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Moonsamy, Nedine

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The Invitation in J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood, Youth* and *Summertime*.

Nedine Moonsamy

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Johannesburg, 2010.

Declaration

I declare this dissertation my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.



Nedine Moonsamy
09th December 2010

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Introduction

> There is the question of the invitation, the correct way to phrase an invitation
>
> *Summertime* 159.

J.M. Coetzee's three unlegislated autobiographies, *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002) and *Summertime* (2009), are profoundly informed by, if not obsessed with, the invitation. Strange perhaps, or unexpected, from Coetzee who, as both author and private individual, is one generally perceived as unwilling to proffer *any* kind of invitation to the literary community and general public. Despite Coetzee's reticence (or as a result of it), many critics and reviewers have noted the authorial dispositions of Coetzee's protagonists[1] and have chosen to read them as clandestine instances of autobiography. However, the arrival of texts that for the first time put the proper name of the author at our disposal[2] – 'John Coetzee' as protagonist – and appear to *invite* these very speculations, has led to a general critical wariness. It is thus safe to say that Coetzee's autobiographies stand as curious critical anomalies in his *oeuvre*. The sparseness of literary response to his autobiographical work, when compared to the profuseness of response to his fictional texts, is telling.

In order to grapple with the hesitant critical response that appears to be specific to Coetzee's autobiographies, I will be reading *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* as a

[1] Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee in *Dusklands*, Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*, the Magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Susan Barton in *Foe*, Dostoevsky in *The Master of St. Petersburg*, Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron*, David Lurie in *Disgrace*, Elizabeth Costello in *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man* and JC in *Diary of a Bad Year*.

[2] Even *Diary of a Bad Year*, also strong in its evocation of the autobiographical, does not use the name of the author.

collective triad. These three texts cover three specific periods; 1950–1953, 1959–1964 and 1972–1977. They have been published in chronological order. This, together with the collective subtitle, *Scenes from Provincial Life*[3], appears to imply that they be read as a neat and consistent triad of autobiographical output. There are many instances in the texts that rely on, or invite, the 'memory' of the previous text in order to carry its narrative forward, which again serves to implicate the autobiographies in an interactive relationship with each other. Furthermore, the 'three Johns' invoke each other in their respective characterisations. They reflect a more or less consistent portrait of the 'same' person in three different stages of 'growth'. This is a feature unique to these three texts as a triad; despite the autobiographical speculations made about various texts in Coetzee's *oeuvre*, none appears to lend itself to a collective reading as closely as these three texts do in relation to each other.

Boyhood covers the experiences of John as a child. His existence is governed by various institutions; the most prominent of these are the school and the family. As a child, John is at the receiving end of these institutions and he is often subjected to modes of behaviour that he finds stifling. *Boyhood* is an account of a precocious young boy who tries to find spaces for self-expression. His only respite, as we see in the text, is reading, cricket, the farm, his mother (or the free-spiritedness she encourages in him) and his relationship with his cousin, Agnes. Ultimately, it is in this text that John learns his valuable (and seemingly lifelong) lesson: "part of being prudent is always to tell less rather than more"

[3] Although *Youth* does not have this subtitle in the U.K edition, Attridge states that "[i]n the U.S.A., the book [*Youth*] appeared with the subtitle *Scenes from Provincial Life II*, which made its connection with *Boyhood* clear" (2005: 156).

(*B* 29). He opts to live as a secretive child because he finds no space for self-expression within the formal constraints of his life. *Boyhood* is composed in the third person, present tense narrative voice. In this text it is used as a seamless mode of telling which maintains a formal distance between author and reader.

In *Youth*, John has grown into a young man. He leaves South Africa after completing his degree to pursue his dream of becoming a poet in London. He has the same characteristics of John, the boy in *Boyhood*, (he is still the same 'odd' and secretive person) but here the predicament of self-expression develops into a specifically artistic one. John has now found his passion; his domain of expression is writing. But in London, for pragmatic purposes, he spends most of his time working for IBM rather than pursuing his dream. Yet his failure, he assumes, is also due to the fact that he does not exude the personality of an artist. Consequently, John tries to cultivate such a personality but his every attempt at changing himself fails. *Youth* ends with a dismal display of John's hopelessness as he succumbs to melancholia and the loss of his literary aspirations. This text is written in the same third person, present tense narrative voice of *Boyhood*. However, having used this as a device of formal distantiation in *Boyhood*, the narrative voice in *Youth* grows in complexity. There are numerous diegetic breaks that disrupt the seamless reading of a third person, present tense narrative. For example, there are moments in *Youth* where the reader is left wondering if they are being directly addressed by the author. However, the reader is denied evidence of this trace as it re-inserts itself back into the framework of the third person, present tense narrative. Furthermore, in *Youth*, Coetzee chooses to write about the period in which he cannot and, as the text

implies, will never write. This subjects the narrative voice to a great deal of irony as John laments his inability to write whilst already being written about, whilst already having become a writer.

In *Summertime*, we are subject to numerous versions of John Coetzee. There are the third-person, present tense narratives that cover the years 1972–1975 and also, the present day (but retrospective) accounts of John Coetzee, given in the form of interviews. This conscious division between the insitutionalised image of J.M. Coetzee, the author, and John, the man, is one that has previously only been ironically implied. *Summertime* presents the well-renowned, Nobel Prize winning author that we have come to know and recognize, although, he is already dead. The character of Coetzee's biographer, Mr. Vincent, allows us to access an 'unpublished' manuscript of what was to become the third part of *Scenes from Provincial Life*. It appears that the author has died before he could complete it. The 'unpublished' manuscript deals with the period following John's return to South Africa after a decade abroad. Mr. Vincent seeks out the people who appear in these manuscripts and interviews them. This, in the hope of understanding the unfinished, unpublished fragments that Coetzee has left behind and ultimately, compiling a biography of his own.

Summertime departs radically in terms of style and technique from its predecessors. The framing device of the posthumous biography completely undermines a simplistic reading of the third person, present tense narratives. In *Summertime*, the *autos*, the author of the autobiography, is subject to a multiplicity of complex divisions: the subject is split

between the separate interviews, again in the consciousness of Mr. Vincent, his biographer, also in the 'Coetzee' who writes third person, present tense narratives of his life (the text itself mobilizes the assumption of the third person, present tense as a marked characteristic of Coetzee's autobiographies), but who now also makes editing comments on his own writing. And of course, we also have to consider the author who ultimately orchestrates this heady plethora of self-characterisation.

Yet while *Summertime* is so different from *Boyhood* and *Youth* in terms of technique and form, what remains unchanged is the characterisation of John. John is still awkward and alone. He fails to connect with people and the failure is seen as purely his own. He cannot express himself to his lovers, his pupils and his father, nor does he know how to receive people as they are. He continues to lament the necessity of an institutional existence despite the fact that he has managed to realise his dream of writing. According to the interviewees, he is still seen as a somewhat dour and aloof human being.

Apart from the consistent characterisation, what ultimately informs my motivation to read these three autobiographies as triadic is Coetzee's recurrent application of the trope of the invitation. In this dissertation, my analysis will follow the invitation as it is performed and presented in these texts as both narrative event and thematic concern. This elucidation of the invitation, I wish to suggest, allows Coetzee to foreground the invitation such that he may, as alluded to in the epigraph, put it into question.

If we look at an invitation in its most generic form, it assumes three processes. Firstly, it implies a system of communication between an addresser and an addressee. This in itself implies a shared language or discourse of the invitation between the parties. Secondly, the power lies with the inviter as opposed to the invitee. The only power the invitee might choose to exercise is a refusal to either accept the invitation or to arrive, which is significantly less powerful in relation to the act of initiating hospitality. Lastly, there is the expectation of a meeting; the invitee will 'meet' the inviter on the terms stated in the invitation. Through a reception of this nature, the promise of the invitation is realised and good hospitality is practised between the parties.

If we examine the discourse of narratology, there appears to be a rather neat correlation between the systematic infrastructure of the invitation and the narratological definition of a text. In *Narrative Fiction*, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan describes narration as "a communication process in which the narrative message is transmitted by addresser to addressee" (2002: 2). Like the invitation, the narratological model proposes a form of communication; the transmission of a message between a sender and a receiver. Narratology has devised a chain of categories through which the message is transmitted: the Author, the Implied author, the Narrator (optional), the Narratee (optional), the Implied Reader and the Reader (Rimmon-Kenan 2002). Yet by defining a text as "spoken or written discourse [... that] implies someone who speaks or writes it" (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 3), we get a sense that the diagrammatic chain of narration, although presented in a horizontal schema, is ultimately hierarchical. The assumption is that of a governing 'voice' that sits at the 'top' of the chain which filters through to the 'bottom' to be

received by the reader. Finally, the narratological assumption of communication confirms the potential to convey meaning. Like the invitation, there is still the expectation of a deferred 'meeting' of meaning. Should the author make successful use of the systematicity of narratological methodology, the reader will understand what the author is 'saying' and thus feel sufficiently hosted by both the text and the author.

More specifically, if we turn to Linda Anderson's *Autobiography* (2001), we see that the same narratological model is evident in this genre. However, here the categorical chain of narrative transmission is compressed to suit the specificities of the genre: "there must be 'identity between the *author*, the *narrator*, and the protagonist'" (Anderson 2001: 2). Autobiography, as opposed to conventional fiction, marks a more direct communicative chain between author and reader. The narratological distinction between author, implied author, narrator and protagonist is distilled into a close, almost single, writing position. By promising identity between these otherwise separate writing positions, autobiography instills a sense of intimacy in the autobiographical act and this, in turn, mobilises the trope of the autobiographical invitation. Unlike fiction and biography, autobiography implies that the identity of the writer is actively *invited* into the act of writing. It suggests that the genre seeks to host the individuality and the personality of the writer. Furthermore, by being allowed to make a declaration of identity in the text, the author *invites* the reader into accepting the text as a presentation of his/her life. These two forms of invitation work in tandem; by accepting the invitation to write as her/himself, the author makes an invitation to the reader to engage the personality of the author through the text. Thus, both forms of invitation are necessary in assuring and sustaining a

personal and ultimately *truthful* meeting between author and reader. And as we see, it is this *telos* of truth that not only helps autobiography to conceive of its hospitality but also allows for its distinction as a genre.

In light the above, I wish to suggest that Coetzee's prolific use of the invitation *within* autobiography invites us into a consideration of the genre itself. In choosing to read the triad as what Germaine Brèe refers to as meta-autobiography[4], I explore the invitation as a meta-textual trope that enables the author, Coetzee, to stage an encounter with the invitation through his mirror self, John, which in turn reflects his negotiation with the autobiographical invitation in the act of writing an autobiography.

