

J. M. Coetzee: Reluctant public intellectual

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Complacent and yet not complacent, intellectuals of the kind I describe, pointing to the Apollonian “Know yourself”, criticize and encourage criticism of the foundations of their own belief systems. Such is their confidence that they may even welcome attacks on themselves, smiling when they are caricatured and insulted, responding with the keenest appreciation to the most probing, most perceptive thrusts. They particularly welcome accounts of their enterprise that attempt to relativise it, read it within a cultural and historical framework. They welcome such accounts and at once set about framing them in turn within the project of rationality, that is, set about recuperating them.”

— J. M. Coetzee, *Giving Offence*¹

Why should concern about public intellectuals be topical everywhere, not least in South Africa as evident from recent publications by Jonathan Jansen² and Themba Mbadlanyana?³ And why focus on notoriously publicity shy, writer-teacher J. M. Coetzee who *Mail & Guardian* critic Shaun de Waal once called “the Greta Garbo of South African literature”? What can be gleaned from a disjuncture between “sceptical rationality” and “sincere outrage”⁴ that is the subject of Coetzee’s deliberations on censorship, but more importantly what insight can be had from the hauntingly dense narrative “He and His Man”,⁵ read in lieu of the customary address expected of a laureate at the occasion of the prestigious award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in Stockholm in December 2003? These questions, I suggest, open a window into our current state of the commerce of thinking, into the space of Literature, and of our imagining a place for ourselves in a world ruled by economic rationality and fashioned by celebrity culture; a global world that places insoluble tension between the “intellectual” and the “public”. After all, the ideal of an examined life embodied by Plato’s Socrates that lies at the

¹ J. M. Coetzee, *Giving Offence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996): 4.

² See Jonathan Jansen’s chapter “South Africa: Intellectuals, the state and universities” in the recently released book, *Poverty of Ideas – South African democracy an the retreat of intellectuals*. <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20091211084236622>

³ See Themba Mbadlanyana’s guest column of the Centre for Politics and Research under the somewhat alarmist heading: “The tragedy of our public intellectuals” (3rd May, 2010) <http://www.politicsresearch.co.za/archives/444>

⁴ J. M. Coetzee, *Giving Offence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996): 5.

⁵ Further references to the Nobel Lecture “He and His Man” are from <http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/2003/coetzee-lecture.html>

heart of secular moral authority, is being rapidly drowned in the cross-currents of what Appadurai has called the “five dimensions of global cultural flows” (in form of “*ethnoscape*, *mediascape*, *technoscape*, *financescape*, and *ideoscape*”) that define the current “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy”⁶ as something utterly unprecedented. What Coetzee sets into motion in his Nobel Lecture is the necessary preying “upon the old [stories]” that tend to be swamped by these “flows” in so far as “the young are to be forbidden”, to connect with the (Western) past, having to “sit for ever in silence.”

Socrates, you’ll recall, when speaking in his defence in the Agora of Athens, famously referred to himself as “a kind of gadfly” that “the god has placed ... in the city” for the purpose of serving its better conscience.⁷ Never entirely erased from Western intellectual memory, the Socratic position dedicated to finding the inconvenient truth in a society given over to amassing “wealth, reputation, and honours”⁸ reappears in Coetzee’s autobiographical fictions *Youth* and *Summertime*, transcribed into 14th century Middle English as “Ayenbite of Inwyt”,⁹ literally “prick of conscience”. Albeit confined to the literary text, and not published in a newspaper or uttered in the public square, Coetzee’s dissent from the political power of the day, memorably exemplified in the figure of Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron*, arguably the prototype of a caring intellectual, bears comparison with Zola’s famous “J’accuse” of 1898 with which the French novelist called for justice in the Dreyfus Affair.

Figures of speech have a history and so have the subjects thus designated; the curious amalgam of “public” and “intellectual” made its appearance first in Russell Jacoby’s *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* in New York in 1987. Soon thereafter the trope “public intellectual” entered South African discourse, undoubtedly gaining momentum from a survey organised by America’s *Foreign Policy* and Britain’s *Prospect* magazines. Their “thinkers list” sought to identify the world’s “Top 100 Public Intellectuals”, among them scientists, economists, philosophers, clerics, judges, scholars, and environmentalists, not to mention eleven writers, including Coetzee, Achebe and Soyinka, who have “shown distinction in their own field along with the ability to communicate ideas and influence debate outside of it”.¹⁰ The Africa-focused website *africapeda* was

⁶ See this seminal chapter in Arun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large – Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 27-47):33.

