and health.

Coda

In fictional works which are autobiographical, the percentage of truth to fiction is likely to be less than what we would expect in fictionalised memoirs. However, we cannot deny such genres their autobiographical content. I have tried to highlight the autobiographical slant of Coetzee's fictions – an aspect of his works many critics have often ignored – and the fictionalised, autofictional nature of Coetzee's memoir *Boyhood*. While many critics have studied the fictions – apartheid or post-apartheid, less attention has been given to Coetzee's trilogy of memoirs. I tried to blend them with an eye to better understand the fictions which outnumber the memoirs and exceed them in critical reception. In other words, I have tried to suggest a new model for interpreting Coetzee's novels in the light of the memoirs, using in particular Coetzee's first memoir *Boyhood* and a cluster of interrelated themes: the body and desire, animals, and the farm.

In depicting his protagonist in *Boyhood* and *Youth* as a socially marginal, yet sensitive, figure at odds with his parents' materialism and the political scene of his country, Coetzee seems to be following the autobiographical tradition of James Joyce's artist figure Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Common themes include troubled family relations, being at odds with one's country and its ideologies, artistic ambitions, self-exile, etc. While Joyce uses the past tense in his autofictional portrait of himself as a young artist, Coetzee uses the present tense to allow for this contrast with Joyce and continue his experimentation in narrative technique.

My approach is not exactly historical-autobiographical. Although I read Coetzee's autobiographical memoir against the novels, my goal has not been determining authorial intention or historical contexts. I tried to show how the works are one whole and are better read alongside each other. In a sense, my approach is new critical in a formalist sense. For the critic Lois Tyson, 'the complexity of a literary text is created by its *tension*,' which can mean the 'linking together of opposites'. This tension is created

by the integration of the abstract and the concrete, of general ideas embodied in specific images. ... Tension is also created by the dynamic interplay among the text's opposing tendencies, that is, among its paradoxes, ironies, and ambiguities.²⁴

I would like to extend this argument to tension existing at the level of texts rather than a specific text. In reading Coetzee's novels against his fictionalised memoirs, one should see intertextual relations among such texts as instances of tension whereby Coetzee grapples with notions of body and desire, farm life, and the lives of animals.

Coetzee's apparent autobiographical preoccupation with such themes is an attempt to account for and justify personal convictions. Reading Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, Rachel Ann Walsh argues that Mrs Curren's epistolary and confessional narrative is an attempt 'to account for herself and offer a response to a historical juncture that demands violent justice'.²⁵ Similarly, confessional writing is a means of accounting for the self for the author just as it is for the character. Gillian Dooley suggests that in such books as *Elizabeth Costello*, *Here and Now*, and *Diary of a Bad Year* Coetzee might 'provide a set of opinions that we can now ascribe' to him, given the

²⁴ Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide* 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2006) 140.

²⁵ Rachel Ann Walsh, "'Not Grace, Then, but at Least the Body': Accounting for the Self in Coetzee's *Age of Iron*." *Twentieth-Century Literature* 56.2 (2010) 168.

continuity of those opinions between these fictional and non-fictional works.²⁶ A concern for animal life, farm life, and the body is frequently found in Coetzee's works to an extent that gives it autobiographical value when considered as an extension of or a development from the memoirs. In such a case, we have to consider the fact that, although *Boyhood* was published in 1997, it stages a time in Coetzee's life when he was a school boy and a teenager. The formative impact of its details on the boy in the memoir logically precedes the conception of ideas covered in the fictions. Overall, Coetzee's project seems to be one of creating tension among his autobiographical and fictional texts, 'writing interdependent texts and interrogating the relationship between life and fiction'.²⁷ An intra-comparative approach yields much to Coetzee's readers, and the autobiographical element in Coetzee's fictions is worthy of more investigation.

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²⁶ Gillian Dooley, 'Feste Ansichten in his Own Person: J.M. Coetzee Speaks', *Media Tropes* 4.2 (2014)

44. www.mediatropes.com

²⁷ Neimneh, 'J.M. Coetzee and Literary Developments: The Farm Theme in *Boyhood* and *Life and Times of Michael K.*' *Journal of Language and Literature* 4.2 (2013) 119.