By choosing to read Coetzee's triad as meta-autobiography[5] I betray a post-structuralist inclination. However, this position appears to be a complementary, if not a necessary, one; post-structuralism engages the notion of the question as central to its ethos by constantly seeking to challenge and re-evaluate a set of established ideologies. As we see in the epigraph, Coetzee's "question of the invitation" is made in response to "the correct way to phrase an invitation" (*S* 159). By questioning the 'correct' invitation and placing it under our scrutiny, Coetzee disrupts the fluid transmission of its accepted phraseology, so to speak.

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[4] See Brèe, G. 'Michel Leiris: Mazemaker.' In: Olney, J. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical.* Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 1980.

[5] Indeed, choosing to read these texts as meta-autobiography is by no means new. Many theorists who choose to respond to these texts suggest that Coetzee is much too erudite to write anything other than meta-autobiography. Evidently, I concur.

I seek to demonstrate that this act of questioning is not without its own profound philosophical implications. In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that such categorical metaphors, as employed in the systemic arrangement of concepts, "keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor" (1980: 10). Similarly, the invitation, as an autobiographical trope, elucidates as much as it hides. I wish to argue that, through the question of the invitation, Coetzee demands an evaluation of this very exclusion; to ask at whose, or what, expense the trope of the invitation persists. It implies a challenge; Coetzee creates doubt about the trope of invitation as it is understood to operate within autobiography.

In order to expand on the nature of Coetzee's question I employ a predominantly Derridian framework. Jacques Derrida's attempts at challenging and displacing the omniscient 'narratives' of the philosopher provides a useful philosophical foundation for understanding Coetzee's authorial interventions within literary discourse. Both Derrida and Coetzee assume the position of the writer in a self-conscious manner, allowing them to utilize the text as a means by which to grapple with the authorial ethics of writing. I bring into discussion Derrida's *Of Hospitality* (2000), 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', (Derrida in Lodge 1988), 'Différance' (1982), the 'envois' section in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1987) and *Aporias* (1993). I sustain this Derridian lens because Derrida's own acts of questioning, as reflected throughout his extensive *oeuvre*, are part of the healthy skepticism of post-structuralist thinking that proves indispensably helpful in bringing us closer to the autobiographical significance of Coetzee's question of the invitation.

In the triad, *Scenes from Provincial life*, it is hard to accept John as the protagonist of a *bildungsroman* for he is always controlled rather than controlling. Consequently, a portrait of John emerges as one of a rather pathetic person[6]. This portrait has puzzled many who have noted it, finding it hard to reconcile our respect for the world-renowned J.M. Coetzee with this pitiable John of the triad[7]. In this dissertation I wish to suggest that the 'pathetic' character of John is a direct result of Coetzee's desire to put the autobiographical invitation under scrutiny.

John makes us aware of the ludicrous nature of the conventions of the invitation through his contention with it. Thus, John, clumsy in social signification, already puts the structural concerns of the invitation into crisis, into question, by making them apparent to

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[6] Attridge notes that British reviewers, assuming *Youth* to be fiction, found it lacking; it was considered banal and poorly constructed (2005).

[7] In 'Confessing in the Third Person' (2005), Derek Attridge argues that *Boyhood* and *Youth* can be fruitfully read as confessional writing that simultaneously seeks to deconstruct the genre in which it operates. This line of argument allows Attridge to account for John's characterisation as a necessary precondition of the confession; the 'unflinching' focus on the unpleasant is required of Coetzee in his staging of a confessional act (Attridge 2005). Thus, in Coetzee's desire to confess, John must bear this 'shameful' representation of the self.

In '*Autre*biography: J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*' (2003), Margaret Lenta argues that John is a representation of the "deformed and stunted inner life" (Coetzee in Lenta 2003: 166) that Coetzee makes reference to in his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech (1987). For Lenta, John enacts the sense of estrangement that ensues from the lack of humane interaction that is a consequence of the oppressive segregationist laws of apartheid South Africa. His failures are thus extrapolated from the political milieu of South Africa, which ultimately makes of him a passive political object subjected to harsh social conditions.

Sheila Collingwood-Whittick formulates a much more sensational account of John's characterisation. In 'Autobiography as *Autre*biography: The fictionalization of the self in J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*' (2001), she argues that John's behaviour is an unwitting allusion to Coetzee's 'blind-spot' of self-interest. In *Boyhood*, John makes a decision to live his life as a secret that requires protecting. This, she argues, is an illustration of J. M Coetzee's unwillingness to bring himself into the public sphere as a personality.

In 'Disrupting Inauthentic Readings: Coetzee's Strategies' (2009), Katy Iddiols is responding to *Diary of a Bad Year*, yet the parallel implications for the 'autobiographies' are obvious to see. Iddiols suggests that Coetzee deliberately portrays himself in a poor light in order to prevent us from reading the character as the author. She argues that Coetzee's mischievous device is to discredit his 'doubles,' knowing that we will be unable to reconcile them with our respect for him as a world-renowned author.

us as readers. In showing John's resistance to the invitation, Coetzee has him assume a marginal space in relation to society. And if we read in this a semblance of Derrida's marginal figure of the foreigner in *Of Hospitality* (2000), we begin to see the significance of such a portrayal. For, according to Derrida, the margin is the *only* place from which the question of hospitality can be posed.

In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida's first essay is titled, 'Foreigner Question: Coming from Abroad/from the Foreigner'. It opens with a question: "Isn't the question of the foreigner [*l'ètranger*] a foreigner's question? Coming from the foreigner, from abroad [*l'ètranger*]?" (Derrida 2000: 3). For Derrida, the question of hospitality is one *of* the foreigner since it is precisely for the foreigner that we conceive of hospitality. It is this marginal figure, existing outside of a given society or community, who needs to be invited in. Thus, it is the foreigner who, in effect, enables us to conceive of our hospitality. Derrida utilizes the foreigner's question as the initial point of entry into a discussion of hospitality because, he argues, the foreigner is "the one who putting the first question, puts me to question" (2000: 3). The foreigner, by existing on the periphery of society, estranges what is familiar. The foreigner questions our hospitality by making evident our ability, or lack thereof, to incorporate him/her. Thus, Derrida proposes a rethinking of hospitality from the position of the foreigner as it is always the foreigner that our hospitality must seek to invite and include.

I believe that John's marginal position in relation to the invitation draws us into the realization that "there *is* the question of the invitation" (*S* 159) (italics mine). It affords

Coetzee the opportunity to delineate the invitation through defamiliarisation as John struggles to comply with its conventions and rules. Furthermore, by putting John in the position of the 'foreigner', Coetzee effectively draws us into the awareness of the structural trope of the autobiographical invitation and, consequently, he stages the act of putting it into question.

My chapter divisions are derived from the distinctions that Derrida draws between conditional, absolute and aporetic hospitality respectively in *Of Hospitality* (2000). Derrida's *Of Hospitality* proves to be a highly complementary text by providing us with an ethical exploration of the invitation and the hospitality that it makes possible. It is through Derrida's argument that I endeavour to explore Coetzee's reconfiguration of the invitation as an autobiographical trope. I will use this discussion as a means to speculate about the general potential for ethical autobiographical hospitality within literary studies.

In locating this text as central to my argument I am aware of the apparent overlap that it implies between this dissertation and Michael Marais's *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fictions of J.M. Coetzee* (2009). Marais's monograph is a captivating and novel examination of hospitality in Coetzee's fiction through the lens of Derridian and Levinasian ethics. In this dissertation I will illustrate that this conceit, as noted by Marais[8], is one that need not exclude the triad. I seek to display that it can be fruitfully extended into a study of Coetzee's autobiographies. In reading Coetzee's engagement with hospitality as continuous in the triad, I also embark on an exploration of

[8] Similarly, in *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of Africa*, David Attwell notes that "the repetition of failed reciprocity is a central trope in Coetzee" (2009: 70).

the ethical implications of authorship and readership that Marais finds implicit in Coetzee's texts. In chapter two, I engage Marais's text in detail and address there the differences that arise due to the specificities of the genres under examination.

Furthermore, the question of the invitation is one that is posed to us, as theorists and critics. By examining the kind of critical responses the texts have invited thus far, we can gauge the nature of the invitation that is assumed to be operative or inoperative in Coetzee's triad. Hence, this dissertation also grapples with the critical paradigms that inform the literary responses to *Boyhood* and *Youth*[9]. I believe this to be a crucial exercise that will allow us to explore the possibility of reassessing our critical reception of and response to these texts. Coetzee's triad thus becomes a helpful means to explore the overall potential of autobiography. It aids the exploration of the general possibility of autobiography to invite and host a more hospitable response.

The purpose of this dissertation is to illustrate that the triad allows us the opportunity to think of the invitation outside of the binary logic of acceptance and refusal, hence altering the manner in which we might choose to respond to it. Against the wave of critical response that seeks to suggest that Coetzee blatantly denies us the invitation, I suggest that we *do* stand as invited by the author of these autobiographies, albeit that it is not the invitation we *expect*. It is an invitation into autobiography; situated in the aporia where the *full* possibilities of the invitation are exercised.

[9] *Summertime* was only published in 2009 and there were no critical responses to the text at the time of writing this dissertation.

Chapter One – The Conditional/Impossible Invitation

> Inviting a girl to dance stands for inviting her to have intercourse, accepting the invitation stands for agreeing to have intercourse. So obvious are the correspondences that he wonders why people bother with dancing at all. Why the dressing up, why the ritual motions; why the huge sham?
>
> *Youth* 89-90.

In *Autobiography*, Anderson traces the development of the genre through this central demand for truth. The early autobiography, she states, before the term was coined and the distinction of genre made, has its roots in the confession. This early link to confession is what encodes the initial premise of truth-telling and authenticity of the subject as a fundamental element of the autobiographical project. These early confessions were inscribed with the *telos* of Christian salvation and used the genre to display the subject's journey towards self-illumination. In perceiving God to be the primary 'recipient' of the text, the confessor could not lie about himself. Thus, the honesty with which the act is performed becomes the gauge of success for the narrative (Anderson 2001). Furthermore, the autobiographer not only ensures his own salvation but allows his/her conversion narrative to stand as an invitation to the reader to embark on a similar journey of confession and salvation. However, in order for the reader to accept this invitation and fulfil the didactic function of the confession, he/she *must* trust the author. Thus, the author, through the intention of truth, assures the reader that they are who they have claimed to be in the text. In choosing to accept earnestly the initial invitation into sincere confession, the author allows for the process by which the reader begins to invite the

author's narrative into their lives by incorporating the life-lessons of the author into their own experience.