⁷ Plato, *Apology* in *Five Dialogues*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, revised by John M. Cooper. (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 2003, 21-44): 35.

⁸ See above p. 34.

⁹ See J. M. Coetzee, *Youth* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2002): 130, and *Summertime. Scenes from Provincial Life* (London: Harvill Secker): 4.

¹⁰ See here the site of *Foreign Policy*, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4379

undoubtedly aware of this global list when proudly citing J. M. Coetzee as one of the eight distinguished intellectuals from the African continent: “The 2003 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Coetzee wrote his most famous novels – *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, and *Disgrace* – while a university professor in South Africa and the United States.”¹¹

Aside from the fact that Coetzee has settled in Adelaide in 2002 and become an Australian citizen in 2005, albeit important only to those who keep national scores of achievement, the degree to which this particular author and, for that matter, any writer devoted more to literary inspiration than the lime-light should be a “public intellectual” remains debatable. It is not obvious at all what constitutes public discourse in a data-driven world of statistics, news-eventisation in the media, blogs, social networking and sound-bite celebrity culture that undercuts debate. Coetzee most certainly deserves the epithet “intellectual”; but the “public” aspect in terms of score-cards handed-out by list keepers seems restricted to the “rhetorical event” of the Nobel award generally tied to academic inaugural occasions.¹²

Nevertheless, Jane Poyner seems to think otherwise when devoting an essay collection to *J. M. Coetzee and the idea of the public intellectual*.¹³ Adamant to frame the writer as “public intellectual”, the Exeter University critic prods Coetzee, in a rare interview, to comment on Said’s suggestion that the intellectual assume a public role and to “raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d’être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug”. Coetzee, with an always finely tuned ear to reasoned use of language, answers lapidary [lapidarily – ed.]: “[this] constitutes a definition, not a comment”. Deflecting Poyner’s oblique request to show his cards as “public intellectual”, Coetzee offers a critically illuminating, historically contextualizing explanation instead: “The resurrection of the term *public intellectual*, which for years was not part of public discourse, is an interesting phenomenon. What is the explanation? Perhaps it has something to do with people in the humanities, more or less ignored nowadays, trying to carve out a niche for themselves in the body politic”.¹⁴ The candour of Coetzee’s response alludes to the malaise of

¹¹ See <http://africapedia.com/TOP-AFRICAN-PUBLIC-Intellectuals>

¹² See for details on the “Nobel Prize” as “rhetorical event” tied to academic inaugural occasions Philippe-Joseph Salazar’s contribution that, besides offering a genealogy, also places the South African Nobel Prize (Literature and Peace, respectively) winners in context. Philippe-Joseph Salazar, “Nobel Rhetoric; or, Petrarch’s Pendulum”, in *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 42, 4 (2009): 373-400.

¹³ Compare with David Attwell’s empathetic, and highly informative contribution “The life and times of Elizabeth Costello. J. M. Coetzee and the public sphere”, in Jane Poyner, ed., *J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006): 25-42.

¹⁴ Poyner, *J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*, 22-23.

literary studies today, as staged so eloquently in “The Humanities in Africa” in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) on the one hand, on the other, it points to the politicisation of the intellectual that underlies the peculiar American coinage of a trope precariously tying the idea of the “public” to the much older idea of the “intellectual”.

Whereas the idea of the intellectual has a strong provenance in France, the United States, where Jacoby introduced the pleonasm “public intellectual”¹⁵ before the horizon of a bitterly fought Culture Wars between politically conservative (Republican) and progressive (Democratic) academics and journalists, has always displayed an uneasy relationship between “public life” and the more insular “life of the mind”. In America the venerable tradition of anti-intellectualism was scarcely dented by the scholar-writer Emerson who, in the late 19th century, poignantly called the intellectual the “world’s eye”. Less concerned with what for French thinkers, like the late Pierre Bourdieu,¹⁶ constitutes a necessary critical counter-power without which there can be no effective democracy, the American discourse seems to respond to structural changes in the vocation, role, and place of the intellectual; adverse changes that also affected South African life as seen not only in Jansen’s and Mbadlanyana’s concerns, but also in Coetzee’s response to Poyner. And who will forget Coetzee’s portrayal of Lurie’s disenchantment with the sorry state of literary studies in the “Cape Technical University, formerly Cape Town University College” in *Disgrace*.¹⁷ “Professionalisation and academisation”, Jacoby argued,¹⁸ explain the dearth of successors to earlier thinkers who, orientating themselves toward an educated public, informed in “straightforward prose” a “non-professional audience” what stand to take on contentious subjects. Echoing a predominantly American anxiety about the viability of what is still sometimes called “the profession of thought”, Richard A. Posner on the right of the political spectrum bemoans the decline of what he terms “public intellectual products in a low cost market”.¹⁹ Posner’s much discussed 2001 *Public intellectuals: a study of decline* neither adds to