Anderson cites the eighteenth century, when individualist doctrines take precedence and the self begins to emerge as a project, as the period in which autobiography comes to be accepted as part of contemporary and literary culture and begins to receive critical attention for its specificities as a genre. Her text is a brief exegesis of the various questions that have accompanied the genre ever since its inception; the ever indeterminable boundary between fiction and truth, the shifting ontology of the subject and the growing body of critical theory, all of which have led to a genre that has always been without any stable definition (Anderson 2001). Anderson argues that the advent of psychoanalysis and modernism further increased the contestations around autobiography. She states that the theories of Freud and Lacan marked a radical shift from the notion of unitary selfhood as the 'arrival' of the unconscious made it impossible to know fully and understand the subject. The apparent gap between subject and narration of the subject challenged the autobiographical assumption of truth by illustrating that the truth of the self is ever-unknowable or impossible. Furthermore, the modernist sense of alienation and doubt about the subject position of the author ruptured the intimacy that the autobiographical invitation sought to convey.

Yet in this very instability Anderson sees an even greater "need to contain and control it within disciplinary boundaries" (2001: 2). She cites numerous critics' attempts to cordon off the genre in order to make it sustainable. Anderson sees the most prominent attempt

as the one that comes from the French structuralist, Philippe Lejeune, whose *Le Pacte Autobiographique*, sought to re-insert and solidify the presence of the autobiographical invitation. Anderson states the following: "according to Lejeune, the author of the autobiography implicitly declares that he is the person he says he is and that the author and the protagonist are the same" (2001: 3). Anderson, like many others, has noted the legalistic terminology that Lejeune employs to authenticate the intimate role of the autobiographical author in relation to the text. It is Lejeune who proposes the contentious autobiographical 'pact' or 'contract' by arguing that it is always the author's intention to honour his/her signature (Anderson 2001: 3). This pact ensures that the author extends an invitation to the reader by binding him/her in seriousness, sincerity, and honesty and consequently, it assures us of the *telos* of autobiographical truth.

In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida provides an explanation by which to understand the inevitable appearance of the pact in all conditional forms of hospitality. Derrida uses Plato's dialogues to illustrate that the Greek word for foreigner, *Xenos*, has its root in the word *Xenia*, which means 'pact'. This keen observation serves to illustrate the utter inability to conceive of hospitality without 'contractual' exchange. The 'laws of hospitality', Derrida suggests, are a group of laws which pre-empt the moment of hospitality. Because the laws exist before the arrival of the foreigner they allow the foreigner to anticipate what will be expected of him/her. Hence, both parties, both the state and the foreigner, are aware of the conditions of their encounter and rely on its systematicity for successful invitation and reception, for good hospitality (Derrida 2000).

Similarly, critics of autobiography assume that the pact, as defined through the convention of truth, allow for the systematic exchange of mutual hospitality between the author and the reader. In choosing to write an autobiography the author, as guest, enters into an implicit pact of truth. The author assures that the person/ality revealed in writing is a sincere account of lived experience. It is only through complying with a demand for truth that the author is assured that his/her narrative will be sufficiently hosted by the genre of autobiography through the manner in which it is read and received by critics and the reading public. Furthermore, in accepting the pact, the author fulfils his/her role as the congenial guest and allows for mutual hospitality through the extension of the second form of invitation. By granting the assurance of truth, the reader is invited into a sincere account of the author's life and welcomed into the narrative by having the expectations of intimacy and trust fulfiled. Thus, the necessity of the pact is that is sustains the systematic exchange of the invitation and allows for the practice of good autobiographical hospitality.

Regarding the triad, *Scenes from Provincial Life*, it is the apparent lack of the invitation that breeds distrust of Coetzee. Those who responded to *Boyhood* and *Youth* take into account their familiarity with Coetzee's *oeuvre* and allude to his consistent use of the text to undertake meta-fictional explorations of the dynamics of authorship. As a result, many are inclined to dismiss, at the outset, the possibility of receiving these texts as the simple retelling of his life as one would generally assume of autobiographies. Truth, these critics presume, can never be Coetzee's *intention*. Coetzee's use of autobiography is seen as

strategic as opposed to 'real' and the primary purpose of their responses is to deliberate about what his *actual* intentions might be.

In '*Autre*biography: J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*', Lenta begins by arguing that these texts should be read as instances of autobiography as opposed to the fictions that many reviewers have mistakenly thought them to be. Yet considering them as autobiographies, she understands, has its own complexities – *Boyhood* and *Youth* evidently have a problematic relation to the conventions of the genre. Her analysis focuses on the third-person, present-tense narration that the texts employ, considering this to be the primary means of disruption. Looking back on the history of the use of the third person in autobiography, she places Coetzee alongside his predecessors. It is an analysis that leads her to deduce that "the third person becomes the candid admission of the distance between author and autobiographical subject" (Lenta 2003: 168). After noting the evident distance that the use of third person, present tense creates between author and autobiographical subject, Lenta relies on Lejeune's pact to gauge its effect on us as readers: "Lejeune explains that what allows autobiography to be read as such is the 'explicit or implicit contract proposed by the author to the reader' [...] but has not an autobiographer who uses the third person already began to vary the pact?" (Lenta 2003: 160). Ultimately, Lenta reads "an intention in the author to weaken the autobiographical pact with the reader" (2003: 161). She suggests that Coetzee does not attempt to amend the problems of authorial distance but opts instead to make a display of the unattainable objectives of the autobiographical invitation to write as 'himself'. As a result of this

intended skepticism towards the autobiographical invitation, Coetzee violates our desire for the invitation to read the narrative as a reflection of his life.

In 'Autobiography as *Autre*biography: The fictionalization of the self in J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*', Collingwood-Whittick is equally intrigued by the manner in which the third-person, present-tense narration unsettles the conventions of autobiography. Like Lenta, Collingwood-Whittick believes that there is already an intention in Coetzee to weaken the conventional pact of autobiography. Her response is to locate a pact that is specific to Coetzee by generously borrowing from his ideas as presented in *Doubling the Point* (Attwell 1992). In this text she sees "a rehearsal of the reasoning and methodology that will be employed by Coetzee in the act of truth-telling that he is himself thinking of staging" (Collingwood-Whittick 2001: 15).

In 'Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky' (1985), an essay that appears in *Doubling the Point* (Attwell 1992), Coetzee traces the lineage of confession in the context of secular autobiography. Through an examination of a vast range of texts, Coetzee illustrates that the confessor, upon confessing, is forced to be self-reflexive about what he/she has confessed. Hence, once the writer has confessed, doubt inevitably follows about what has been confessed, forcing the author to make a re-confession in light of a new sense of 'truth'. Coetzee argues that this level of inevitable self-scrutiny leads to an endless spiraling of the confessional act as the author tries in vain to reach the truth of the self or of an event. In the Christian context, Coetzee states that grace and salvation are the necessary means by which the confessor is relieved of

this burden of self-reflection. The concept of salvation unifies the act of confession by providing a *telos* and a means by which to reprieve oneself from the impossibility of knowledge of oneself. However, in the secular context, the autobiographer has no means by which to conclude this event without making the confession seem arbitrary and without its spiralling out of control. Coetzee thus argues that in secular autobiography the self-reflexive and narcissistic 'I' of autobiography, far from achieving the goal of truth-telling, endlessly defers this process as doubt multiplies around the self without end (Coetzee in Attwell 1992).

Collingwood-Whittick uses Coetzee's examination of first-person autobiography in order to speculate about his use of third-person narration in his own autobiography. She argues that Coetzee engages in third-person, present-tense autobiography in order to demonstrate that the truth about the self can, in fact, be told. However, one can only do so from the distantiated and objective stance of the third person where the consciousness of the narrator cannot interfere with the events as they are being told. Collingwood-Whittick argues that Coetzee uses the third person to acknowledge and maintain distance between the adult consciousness and the young boy. She suggests that Coetzee uses this device in order to let the past be told without the intrusions of a self-reflexive and retrospective consciousness of the 'I' narrator.

Yet while assuming this to be Coetzee's intention, Collingwood-Whittick nevertheless demonstrates that Coetzee's attempt at truth-telling has been unsuccessful: "the actual benefits that decision [the use of third-person narration] brings to the truth-telling process

are more illusory than real" (2001: 19). Collingwood-Whittick argues that Coetzee has not remained true to his young focaliser, John. She cites examples from the text where it is evident that the detail of description could never belong to a child, where John's perceptions are reviewed as opposed to immediate and where the psychological interpretations of feelings clearly belong to someone other than John. By outlining these moments, Collingwood-Whittick suggests that the text makes 'slippages' out of the past that should belong exclusively to young John. She thus addresses the manner in which Coetzee's texts merely give the *impression* of telling the objective truth about the past whilst actually failing to do so. Assessing Coetzee's use of the third person in relation to the intentions she perceives to be present in *Doubling the Point*, she ultimately asserts that "however we explain it, Coetzee's use of third-person narration in *Boyhood* has a certain number of negative consequences for the truth-telling pact that, the author believes, should be at the heart of the autobiographical endeavor" (Collingwood-Whittick 2001: 22). She thus reads Coetzee's autobiographies as "a betrayal of the very pact that it is designed to honour" (Collingwood-Whittick 2001: 23), of the pact of truth that she has identified in Coetzee's own reflections on autobiography.

Attridge's article, 'Confessing in the Third Person', is interesting because it follows similar turns of thought. He too borrows very generously from Coetzee's ideas in *Doubling the Point* in order to make a case for Coetzee's 'brand' of truth as opposed to conventional autobiographical truth. In the article, 'Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky' (Coetzee 1985), Attridge argues that Coetzee links the idea of confession to truth. The confession is seen as a means by which to reach the truth

of oneself by producing it in the act of writing (2005). Following this lead, Attridge chooses to read Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth* as texts that operate in the genre of confession in order to access truth. Like Collingwood-Whittick, Attridge suggests that the use of third-person narration is Coetzee's attempt to circumnavigate the deferral of truth that, as Coetzee has argued, occurs in first-person autobiography. Attridge argues that the use of the third person creates distance between the narrative consciousness and the narrative voice and allows for the truth of the past to be told without the intrusions of the narrative consciousness. For Collingwood-Whittick, Coetzee's presentation of the schism between narrator and narrating consciousness is deemed unsuccessful. However, Attridge argues that Coetzee remains true to young John's perception by denying the intervention of the narrating consciousness which,due to distantiation, cannot judge him and fails to question his account of events (Attridge 2005).

However, in 'Confessing in the Third Person', Attridge's ultimate concern with the truth appears to stem from Coetzee's heavy-handedness with regard to the genre of confession. Working towards his conclusion, Attridge mentions a few 'happy' incidents from Coetzee's life that Coetzee has omitted from the story of his life. This observation leads Attridge to argue that by engaging in confession, Coetzee has, in fact, given in to the temptation to exaggerate his misgivings. Thus, Attridge rather tentatively suggests that Coetzee ultimately distorts the truth by failing to account for the *entire* truth of John's/his life.

I have chosen to discuss these three responses in detail because they all reflect the common difficulty of grappling with *Boyhood* and *Youth* as autobiographical texts.

Margaret Lenta, Sheila Collingwood-Whittick and Derek Attridge all argue that the third-person, present-tense narration serves as Coetzee's blatant acknowledgement that he is *not* writing as himself and this, in turn, suggests that it is not his intention to invite us as readers into a representation of himself. Considering this loss or lack of invitation, they attempt in their own ways to locate elsewhere the pact to which Coetzee conforms. Through the implicit reliance on notions such as a pact and the invitation the act of reading becomes forensic in nature. It is through an understanding of intention that these theorists try to locate the truth behind Coetzee's texts. In the cases above, it results in a turn towards Atwell's *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (1992). In this text, Coetzee's own article on confession and autobiography, 'Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky' (1985), is featured as well as interviews with David Attwell which divulge Coetzee's stated scholarly opinions on writing, truth and autobiography. *Doubling the Point* thus makes available Coetzee's 'sincere' thoughts and opinions which compensate for the perceived lack thereof in his autobiographies. What this theoretical move betrays is a desire for the invitation that these critics perceive to be missing in the texts; it is the desire for the truth of the subject who issues an invitation.

Ultimately, they all conclude that *Boyhood* and *Youth* must be considered as what Coetzee has himself called *autre*biography in *Doubling the Point* (Attwell 1992) and not autobiography. These theorists find themselves unable to bestow the label of autobiography upon these texts, the very genre in which they sought to analyse and defend them. This in turn implies that autobiography must be reserved for the author who

observes our right to an invitation and they cannot, it appears, count Coetzee amongst those writers.

While wanting to acknowledge a seeming indeterminability of the invitation in the triad, it becomes evident that what persuades these theorists to read it as more of a gesture of refusal as opposed to participation, as *autre*biography as opposed to autobiography, is Coetzee's reputation as a reticent individual. For as we see, still seeking out the intention behind Coetzee's autobiographical act, Collingwood-Whittick arrives at, and settles on, a decidedly personal one. Of the use of third person narration, she states the following: "Yet what might appear at first sight to represent a schizoid fissure can be more satisfactorily interpreted as an expression of the author's determination to demarcate the boundary between his private and public selves; to cordon off his identity as a private individual" (2001: 21- 22). She argues that Coetzee ultimately employs the third person as a device of distantiation in his autobiographies in order to maintain his privacy.

The prominence of this perceived intention makes it one worth noting. In *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual* (2006), Jane Poyner uses her 'Introduction' to explain and contextualize J.M. Coetzee's reluctance to take up the position of the public intellectual in society. She sees this general characteristic of Coetzee as evident in his autobiographies by calling the use of third person narration in *Boyhood* "a device that allows [the] author to distance himself from character in his story and, in some senses, allows Coetzee to abnegate responsibility for his actions" (Poyner 2006: 4). In 'A Feminist-Vegetarian Defense of *Elizabeth Costello*: A Rant from an Ethical Academic on

J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*', Laura Wright argues that *Elizabeth Costello* is much like John of the triad. As characters, she reads them both as "a device that serves to alienate the author from a self he reluctantly claims as his own" (Wright in Poyner 2006: 198). Poyner and Wright suggest that while Coetzee may, in some capacity, write 'autobiographically' he nevertheless fails to invite by denying us the right to read the texts as a reflection of *his* identity. Through distantiation, Coetzee ruptures the experience of intimacy and trust that the autobiography is thought to inspire in its readers. As these theorists imply, the use of third-person narration allows Coetzee to behave somewhat irresponsibly and inhospitably towards us; because he works in favour of his desire for privacy, we can never claim to be/feel sufficiently hosted as readers.

Furthermore, Collingwood-Whittick argues that *Boyhood*, as an autobiographical text, presents evidence of Coetzee's autobiographical reluctance to invite:

> The plausibility of this interpretation is reinforced by the psychological evidence contained in the memoir itself, one of the main themes of which is the rigid compartmentalization to which the young Coetzee subjects the multiple aspects of his experience of the world. There is a compulsive secrecy about the boy which drives him to keep each facet of his life isolated and imprisoned in his own dark, impregnable cell.
>
> (2001: 23)

In the representation of John as an exceptionally secretive child, she reads Coetzee's personal need to protect his private being from the self-exposure that the act of autobiography conventionally requires of its authors. Ostensibly, if we examine the trope of the invitation in the triad, *Scenes from Provincial Life*, this case can be easily made.

Boyhood, Youth and *Summertime*, are indeed punctuated with events that capture John's obstinate desire to avoid participation.

As rightly noted by Collingwood-Whittick, *Boyhood* can be read as an account of a boy who goes to great lengths to avoid 'playing along.' As a child we see that John "flees polite talk because of its formulas: 'How are you?' 'How are you enjoying school?'– baffle him. Not knowing the right answers, he mumbles and stammers like a fool. Yet finally he is not ashamed of his wildness, his impatience with the tame patter of genteel conversation" (*B* 78). Here John describes how he contends with his father's family, the Coetzees. John perceives them to be a conservative lot who expect him to respect unquestionably their supremacy as adults. He finds their formulaic exchanges pretentious, boring and stifling. Because he finds the manner in which they talk to him extremely patronizing, he says that "as soon as he can escape he begins to mock the commonplaces of politeness" (*B* 78). John would much rather be alone to make fun of those who are absent than compromise himself by being in their company. His dislike for his father's family, as we see, does not exclude his father. In *Boyhood*, John and his father have little that counts as a relationship. In an effort to engage his distant son, his father tries to create conversation about his son's growing interest in reading. Yet when his father tries to discuss a few poems with him, "he mumbles [...] refuses to play the game. It is not long before his father gives up" (*B* 105). John will not be persuaded into any cordial father-son exchanges, even if discussing poetry is an activity that he might enjoy. In *Boyhood*, John has problems with his mother too: "her blinding, overwhelming, self-sacrificial love, for both him and his brother but for him in particular, disturbs him [...]

Never will he be able to pay back all the love she pours out on him [...] he deliberately hardens his heart against her, refusing to give in" (*B* 47). Because his mother loves him with such fervour, his childish logic dictates that he would have to reciprocate with equal measure at some point in the future. The horror of this burden that she imposes upon him leads him to retract from participation altogether. Ultimately, John is completely burdened by the obligations of family; he thus wonders if he will ever be able to live "as he wants to live: without belonging to a family?" (*B* 91).

In *Youth*, this is precisely what he manages to achieve. As a young man, John supports himself through university so that he is no longer reliant on his family and no longer has to play by their rules. He has become the independent individual he always longed to be as a child. Yet, all the same, the achieved distance does not lead him to make amends or think more kindly about his family. Despite his mother's overtures, he still refuses to allow her any access to his life. However, in *Summertime,* this independence proves to have been short-lived. John returns to South Africa and moves back into his father's house. He lives with his ageing and eventually ailing father in a state of animosity and shame. John is always trying to puzzle his way out of the situation so that he can be free again.

With regard to family, it is only Margot who appears to have worked past his icy exterior as a child (we might assume her to be Agnes in *Boyhood*). In her 'narrative' account in *Summertime*, Margot tells us of John's extreme alienation from the Coetzees. He has become a figure of shame in the family. Margot, however, is sensitive to her cousin's

reticent nature and takes pity on him. Seeing him as frighteningly alone, she tries to connect with John by writing him a deeply personal letter. In her letter she relates her deep affection for him and her desire to see him happy. She advises him to find a wife to soothe his melancholic spirit. In response to her letter Margot receives an extremely terse and formal letter from John. The discrepancy between her open affection and his cold reply leaves her feeling utterly exposed and betrayed. Regarding family, we see that even his closeness to Agnes/Margot does not inspire a spirit of participation in John. He remains obstinate and insular because he does not want to succumb to the vulnerability that participation requires.

John's evasiveness is evident in his love affairs too. In *Youth*, John has let go of his family and appears to have made space in his life for female companionship. Yet as Lenta accurately notes in her article, these affairs are "distressingly simple – he cannot wait for [the women] to leave after the sex act is over" (2003: 166). Being in a relationship for John equates to feeling trapped, manipulated and overpowered. He acts rather callously towards women in order to avoid the self-exposure and commitment that stand as the pre-calculated 'costs' of being in a relationship with a woman.

The same can be said of his relationships in *Summertime*. All of his sexual affairs suffer, and eventually end, because of John's unwillingness to participate. In Julia's interview, we see that she noticed John's inability to invite; "I was the one who had made all the overtures, issued the invitation. *Enough, no more*, I said to myself. *It is up to him now*" (*S* 33). His refusal to participate leaves her feeling frustrated and ultimately betrayed.

Towards the end of her interview, she speaks about the first time they actually manage to connect during lovemaking: "for once he opened his heart, the heart he normally kept wrapped in armour. With open hearts, his and mine, we came together" (*S* 83). But, she continues, "He saw me – saw me as I was at that moment – took fright, hurriedly strapped the armour back over his heart, this time with chains and a double padlock, and stole out into the darkness. Do you think I find it easy to forgive him for that? Do you?" (*S* 84). The moment of connection is unsustainable for John and he flees the scene. He is afraid of the vulnerability that the moment inspires in him and of having to take responsibility for Julia.

Similarly, in *Summertime*, Adriana also suffers from this sense of betrayal. Adriana meets John when she initiates contact with him in his capacity as her daughter's English teacher. She invites him to the house to gauge his credibility (which she finds questionable) and to warn him away from her daughter who already appears to be smitten with Mr. Coetzee. This meeting, she says, "was not an invitation to him to pursue me, it was a warning to him to not pursue my daughter" (*S* 165). Nevertheless, John begins a relentless pursuit of her to the point of becoming bothersome. Adriana's memories of Mr. Coetzee are particularly bitter. Her encounter with him becomes all the more harrowing as she relates the dire circumstances she experienced in South Africa during that time. Far from relieving the many burdens that she suffered, John only added to them. As a result, Adriana can only remember him as an exceptionally selfish man: "that was what I needed in Cape Town: a facilitator, someone to make things easier for me. Mr Coetzee could have offered to be my facilitator. A facilitator for me and a protector for my girls.