¹⁵ Of interest in this regard :Francois Beilecke and Katja Marmetschke, eds., *Der Intellektuelle und der Mandarin* (Kassel: Kassel University Press, 2005) and Helen Small, ed., *The Public Intellectual* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002): 1-18.

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Science of Science and Reflexivity*, R. Nice, trans. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004): 274. Rather than taking reasoned disagreement as a catalyst of progress, as suggested in the wake of the debate by British sociologist, Barbara A. Misztal’s exhaustive study, *Intellectuals and the Public Good. Creativity and Civil Courage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) that examines Nobel Peace Prize laureates, the American discourse like the recent South African one seems to be more concerned with a lack of impartiality and commitment due to ‘Professionalisation’.

¹⁷ J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1999): 3.

¹⁸ Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic, 1987): 27.

¹⁹ Richard Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001): 19.

Jacoby's earlier account nor does it say much about the profound transformation of the public domain historically ruled by the Fourth Estate, journalism and the newspapers, born with the Republic of Letters in the Enlightenment. Moreover, Posner's contentious tabulation, based on statistics derived from media, mentions and scholarly citations, of 546 people he determines to be "public intellectuals", does not venture much beyond Régis Debray's much more insightful, because historically more astute, *Teachers, Writers, Celebrities: The Intellectuals of Modern France*,²⁰ (and a likely source for Jacoby). Debray, drawing three consecutive intellectual cycles from university to publishing and media, had already argued, in the words of Said,²¹ that "once an intellectual's circle is widened beyond a like group of intellectuals — in other words, when worry about pleasing an audience or an employer replaces dependence on other intellectuals for debate and judgment — something in the intellectual's vocation is, if not abrogated, then certainly inhibited". Thus, Posner's attempt to prove "with precision" that "public intellectuals" gain attention as they lose scholarly credibility should not come as surprise in a market and media driven world.²²

Different nations look upon their thinkers and writers differently, yet there has always been general consent about the self-defined right on the part of the intellectual to worry the world and to believe that there is a symbiotic relationship between the private world of the thinker and the public world he or she wishes to address by means of reasoned persuasion or storied expression. That the intellectual should conscientiously pursue truth, even if it leaves people "uncomfortable" seems to be the consensus since Socrates' time; considerable disagreement, though, exists over whether an author like Coetzee, for instance, should have followed in Zola's footsteps and publicly offered pronouncements on national and transnational politics. In short, opinion as to where the writer-intellectual ought to position himself in public discourse, and if he should advocate specific causes differ sharply. On one side of the spectrum, Julien Benda in his seminal treatise, *La trahison des clercs* of 1927,²³ taking sides with Dreyfus, argues that the intellectual must maintain independence from all organised social bodies, especially political ones, in order to speak the truth to power. On the other end, Sartre in the 1940s openly sides with the French Communist party, sharply critiquing Benda (and Camus among others) for not advocating *littérature engagée*,

²⁰ Régis Debray, *Teachers, Writers, Celebrities: The Intellectuals of Modern France*, B. Mulhern, intro., D. Macey, trans. (London: Verso, 1981), published originally in France in the late seventies.

²¹ Edward W. Said, *Representations of the intellectual: The 1993 Reith lectures* (London: Vintage, 1994): 51.

²² As it seems to do for Jansen and Mbadlanyana referred to earlier.

²³ See English version: Julien Benda, *La trahison des clercs – The treason of the intellectuals*, R. Aldington, trans. (New York: Norton, 1980).

committed literature.²⁴ That taking sides and championing political causes can turn out in retrospect to have been misguided and even false, as Mark Lilla²⁵ argued recently when chastising “European intellectuals” on both sides of the Rhine between the World Wars, is not the issue. At stake, rather, is Benda’s suggestion that true intellectuals — as seems to be the case with the author-persona Coetzee²⁶ — might serve humankind best by being committed to universal ideas, while at the same time staying detached from the political passions of the masses and not taking sides in politics.