Then, just for minute, just for a day, I could have allowed myself to be weak, an ordinary, weak woman" (*S* 177-178). Just as with his family, John fails to accept the overtures of hospitality that come from the women in his life. His inclination is always to refuse or ignore the needs of others in order to protect his overriding need for independence and secrecy.

This gesture of refusal is also present in the one area of John's life where we would expect his participation. In *Boyhood*, John is evidently good at school. However, he still prefers to pretend to be sick so that he can stay at home and read. His intelligence is obviously something on which he prides himself, but when he receives an invitation from his teacher in recognition of his exceptional potential, he responds: "Mr. Gouws wants him to come to tea at his home. Dumbly he nods and memorises the address. This is not something he wants" (*B* 131). The teacher acknowledges John as his star pupil by making a warm gesture of invitation. However, when he gets there, we see that "he does not know how to behave" (*B* 132). John refuses to play the part of an appreciative student. He maintains his stubborn silence and refuses to enjoy the tea. As the discomfort grows, Mr. Gouws relents and lets him leave. In *Summetime*, John has chosen the path of academia for himself. Yet when a lecturing position opens up at the University of Cape Town, he performs poorly in the interview. In his fragments John comments about this interview: "that has always been a fault of his: taking questions too literally, responding too briefly" (*S* 206). John is fully aware of what is expected of him but he refuses to shape his answers accordingly. As a result, he does not get the job the first time around.

In light of the above analysis, in it not inconceivable to read the triad as evidence of what Collingwood-Whittick sees as Coetzee's personal refusal to participate in conventional autobiographical hospitality (2001). It becomes plausible to assert that Coetzee, as a hostile autobiographer, is guilty of the kind of behaviour evidenced by John. Yet what this reading fails to acknowledge is John's *dilemma* in relation to the invitation. Coetzee's representation of John's interaction with the invitation is more nuanced than being a mere refusal.

In the triad, John's ambivalence in relation to the invitation is poignantly portrayed through the extended metaphor of the game. In *Youth*, John can spot the game in everything. It becomes a promiscuous metaphor that he applies to almost every encounter in his life; the game of sex, the game of work, the game of writing and the game of conventional hospitality. Because John has grown skeptical of social etiquette and bears a certain affinity for speaking about decorum in the language of the game, it is through the game that we witness the ambivalence that informs his interaction with the invitation.

However, the game makes its first appearance in *Boyhood* as the literal game of cricket. Despite his love for the sport, John is not good at cricket: "to him real cricket can only be played in silence and apprehension, the heart thudding in the chest, the mouth dry" (*B* 53). John's description of the game makes us aware of the antagonism involved in playing the sport. As a result of this latent hostility that John experiences on the pitch, he makes some rather humorous attempts to play cricket on his own. The first attempt involves recruiting his mother to bowl so that he can play cricket in the backyard. But

John soon drops this idea out of sheer embarrassment. His second attempt is to invent a pulley device that will allow him to release the ball from a catch all by himself. And, "with this he is satisfied: he has bowled and batted all by himself, he has triumphed, nothing is impossible" (*B* 30). Yet as the ball flies all over the place, John's one-man game is tainted with a trace of the ludicrous. This is, no doubt, the spirit in which John stands as judged in the text.

What John is forced to realise in *Boyhood* is that although the game of cricket is an evidently hostile affair that evokes his general unwillingness to participate, he cannot afford *not* to play. For John, "cricket is not a game. It is the truth of life. If it is, as the books say, a test of character, then it is a test he sees no way of passing yet does not know how to dodge" (*B* 54). His devotion to the sport dictates that he is compelled to play; he will lose too much by opting not to play. Thus, despite the tension that cricket evokes in him, his desire for the game compels him to participate.

Much like the game of cricket in *Boyhood*, ambivalence also informs all of his relationships. It is key to note that in *Boyhood*, while he admonishes his mother for her love, "he fears the moment, a moment that has not arrived, when she will utter her judgment" (*B* 161). While John is irritated by her doting affection, he is equally afraid to lose it. When we read with this understanding in mind, it is easy to note the discreet manner in which he tries to ensure that she is always proud of him. John cannot completely forestall participation in his relationship with his mother. To do so would

mean that he would fall out of her favour and ultimately jeopardise his position as her favourite son.

This dynamic also plays out in his affairs with women. In *Youth*, his first lover is Jacqueline. When she moves into his flat without asking his permission, John notes that "looking back, he cannot remember inviting her: he has merely failed to resist" (*Y* 7). John is caught between his desire to have her around in order to make the relationship work and the fear of having his space invaded. This is why he cannot decide if he should ask her to leave or make her feel completely welcome. He is himself unsure about whether he invited her because there is a part of him that feels the desire to sincerely do so but also its contrary. The same, we see, applies to every other affair in the triad; whilst desiring to have a lover, John simultaneously fears the entrapment of a relationship.

However, in *Youth* John goes to great lengths to avoid entering into a relationship with a woman. One such attempt is to accept the homosexual advances from a stranger he meets in London. He assumes that homosexuality might help him escape from the burdens of commitment that he associates with women. However, after this brief encounter, he states:

> Is that homosexuality? Is that the sum of it? Even if there is more to it than that, it seems a puny activity compared with sex with a woman: quick, devoid of dread but devoid of allure. There seems to be nothing at stake: nothing to lose but nothing to win either. A game for people afraid of the big league; a game for losers.
>
> (*Y* 79)

John accepts the invitation into the man's apartment but the brief sexual encounter is so uninspiring that he comes to an awareness of the nature of desire. Whilst contemplating his frustration with the game of dating women, he also realises that he is compelled, through desire, to continue playing. As we see in the epigraph, if John will not dance, he might never have intercourse.

Furthermore, when John has reached the depths of isolation in *Youth*, we gain a more poignant sense of the utter ambivalence that governs his response to the invitation. Whilst in London, John mentions that there are full days that pass in complete silence and he slowly begins to realise that he needs friends. John is thus pleased when his new neighbours, a young Indian family, invite him over for supper. "These are the first people in England to invite him into their home" (*Y* 94), he says. The evening does not go off disastrously and, as readers already acquainted with John, we can read the event as a success. Yet soon after, John struggles with the burden of deciding what an appropriate response to their hospitality entails: "is it inconceivable that he should invite them, husband and wife and no doubt crying baby, to his room on the top floor" (*Y* 95). He mulls over what he can do to return the kind gesture of his hosts. The inability to make an appropriate response haunts him to the point of paralysis. He eventually retracts from the dilemma in shame and makes sure to avoid them at all costs. However, our acquaintance with John as a somewhat selfish young man also leads us to believe that he would be happy to do nothing but because of his neighbours' kindness, he now feels compelled to show gratitude. John's uncertainty of response is thus two-fold: it is a reflection of his general inability to understand social relations *and* it is informed by the burden of

acceptance. John's interaction with the invitation is ambivalent; he is always caught between desire and fear. While he wants to partake in what hospitality offers him, he is fearful of the expectations that are its consequence.

By the end of *Youth*, John is completely isolated from the world. On a rather pessimistic note, he comes to the realisation that he is "locked into an attenuating endgame, playing himself, with each move, further into a corner and into defeat" (*Y* 169). Ironically, John assumed that his refusal to play the game of conventional hospitality would bring him closer to his dream of realising himself as an artist. Yet, this is far from what has occurred; at this point in the text he has completely stopped writing. By isolating himself, John has no access to the kind of opportunities that would help him realise his dreams of writing and love as both aspirations require a form of participation and invitation. By playing the antagonist in the game, the game has for John, denied him everything that it makes possible. In the triad, Coetzee makes it clear that there is no space for John outside of the game, for to not play the game is only a defeatist move of the game. To not play the game is thus, impossible.

According to this analysis of the game, Coetzee does not appear to stage outright refusal in the triad. The gesture of refusal is shown to be an impossible one. Refusal is, in fact, an embedded gesture of hospitality that only reinforces the necessity of participation and accentuates the importance of playing according to the rules, without which one is left with no opportunity to realise any material outcomes of a project or a dream. What we have instead is an examination of the ambivalence of participation; of the dual economy

of desire and fear that binds one to the process of participation, irrespective of what one chooses to do.

In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida elucidates the irony of unwitting participation. He unpacks the etymological relationship between the Greek words *Xenia* (pact) and *Xenos* (foreigner) in order to argue that the foreigner is always *already defined* in relation to the pact, irrespective of whether he/she chooses to accept or decline an offer of hospitality. Should the foreigner choose to accept the conditions of the pact, he/she assumes the role of the guest and gains the benefits of hospitality. However, if the foreigner refuses to sign the pact, then the foreigner assumes the role of the enemy and is denied access to what hospitality can make possible. There is no 'outside' of conditional hospitality for the foreigner to occupy as the definitions of both guest and enemy ultimately belong to the economy of conditional hospitality.

Intriguingly, it is this dynamic that appears to inform critics' reaction to Coetzee. In failing to declare an intention to honour an implicit autobiographical pact we find it difficult to read Coetzee as a guest participating in the protocols of the genre. Consequently, as critics, we have managed to integrate Coetzee into the system of autobiographical hospitality, albeit as an enemy; as the autobiographer who refuses to enter into a pact and consequently, refuses to invite. However, a reading of this nature fails to account for the complexity of the autobiographer's ambivalent position of *necessary* participation.

It is interesting to note, in the triad, that while Coetzee takes great effort to stage John's refusal of the invitation, he does not valorize or reward John's actions. Coetzee has chosen instead to represent John's assumption of the 'enemy' position as ultimately defeatist. The difficult lesson that John struggles to learn is that participation is *necessary* if he is ever to express his desire for cricket, women and writing. Furthermore, he must participate despite his fear and, hence, despite himself. The triad suggests that if John is to have any experience of himself and the world, of both his *autos* and his *bios*, he must succumb to the economy of invitational exchange.

Similarly, an author must participate in the conditional exchange of the literary world in order to be a recognized as a writer. Without participation, no matter how begrudgingly it is performed, there can be no author at all. It is thus impossible for Coetzee to not participate in terms of the conventions of autobiographical hospitality. It is not in his power to refuse the autobiographical invitation *absolutely*. From this perspective we are forced to assume that there must be an acceptance and an issuing of an autobiographical invitation despite our inability to perceive one. It is insufficient to read the triad as evidence of Coetzee's refusal to invite. Furthermore, it seems inappropriate to suggest that John's decision to live in secret is an indication of Coetzee's reticent nature. For if we examine the secret as it is presented in the triad, it appears to be an integrated and necessary element in Coetzee's staging of the more general dilemma of the autobiographer – not merely his own proclivities or choices.

In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida explains that the etymological root of hospitality is the Greek word *hostis*. Through a dual association to both hospitality and hostility, *hostis* can be used to signify *both* guest and enemy (Derrida 2000: 45). As previously discussed, Derrida argues that the 'laws of hospitality' are a set of laws that pre-empt the moment of hospitality. Because they come before the foreigner, the foreigner is aware of what is expected of him/her. However, Derrida argues that this also implies that the 'laws of hospitality' are utterly indifferent to the difference of the foreigner. The foreigner can never be completely other as he/she must be aware of the discourse in which to answer and offer up his/her name (Derrida 2000). In desiring hospitality, the foreigner must comply with the conditions of the pact. The foreigner is thus bound to a form of participation that is *always* ambivalent. In being received, the foreigner is always both guest *and* enemy. It is the very pact that binds the foreigner that alienates him/her from him/herself. It turns the foreigner into his/her own enemy in an attempt to become a guest. The foreigner thus accepts hospitality at the heavy price of self-alienation.

In the triad, Coetzee does represent John as an exceptionally secretive person. But John utters the words, "always, it seems, there is something that goes wrong. Whatever he wants, whatever he likes, has sooner or later to be turned into a secret" (*B* 28), and we are encouraged to begin to read his secrecy as an act of self-protection. John's world is portrayed as a hostile one. There is simply nowhere to express his desires in comfort. He thus conducts his life as a secret in the hope that he will not be persecuted. The secret is a means by which John effectively retains his sense of self despite the overwhelming pressure to conform.

John's *need* for a secret (as opposed to his desire for one) exemplifies the personal risk involved in the participation. It is, as John perceptively notes, that "ball that comes impersonally, indifferently, without mercy, seeking the chink in his defense" (*B* 53). John finds it necessary to play against the hostility of the game in order to keep what counts as his own – his secret. This is how Coetzee brings to our attention the irony of autobiographical hospitality. By conceiving of the genre of autobiography as one that is reliant on a pact, we have to wonder how much leeway is left for the author to engage in the act of self-expression. In *Autobiography*, Anderson cites Jameson and Derrida who have noted and criticized the prescriptive nature of genre in general (2001) [1]. Yet, with regard to autobiography, prescription becomes an almost diabolical law of engagement. And so, I believe that there is an ethical imperative in John's question: "is he going to persist in not playing the game?" (*Y* 29). John's rebellion, although defeatist, allows Coetzee to make clear the traps of desire and the mutations of being that occur when one conforms to convention in order to be received.

John's excessive rebellion has special significance for autobiography. It allows us feel the true angst of losing oneself: "if he stopped lying he would have to polish his shoes and talk politely and do everything that normal boys do. In that case he would no longer be himself. If he were no longer himself, what point would there be in living?" (*B* 35). He laments all the actions he would have to perform in order to be seen as more participatory and normal. John realises that if he is to perform these actions, he will be less of himself. He is strikingly aware of the self-alienation that comes with participation.

[1] The subsequent developments within the genre of autobiography are addressed in the chapter two.

However, John's rebellious behaviour makes it hard for us to not see him as the self-described "irascible despot" (*B* 13). It is unsatisfactory to read John as the victim of hostile circumstances. We must also recognize his inflated desire to be set apart from the crowd. There is a part of John that prides himself on not being ordinary: "he is convinced that he is different, special" (*B* 108). And whilst speculating about his ideal self he decides "that is what he would like to be: a hero" (*B* 25)[2]. In another incident in *Boyhood*, this exceptional sense of self makes it necessary for John to flout all the conventional rules when he plays a game with his friends. John coaxes his friends into sharing their first memories with him, but "the point of the game is, of course, to allow him to recount his own first memory" (*B* 30). During this game John triumphs through the superiority of his first *false* memory. Should he play according to the rules, his memories will prove to be as banal as his friends' and make him rather unexceptional; this is why he chooses to lie instead.

Coetzee's representation of John's exceptional sense of self is significant as this is precisely what one expects of an autobiographer. While one accepts that a fictional text is not embedded in the personality of the author, autobiography relies on the expression of this very person/ality. In *Autobiography*, Anderson notes that it precisely for the exceptional individual that autobiography was first reserved. She argues that the difference between autobiography and memoir evolved out of a need to keep the

[2] This is contrary to Lenta's argument where she suggests that John's characterisation possesses an 'everyman' quality. She argues that John does not exude the exceptional qualities of the author but is of a more pedestrian nature. She suggests that this 'everyman' quality allows us to read the ordinariness of John's experiences as our own (Lenta 2003).

exceptional subject of the autobiography distinct from the 'baser characters' of the memoir (Anderson 2001).

Anderson sees a continuation of this in the Romantic autobiography. The writings of Rousseau and Wordsworth, she asserts, use the genre in order to fulfill and fashion the self in relation to the ideals of the Romantic ego. The romantic writer relied on autobiography's distinction of the exceptional subject in order to inscribe themselves as such. It is the genre which loaned credibility to their project of portraying artists as unique and so they propagated the idea of the autobiographical invitation as exclusive, reserving it as part of their own right to write one (Anderson 2001). Furthermore, Anderson argues that it is precisely because of this validation of the author as an individual that the modernist ethos of alienated authorship posed a challenge to the genre. Yet, she argues, many continued to use it as a means to rebel against this ethos; the genre became a helpful and reassuring means for the author to resituate the self in his/her work. Thus, autobiography is supposed to stand as testament to the subject's appealing sense of difference. It is a genre whose hospitality must be based on offering an *exclusive* invitation to its authors as individuals.

It is with great irony that Coetzee stages John's attempts at fashioning himself in imitation of other great artists who, John perceives, have successfully expressed what is exceptional about themselves. In John's search for the true personality of the artist he tries to follow their example: "it is a diet Rousseau would approve of, or Plato" (*Y* 3) and "following Pound's recommendation, he has read Flaubert" (*Y* 24). When he fantasises

about Emma Bovary, he has to pause to ask, "but would Pound approve?" (*Y* 25). However, John soon grows weary of this game and opts for strictly modernist examples instead:

> T.S. Eliot worked for a bank. Wallace Stevens and Franz Kafka worked for insurance companies. In their unique ways Eliot and Stevens and Kafka suffered no less than Poe or Rimbaud. There is no dishonour in electing to follow Eliot and Stevens and Kafka. His choice is to wear a black suit as they did, wear it like a burning shirt, exploiting no one, cheating no one, paying his way. In the Romantic era artists went mad on an extravagant scale. Madness poured out of them in reams of delirious verse or great gouts of paint. That era is over: his own madness, if it is to be his lot to suffer madness, will be otherwise – quiet, discreet.
>
> (*Y* 60)

Through this modernist prototype, Coetzee highlights the intense irony of John's search for his personality. In mimicking the model of alienation expressed through the *autos* and *bios*, the life stories, of these men, he becomes *doubly* alienated from himself. And so John soon gives up in frustration. He realises that he is stuck with just himself. He *cannot* enter into his own ideal of autobiographical stature through the prescribed emulation of other artists' autobiographies.

And to this self John learns to remain true, even to the point of protecting it in the form of a secret. Through the containment of the secret Coetzee allows us to understand the true paradox in which John is caught; the desire to share it and the need to keep it from that which seeks its destruction. It is the secret that makes us aware of the current machinations of autobiographical hospitality, a form of hospitality that is ironically

hostile to the exceptions of the subject. Seen in this light, autobiographical hospitality is that which unwittingly discredits its own hospitality by making an impossibility of what it initially proposes to its authors. It is for this reason that Derrida asserts that 'the laws' of conditional hospitality have the inherent potential for violence (2000). It becomes a hospitality that is no hospitality at all, or hostility working under the guise of hospitality.

Reading the triad in this manner prompts us towards the ethical duty of rethinking our conception of the genre and our responses to work within the genre. As we have seen, the attempt to read Coetzee's autobiographies has led to the immediate search for the invitation that Coetzee accepts into autobiography and which he issues to us as readers. Unable to locate any form of invitation in Coetzee's autobiographical gesture, the critics discussed in this chapter all suggest that Coetzee flouts the norms of autobiographical hospitality. In the case of Coetzee, the accusation of inhospitable behaviour is further exacerbated by our willingness to read Coetzee's reticence as mimetically reflected in these texts. However, as I have aimed to argue in this chapter, the extension of autobiographical hospitality through the demand for a pact contradicts the notion of hospitality itself. John's secretiveness is informed by the hostility that he perceives to be involved in sharing himself with the world. The pre-conditioned modes of social exchange do not allow for the expression of his secret but seek to destroy it through conformism. Similarly, the author of an autobiography, while wanting to give expression to his personality, must face the indifference of convention, which ultimately, turns self-expression into an impossible act. Hence, reading an autobiography with a demand for a

pact is more of a reflection of our lack of hospitality rather than the author's. It could even be considered an expression of our hostility.

However, reading John's engagement with the invitation as a chastisement of our critical endeavours is only one experience we can take away from this analysis of the triad, *Scenes from Provincial Life*. Through the question of the invitation Coetzee makes us aware of the precarious stance that the autobiographer must assume in choosing to write an autobiography. John of the triad 'facilitates' an encounter with the autobiographical writer, Coetzee, who cannot refuse, but must negotiate the impasse of autobiographical hospitality. Despite using John's experiences to make evident the hostility of conditional hospitality, Coetzee does not stage a 'coup' by showing this to be an impossibility in itself, as a defeatist move in John's game. John never gets to be the individualist 'hero' he dreams of becoming. As Coetzee represents him, he simply cannot bypass that which makes possible all of his interactions with the world, including his authorial interactions. As I have illustrated, without the issuing and reception of invitations, John becomes isolated and fails to have an experience of himself as the writer he hoped to become. Similarly, for the autobiographer it becomes impossible to disregard completely the idea of the autobiographical invitation when choosing to write one. Without the invitation, one would have no way to call one's work 'autobiography' and there would be little justification for the inclusion of one's personality in the act of writing.

In John, I have argued, there are the subtle nuances of both desire and fear in relation to the invitation. The same, I imagine, applies to Coetzee. By putting the autobiographical

invitation into question and mobilizing it as a trope, Coetzee draws us into this situational double-bind of the desire to accept and the fear of what acceptance dictates. In the triad, John is left in the impasse of conditional hospitality. And it is from this impasse that the triad comes to us, informed by a necessary paradox of rebelling against and complying with the conditions of autobiography. Through John we experience the severe tension of the impasse, and it is this very tension, I believe, from which the texts issue.