An intellectual’s mission in life, according to Edward Said’s 1993 Reith Lecture *Representations of the Intellectual*,²⁷ is to advance human freedom and knowledge. This mission often means standing outside society and its institutions and actively disturbing the status quo. At the same time, Said’s intellectual is part of society and should address his concerns to as wide a public as possible. Thus Said’s intellectual is constantly balancing the private and the public, something Coetzee demonstrates in his occasional public pronouncements on animal welfare. While his or her private, personal commitment to an ideal provides necessary force, the ideal must have relevance also for society. In a more recent 2002 essay, “The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals”,²⁸ the late Said, champion of the Palestinian cause, albeit not uncritically, rejects heroic assumptions on the part of intellectuals to better the world by formulating utopian alternatives purportedly more just, visions of a morally grounded social and political order. This would too far exceed the current bounds of the potential of reason. Rather, the critical theorist must fundamentally aim to retain and promote an awareness of the contingency of such conditions and the extent to which such conditions are capable of being changed. Instead of succumbing to instrumental reason, Said suggests with recourse to Adorno that “overlapping yet irreconcilable experiences demand from the intellectual the courage to say that *that* is what is before us, ...the intellectual’s provisional home is the domain of an exigent, resistant, intransigent art into which, alas, one can neither retreat nor search for solutions”.

This position seems to suit Coetzee who in temperament is closer to Renaissance man Desiderius Erasmus than Martin Luther, and whose writing fits the avangardist template of Adorno’s rather than Lukács’ aesthetics.

²⁴ It should be noted that Sartre’s stance concerning politically engaged literature became more nuanced than originally pronounced in an accusatory tone similar to that of Benda in his epochal *Les Temps modernes*. See here Ungar’s introduction to Sartre’s “*What Is Literature*” and *Other Essays*, intro. by Steven Ungar. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988): 18.

²⁵ Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind. Intellectuals in Politics* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001): 215.

²⁶ Coetzee was subjected to strong attacks in the SA press in the 1980’s by among others, Gordimer, for not taking a more active stand against the Apartheid regime.

²⁷ Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*.

²⁸ Edward W. Said, “The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals” in Helen Small, ed., *The Public Intellectual* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002): 19-39, [39].

Typically referring to himself in his interview with David Attwell in the third person, Coetzee says: “Sympathetic to the human concerns of the left, he is alienated, when the crunch comes, by its language — by all political language, in fact”.²⁹ Neither pronouncements nor the public persona of the writer count but, as demonstrated in the Nobel Lecture, of utmost importance is the dogged work in and with quotidian language as measure of life, art, history, and truth. “It is hard for fiction to be good fiction while it is in the service of something else”, Coetzee asserts in the interview with Poyner³⁰ mentioned earlier. Hyperaware of the limits of his own authority — “the authority of the author has never amounted to anything more than a bagful of rhetorical tricks”, he says³¹ — and almost pathologically guarding his private thoughts and feelings before a public hungering after personal information and intimate confessions, Coetzee refuses in both interviews and narrative fictions to state his personal beliefs: “I am a writer”, he has his alter ego, Elizabeth Costello say, “It is not my profession to believe, just to write. ...I do imitations, as Aristotle would have said”.³²

Not surprisingly, Coetzee responds to Alfred Nobel's vision that a prize-worthy author writes for the sake of certain ideals, and gives us lessons in the application of those ideals, with a (post-Barthes, post-Foucault) refusal to set himself up as a purveyor of authorial truth. Nobel awardees in Literature usually reflect on the creative process and present themselves in the light of what they intended to achieve with their work, referring straightforwardly to influences that fashioned their oeuvre, and to positions taken in respect of specific issues. Coetzee's Nobel address is no exception, although unlike his 1991 predecessor: Nadine Gordimer, who explicitly refers to Sartrean commitment,³³ Coetzee eschews “deliberative” and “forensic”, political argument. Meticulously avoiding the personal pronoun “I”, and opting for a storied “ceremonial oratory of display”,³⁴ he demonstratively aims not at persuasion based on argument but on narrative seduction founded on *aethesis* or what for Hume amounts to the “sympathetic imagination” that connects the subject of the narrative with the narrating subject and the addressee (listener or reader) on a tour de force into the writer's laboratory. Although “the genesis story of a writer. ...the story that wrote her or him into being”, to use Gordimer's words, is inferred in Coetzee's Address, the drama

²⁹ J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point. Essays and Interviews*, ed., David Attwell (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1992): 394.

³⁰ Poyner, *J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*, 21.

³¹ J. M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Havill Secker, 2007): 149.

³² J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello. Eight Lessons* (London: Secker & Warburg, 203): 194.

³³ See Nadine Gordimer, “Writing and Being”, *Nobel Lecture in Literature* (Stockholm: Swedish Academy, 1991) at http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1991/Gordimer-lecture.html

³⁴ Aristotle, *Rhetorica*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts in *The Works of Aristotle. Translated into English*, ed. W. D. Ross, 11 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925): 1358a.

that unfolds between “He and his Man” does not so much exhort or defend creative writing than stages it. Setting the scene with a motto³⁵ taken from a passage of Defoe’s epochal adventure tale *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Coetzee’s epideictic narrative discourse constructs creative writing as an event — in the present tense, reflecting on the past — of someone, “he”, Robin, sitting “in his room by the waterside in Bristol”, in the process of writing while also reading and reflecting, with a mixture of incredulity, curiosity, and empathy on numerous reports, sent to him by “his man” about how “decoy ducks” lure their fellow foreign ducks promising plenitude to greener shores, only to be ruthlessly slaughtered by Englishmen; about “an engine of execution” in Halifax, and the heart wrenching afflictions that befell the people of London in “the year 1665” when “the plague descends upon the city”.

These reports are derived from Daniel Defoe’s (1661-1731) *Tour Thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain* (composed between 1724 and 1727 as a vivid county-by-county review and celebration of the British life and industry), and *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) that displays enticing powers of self-projection into a situation of which Defoe, having been four years old, only had experience through the narrations of others. Thus drawing his listener/reader in the guise of one of literature’s most influential characters, Robinson Crusoe, identified, besides the motto, by his paraphernalia “parrot” and “parasol”, into a narrative world that, according to Aristotle, explains action by motive (to write), relates behaviour to personality (a writer), and appearance to reality (the already written), the Nobel Lecture makes the reader look at the early 18th century world of acclaimed author Defoe who, together with Fielding and Richardson is usually regarded as originator of the modern novel.

Coetzee describes Defoe, in his “Foreword” to *Robinson Crusoe*, whose spectre hovers also over the 1987 novel *Foe*, as “a businessman trading in words and ideas, with a businessman’s clear sense of what each word or idea weighs, how much it is worth. As a thinker he may not be original, but his mind is acute and curious about life in all its aspects”. Tellingly, Coetzee’s (self-)portrait of the imagined writer, Robin, entails considerable speculation about what sort of a person “his man” (Defoe), the author of these writings of disaster, might have been in the quotidian surroundings of family, friends and acquaintances — foreshadowing Coetzee’s most recent autobiographical fiction *Summertime*. As a character in his own tale that was to elevate him into a powerful vision and role model for generations of readers, “He”, Robinson Crusoe, wants to fathom his

³⁵ The motto reads: “But to return to my new companion. I was greatly delighted with him, and made it my business to teach him everything that was proper to make him useful, handy, and helpful; but especially to make him speak, and understand me when I spoke; and he was the aptest scholar there ever was.”

mysterious author-father, Defoe,³⁶ who based on the life of historical mariner and castaway Alexander Selkirk (1676 - 1721), invented him in the first place and whom he ultimately eclipsed in the literary after-life. In like manner, Paul Rayment, in Coetzee's *Slow Man* (2007), seeks to get to know the persona of his inventor (fictitious) author, Elizabeth Costello, who battles to narrate him into life.

Inscribing himself into the protagonist, He—Robin, without ever using the pronominal shifter “I”, thus deflecting an authorial subject’s self-articulation by emphasising a zone of pronominal non-distinction, a “waterside” metaphorically speaking, between an internal world of the imagination and the external world from whence the reports originate, Coetzee in his characteristic mode of palimpsestious writing³⁷ performs in the Nobel Lecture the double act of reading and writing as fourfold reciprocity: (1.) between interlocutors (as illustrated by the choice of a particular passage as motto because it refers to teaching Friday, Robinson’s island companion and servant, to “speak, and understand me when I spoke”); (2.) between a historical life (Selkirk) and narrative fiction (*Robinson Crusoe*), lived-experience and the quest for transcendent meaning; (3.) between the world and the text (the “reports” sent by “his man” and their transformation in a solitary *situation d’énonciation*, [scene of uttering] “[i]n the evening by candlelight”, by way of balancing, what Coetzee once called in a brief “Note on Writing”³⁸ “the possibility of the threefold opposition active-middle-passive. ‘To write’ is one of these verbs”.); and (4.), between “He, scripteur, self-conscious narrator, and agent — not psychological subject — of the action, and “his man”, counter-voice, fellow writer, deliverer of statements (*énoncé*), “companion”, whom he “yearns to meet” but who remains infinitely unreachable.