It is interesting to note that if we follow the metaphor of the game as it develops in the 'collective' narrative of the triad, one is denied the comfort of arriving at a thesis. The game is one in which there is no winning or losing. We are denied the reassurance of mastery with regard to the game. By mobilizing the invitation as question, Coetzee demonstrates that the game at stake is much more complex than the game we imagine it to be. Seeing that Coetzee implies that there is a necessity for a conditional form of hospitality despite its potential for violence, we must ask: What then is *good* autobiographical hospitality? Evidently, with regard to autobiographical hospitality, this question is one that requires further consideration, for as I aim to show, it does not, cannot, end here.

Chapter Two – The Absolute/Impossible Invitation

> That is how they lived, stuck, too poor to move, waiting for the invitation that did not come
>
> *Boyhood* 81.

In the triad, *Scenes from Provincial Life*, we have already discerned John's endless contentions with conditional invitations. Yet whilst John performs his impossible rejection of conditional hospitality, the triad also presents us with certain kinds of invitations that John appears to be more amenable towards. In the epigraph above, John makes reference to the farm, Voëlfontein. Voëlfontein takes on a heavenly magnificence in the young John's mind: "Voëlfontein is a kingdom in its own right," (*B* 91) he declares. However, going to the farm is an arduous business for John; here he must put up with his father's family whom he does not particularly like and who do not particularly like him. Yet in *Boyhood*, he states his willingness to face the antagonism of the Coetzees in order to be on the farm. The reason for this is because "the secret and sacred word that binds him to the farm is *belong*" (*B* 95). For John, who feels as if he belongs nowhere, especially not in Worcester where he lives, this is an emphatic and trenchant statement. In the farm, John has found something with which to identify and he wishes to make this state of identification permanent: "is there no way of living in the Karoo – the only place in the world where he wants to be" (*B* 91). In *Boyhood*, John's yearning for the farm exceeds the meaning of the usual holiday visits during which he behaves politely in exchange for the benefits of being there. He desires the kind of freedom to call it home. His wish is for the invitation that will allow him to reside there indefinitely and absolutely.

In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida outlines a possibility for hospitality of this kind. After discussing the harshest extent of the laws of conditional hospitality, Derrida presents a utopian prospect; this he calls the Law of absolute hospitality (2000). Unlike conditional hospitality, the Law of absolute hospitality allows for the foreigner to be made to feel at home *because* of its ability to account for his/her foreignness. As described by Derrida, it is a form of hospitality that entails opening up one's home to the unknown. The host awaits the arrival of the absolute other and graciously gives place to whoever or whatever arrives. It is a kind of hospitality that receives the foreigner without asking him/her to speak; there are no demands made for either the name of the foreigner or for any gestures of reciprocation (Derrida 2000). What absolute hospitality makes possible is the offering of invitations that are particular, singular and made for the hosting of an individual or an unspecified other. Evidently, absolute hospitality demands that one breaks from the very idea of convention in order to host. For the state, the Law of absolute hospitality comes at the 'expense' of the laws of conditional hospitality. It is an outlaw-law that *demands* transgression in order to host the foreigner (Derrida 2000). Thus the exchange that absolute hospitality initiates is aneconomic. It sustains a belief in the other's right to be received without any preconceived notions of a pact. It allows the foreigner to retain his/her sense of otherness and hence to feel at home.

Michael Marais's monograph, *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fictions of J.M. Coetzee* (2009), holds this idea of absolute hospitality as central to its reading of Coetzee and his work. Marais argues that Coetzee's writing is endlessly caught

up with ethical preoccupations that closely resemble the Derridean and Levinasian ideals of hospitality. Through a patient analysis of Coetzee's texts, Marais finds a perpetual representation of the failures of conditional hospitality amongst characters. And this, Marais argues, is a means by which Coetzee illustrates the failures of a form of hospitality that often results in diabolic relationships of hostility and historical oppression. Furthermore, he argues for the meta-fictional significance of this; like the characters, the author who writes in 'the language of the same', of preconditioned historical discourse, whilst seeking to engage the other only perpetuates the violence of historical marginalization through representation. Marais argues that in order to rival history and to make an ethical gesture in his work, Coetzee frustrates the interpretative economic exchange that proves to be inhospitable to the other (2009).

However, the schwerpunkt of *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fictions of J.M. Coetzee,* lies in the rigorous examination of consistent tropes and metaphors that cumulatively amount to Coetzee's preoccupation with the figure of the lost child. In this recurring figure, Marais reads a prosopopeiac expression of the other that the text seeks to find and make a home for. In showing a desire to host otherness, Marais argues that Coetzee's characters (and Coetzee himself) all undergo forms of inspiration that resemble the act of attempting to engage the other in terms of the Law of absolute hospitality. However, the difficulty of this practice is that hosting the other requires infinite resources from an essentially finite host. Thus, it is significant that the figure of the lost child fails to arrive or be born or recovered and must be mourned *ad infinitum* from one text to another. The 'project' of absolute hospitality can never

conceive of itself as complete. In leaving the gesture of hospitality open, the host does not reduce the alterity of the other by imposing false closures on him/her/it. This is why Marais suggests that Coetzee re-envisions the 'same' project time and time again (2009). As a 'secretary of the invisible', Coetzee is seen as offering absolute hospitality by giving place to the other without term. Through this lack of closure, Coetzee displays awareness that absolute hospitality is an ideal that cannot be realised. But, Marais argues, it is an ideal that Coetzee sustains through the affective gift of desire for the other.

The triad, *Scenes from Provincial Life*, although not discussed in *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fictions of J.M. Coetzee*, can be read in terms of Marais's insights. It follows that Coetzee, in his perpetual desire to challenge the ethics of literary and authorial hospitality, as Marais suggests, would extend this conceit into his autobiographies through the trope of the invitation. Not surprisingly, there are neat parallels between Marais's understanding of Coetzee's treatment of hospitality and my analysis of the trope of the invitation in the triad. Comparable to Marais's examination of hospitality in Coetzee's fiction, I suggested that Coetzee highlights the machinations of conditional hospitality in order to display its aporetic failures and lack of viability as a mode of interaction and inclusion.

Yet more significant still is that the triad, just as Marais suggests of Coetzee's fiction, appears to stage the failure of conditional hospitality in order to gesture towards the ethical ideal of absolute hospitality. However, with regard to autobiography, the alterity that the triad represents as the subject of desire is the otherness of the author. Coetzee, I

believe, marks this alterity through the secret. The secret, I argued in Chapter One, is precisely that which conditional forms of hospitality disallows. By maintaining John's need for a secret self, Coetzee exemplifies an hostility towards the proscriptions of conditional exchange. The triad, in its insistence of John's secret sense of self, not only delineates the constraints of conventional hospitality but gestures towards looking beyond it. For John, a potent secret translates into an equally potent desire to share it.

In Chapter One, I argued that John's resistance to conditional invitations is informed by both his principles and his powerlessness. Yet another aspect of his impatience with conditional hospitality stems from the fact that John desires a reception that surpasses the economy in which he assumes the role of either the awkward guest or the begrudging enemy in relation to those around him. His desire is to be the one at home in/as himself in the lives of others. He yearns for a kind of reception in which there is no need for a secret self or one that will exist despite his need for secrecy. In the triad, we thus witness how John transgresses the protocols of conditional hospitality in order to leave himself open for the host/s who will allow for the sharing of his secret self or quietly give place to it without asking for it to be enunciated.

In *Boyhood*, John states his preference for his mother's family because "they accept him – rude, unsocialised, eccentric" (*B* 78). Unlike the Coetzees, his mother's family lets him behave as he pleases. They make it possible for him to feel at home by ignoring the conventional exchange between child and adult. As a result, John finds a sense of freedom that comes from remaining true to himself in the company of others. In *Boyhood*

he has a similar experience of radical acceptance in his relationship with his cousin, Agnes. John recalls a rather poignant conversation from their childhood during which "he lost his reserve. As he spoke he forgot what language he was speaking: thoughts simply turned to words with him, transparent words" (*B* 94). John remembers a great sense of intimacy between them, a moment in which he unthinkingly abandoned his secret self to her and experienced an unexpected and sudden outpouring of his heart. This experience, far from giving rise to the harrowing sense of torturous self-exposure that is so familiar to John, is that of absolute pleasure. So much, in fact, that John has to wonder, "is this love – this easy generosity, this sense of being understood at last, of not having to pretend?" (*B* 95). His cousin's hospitality comes to him as nothing short of a gift. Agnes creates a context in which John can express his secrets without fear of judgment or demands for reciprocation. She thus surpasses the economic exchange of hospitality by listening in quietude and accepting everything that comes during this encounter with John.

In *Youth,* John's secret has transformed into that of artistic ambition. It is, as he says, "the secret flame burning in him, the flame that marks him as an artist" (*Y* 5). However, John concludes that South Africa is hostile to poetry and poets. Like the farm in *Boyhood*, John imagines London to be an idyllic space where his secret self can be more at home. He moves to London because he assumes that it will find its true expression there. Once John is in London, though, he states that "he may be living in England, but it is certainly not by invitation of the English working class" (*Y* 103). John gives us a sense of the willing impropriety of his actions in order to meet his ideals. He has made the first transgressive step into London, arriving in a country in which he is not particularly

welcome. He wishes to be integrated as one at home among the English and not as a foreign guest or enemy of the country. He thus offers himself absolutely; he cuts himself from his 'homeland' in the hope that he will be received absolutely.

Also, in *Youth*, this desire informs his relationships with women. John wants a woman who is perceptive enough to see the secret artistic flame that burns within him. After a disastrous break-up with Jacqueline, his first lover in the text, John asks the following:

> Is that why the affair with Jacqueline was doomed to fail: because, not being an artist herself, she could not appreciate the artist's need for inner solitude? If Jacqueline had been a sculptor, for instance, if one corner of the flat had been set aside for her to chip away at her marble while in another corner he wrestles with words and rhymes, would love have flourished between them?
>
> (Y 11)

John suggests that the relationship failed because Jacqueline cannot appreciate, nor can she allow for, the burgeoning artist in him. John's impatience with his string of lovers follows this distinct pattern: he grows bored and irritated with them because they fail to inspire the expression of his secret self and do not allow for the artist to be ushered into reality. However, in *Youth*, this incessant failure with women gives way to wild fantasies:

> His own explanation for his failures in love, hoary by now and less and less to be trusted, is that he has yet to meet the right woman. The right woman will see through the opaque surface he presents to the world, to the depths inside; the right woman will unlock the hidden intensities of passion in him.
>
> (*Y* 134)

Not satisfied with the petty and demanding women who present themselves to him, he believes in and dreams of this woman – Destiny – who will rescue him from the oblivion of casual sex and artistic obscurity. He believes that this woman will accept him absolutely and inspire an outpouring of poetry.