When viewed within Aristotle’s tripartite typology of discourse and its timeline, narrative (present), interpretative (past) and deliberative (future) the Nobel Lecture moves in the *hic et nunc*, the present tense, typical of sense experience; interpreting the past always from the standpoint of an affected ethical self who recognises in Literature’s stories “life itself, the whole of life”, charging us to make, as the Nobel Lecture teaches, “due preparation for death, or else be struck down where we stand”. As he, Robinson, was made to see when of a sudden, on his island, he came one day upon the footprint of a man in the sand”. This Coetzee reads as a “sign” of our human condition: “*You are not alone*, said the sign; and also, *No matter how far you sail, no matter where you hide, you will be searched out*” (Italics Coetzee’s).

³⁶ See the Nobel Lecture for the varied descriptions that bear an uncanny resemblance to Defoe’s biography.

³⁷ See my “Reading in the In-between: Pre-scripting the “Postscript” to *Elizabeth Costello*”, in *South African Journal for Literary Studies* 21, 3/4 (2005): 254-276.

³⁸ Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 94.

Nothing escapes the Emersonian “world’s eye”, at least not on the plane of Literature.

Yet when considering Aristotle’s four tropes - the generic “metaphor”, its refinement by “metonymy”, “synecdoche” that marks transition into literal discourse, and, finally, “irony” that, in opposite to metaphor, represents the emergence of an ironic sensibility enabling conscious use of figurative language — Coetzee’s thoroughly “ironic” Lecture unmistakably engages a fourth discourse that stands in a reflexive relation to the other three in so far as it evidently recognises the constructed discursive nature of the experience offered by epideictic capturing of data (in Coetzee’s case 18th century novelistic fiction) and the world (i.e. capitalist economic production), the forensic pursuit of meaning, and deliberative discourse in quest of validity with reference to reason. This fourth or historiographic discourse takes account of the fact that experience (of the writer) takes place in a world already organised and semantically charged by discursivity, realizing that we live in a man-made world determined by human activity (narrating in its various modes and forms) in the shape of contingent facticity (the already narrated), demonstrated in Coetzee’s “awareness, as you put pen to paper, that you are setting in train a certain play of signifiers with their own ghostly history of past interplay”.³⁹ It is this consciousness of history as prologue, not as commoditised (national) tradition but as irreducible spectre, that ought to make readers of this and all other texts issued in the name of Coetzee look for the genesis of the (scriptural) experience bound to any given situation, and it must identify the forces and diverse discourses that interact in such a situation. It should be immediately obvious that historiography, in this sense, has nothing to do with a mere narration of events or their interpretation — as insinuated more often than not by contemporary mass media — but everything to do with a discursive labour on these discourses, as well as the deliberative one.

The Nobel lecture, despite its multilayered ‘weaving’ of sometimes heterogeneous voices and rhetorical discourses, remains essentially a soliloquy. It is an imaginary conversation with the self in a situation of writing-as-performance, out of which both self and subject have to forever write themselves anew, in an act of doubling back that is typical for Coetzee’s counterpunal voice, a voice immediately undercutting any authorial ascription and authoritative judgment, thus abstaining from all advocacy intervention usually demanded from public intellectuals. Although the Nobel Prize bestowed celebrity status on Coetzee, he is not, on Posner’s terms, a public figure issuing opinions, at least not until publication of the novelistic hybrid *Diary of a Bad Year*. In a format that juxtaposes *aethesis* with authorial comment, the protagonist, acclaimed author Senor C., assumes a public role

³⁹ Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 63.

by pronouncing freely in opinion pieces for a newspaper on current affairs from the standpoint of (universal) human freedom and knowledge. However, attractive, young Anya finds her employer's "*lone voice of conscience*" insufficient: "His track record is not so hot. In fact his track record is virtually blank" when it comes to "fighting" for human rights in the "real world",⁴⁰ Anya surmises. Obviously expecting some kind of direct intervention from a moral authority, she forgets that epideictic rhetoric is already praxis. How if not from storied worlds will we know that a certain kind of (modern) literary achievement and a certain kind of ethical integrity are inseparable? Coetzee's narratives for which "He and his Man" must here stand as example, display publicly an unflinching examination of self and world for which popularity scores are no measure.

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⁴⁰ Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*, 197. Italics are Coetzee's.