In *Summertime*, John appears to remain firm in his faith in the existence of this woman; time and maturation have not brought about the erosion of his ideals, as one might expect. In Margot's account (we might assume her to be Agnes of *Boyhood*), John recalls their childhood affection for one another and their plans to get married. This intimate conversation leads him to confess that "ever since that day, being in love with a woman has meant being free to say everything on my heart" (*S* 97). His moment of absolute reception from Margot/Agnes has left a lasting impression on him and he has retained this as his standard of true love. Yet seeing John's loneliness as a result of this very ideal, Margot feels it is time for him to compromise. In a letter she writes to him, she lovingly suggests that he should settle for a nice wife who would take care of him and his father. But John, we find out through the incompatible exchange of letters, will have none of it. He will continue to remain true to his ideal of absolute reception in his lover's life. And as we see in Adriana's account, it is with this hope that he pursues her. When John falls in love with Adriana he attempts to seduce her through a sequence of intimate letters. These letters are the very expressions of his heart; he relates his feelings and opinions about art, music, philosophy, everything that he deems important to his being. He even tells her about his intense love for Schubert and the intimate feelings that the music stirs

in him, all in the hope that she will accept him as a consequence of his deeply private confession.

Further, in *Youth*, Coetzee sets out absolute hospitality as John's autobiographical ideal:

> If he is to censor himself from expressing ignoble emotions – resentment at having his flat invaded, or shame at his failures as a lover – how will those emotions ever be transfigured and turned into poetry? And if poetry is not to be the agency of his transfiguration from ignoble to noble, why bother with poetry at all? Besides, who is to say that the feelings he writes in his diary are his true feelings? Who is to say that at each moment while the pen moves he is truly himself? At one moment he might be truly himself, at another he might simply be making things up. How can he know for sure? Why should he even *want* to know for sure?
>
> (*Y* 9-10)

Jacqueline, his lover, stumbles upon his diary and reads the disparaging comments that he has written about her. She quarrels with John and leaves him to brood over its contents. In the diary he has vented his feelings, being unable to express them directly to her. The diary then, assumes the position of the host by cushioning all of his emotions without uttering the judgment that he fears and that has now fallen upon him. However, what this incident expresses is a desire for a kind of literary freedom that will allow him to be whatever he chooses to be in the act of writing. As a writer, John wants to be equally embraced for both his noble and ignoble emotions, for both his truth and fabrication *and* without the burden of having to decipher the one from the other. The idea of the self as a unitary subject appears to be a stifling concept that fails to account for the plenitude and contradictions of his personality. John suggests that the truth of the self appears to be an

indecipherable concept due to the momentary changes of mood and perception, making all things equally 'true', equally 'false'.

This instance in *Youth*, like many others, ruptures the diegetic fabric of the third person, present tense narrative. It does so by playing on our awareness of the autobiographical act at hand and, hence, issues forth a doubling or confusion between the narrator, John, and the author, John Coetzee. Like many other moments in *Youth*, we find it hard to separate the distantiated author from this utterance and yet we can never verify his presence in these words as they seamlessly blend into the third-person, present-tense narrative of John. The irony of such an effect is, of course, that we cannot decipher whether this is the 'true' voice of the author or if this forms part of the general fabrication of the narrative of John. Whilst we have an expression of the inability to distinguish truth from fiction in an instance of autobiography, we are forced, as readers, to experience it. Yet as a tenuous mark that presents and removes itself, it nevertheless leaves us with a residual question: whilst John expresses a desire for absolute autobiographical hospitality, are we to read this as a desire that belongs to the author, Coetzee? It is a question that leaves us with the challenge to conceive of what such hospitality would entail and how it should be offered.

Drawing from Anderson's *Autobiography*, we see that the more current developments within the genre address this desire for greater authorial freedom. Anderson argues that the theoretical insights of modernism and post-structuralism provide a challenge to the fundamental doctrine of autobiographical truth and as a consequence, seek to free the author from the demand for a pact. Anderson traces the genesis of this movement in the

psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan. The psychoanalytic understanding of the subject as unknowable and irrational, she argues, brought about irrevocable shifts in the perception of the autobiographical subject (Anderson 2001). Psychoanalysis illustrated the distance and contradictions between the self and the narration of the self thus making it impossible to approach the author as a subject with the power or the ability to present the truth of him/herself in writing. Because of the psychoanalytic distrust towards the unitary subject and language through which it is conveyed, truth became an indeterminable, if not impossible, ideal to harbour.

However, Anderson suggests that the negation of truth ultimately comes to fruition through post-structuralist intervention. She argues that post-structuralist theorists and practitioners achieved this by exploring autobiography as acts of and experiments in selfhood. Anderson discusses the very radical propositions of Paul de Man's essay 'Autobiography and De-Facement', and Roland Barthes's *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* as two seminal texts that respectively argue for, and practice, the death of autobiography (2001). Discussing Paul de Man's essay, Anderson finds him to be highly critical of the genre. In this essay De Man argues that autobiography is inherently flawed – much too close and too vulnerable to the neighbouring genre of fiction – and thus, not eligible for classification as a specific and separate genre. And in Barthes's experimental autobiography, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Anderson reads an exemplary display of this vulnerability. In the fragment titled, '*Le livre du Moi* ~The Book of the Self ', Barthes states:

> All this must be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel—or rather by several characters. For the image-repertoire, fatal substance of the novel, and the labyrinth of levels in which anyone who speaks about himself gets lost—the image-repertoire is taken over by several masks *(personae)*, distributed according to the depth of the stage (and yet *no one—personne*, as we say in French—is behind them).
>
> (1977: 119-120)

Barthes exhibits a clear disregard for the unitary and truthful autobiographical subject and chooses to propagate his own post-structuralist ideals of the self as an effect of discursivity. However, still written within the genre of autobiography, Anderson argues that Barthes's text nevertheless serves as testament to the generosity of the boundaries of the genre itself (2001). Considering that autobiography has survived despite the declaration of its 'death', we can only assume that what post-structuralism exploits is the possibility for freedom that is already embedded in the genre. With a genre that has never had a stable identity and set of rules, various experiences of the subject, of the *autos*, can be allowed as autobiography.

If we assume Coetzee to be harbouring a desire for absolute autobiographical hospitality, and to have his autobiographics received accordingly, then post-structuralism appears to provide a framework for reading. Not surprisingly then, it is post-structuralist responses to *Boyhood* and *Youth* that gesture towards an extension of absolute autobiographical hospitality to the autobiographical subject, Coetzee. By dispensing with the desire for truth and notions of the unitary subject, these responses welcome and allow for the autobiographical subject to be other to our expectations. The desire for absolute

autobiographical hospitality that we may perceive to be present in the texts, through John's yearning for it, thus stands as already ostensibly fulfilled in light of post-structuralist responses to the triad.

In 'Wordsworth and the Recollection of South Africa' (2009), Pieter Vermeulen introduces his analysis of *Boyhood* by critiquing the trend of using *Doubling the Point,* to 'pre-interpret' Coetzee's autobiographical texts. He argues against the fallacy of incorporating Coetzee, the author and his opinions, as part of an "eminently closed programme that pre-forms our interpretation of it" (Vermeulen 2009: 48). Vermeulen is highly critical of the biographical 'hunt' that has ensued from the need to locate the truth behind these autobiographies. Consequently, he argues that *Boyhood* should be read for its fictional possibilities. In choosing to read autobiography for its fictional possibilities, Vermeulen not only implies an inability to afford them any autobiographical status but an unwillingness to do so. Emulating the post-structuralist *zeitgeist*, his response relishes the opportunity to put aside the concern for autobiographical truth. In expressing no desire or demand for truth, Vermeulen embraces the critical freedom that this offers him; it allows him the opportunity to read these texts as consistent with Coetzee's vast range of fictional representation. He thus embarks on a reading of *Boyhood* as a text that is comparable to and compatible with *Disgrace*[1].

[1] Similarly, Elleke Boehmer's recent reading of *Boyhood* and *Youth* has the same liberal underpinning. In her article, 'Queer Bodies' (Boehmer 2009) *Boyhood* and *Youth* are read rather seamlessly alongside Coetzee's fictional texts as she examines the consistent representation of the queer subject in Coetzee's *oeuvre*.

Yet just as this kind of response liberates the theorist from seemingly archaic concerns with truth, it also makes an extremely generous gesture towards the author, Coetzee. The genre of autobiography, irrespective of how indeterminably it is used, need not deter the author from the expression of fictional possibilities. The author is left free to fictionalize without any need to answer for this impulse. For how much an author fictionalizes is of little concern to us if we opt to read autobiography as a dead genre – as fiction.

Another more complex post-structuralist response to Coetzee, and perhaps the most prominent, is embedded in the understanding of Coetzee's texts as 'criticism-as-fiction' and 'fiction-as-criticism' (Dovey 1988). In 'Disrupting Inauthentic Readings: Coetzee's Strategies' (2009), this framework is central to Katy Iddiols's reading of autobiographical indeterminability in Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*. Although she does not deal directly with the triad, the application of her argument serves well to highlight the pervasive opinions that have governed literary responses to Coetzee and his autobiographies.

In critical responses to Coetzee, many have noted that Coetzee's dual profession as writer and literary critic puts him in the erudite position to disrupt monolithic literary interpretations that may be applied to his texts. Iddiols argues that, using irony, "Coetzee uses interpretation as a device in his writing" (2009: 185). She suggests that the hermeneutic structures of literary criticism are presented in the texts and unfold within its boundaries in order to disrupt a neat and seamless assertion of these very readings. His texts are thus seen as drawing on the very theories that would ordinarily be used to read them, pre-empting and ironising the act of interpretation that ensues.

In *Diary of a Bad Year*, Iddiols sees the construction of a character "designed to complicate our efforts to read Coetzee himself into his texts" (2009: 191). JC, she argues, is not unlike John of the triad; Coetzee, in his awareness of potential autobiographical interpretations, deliberately confounds this reading by using strategic devices of distantiation. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, she argues that the discrepancy between the unflattering characterisation of JC and our respect for the world-renowned author, J.M. Coetzee, is one such device. Through textual self-reference *and* simultaneous distantiation, Coetzee obstructs the reading of the texts as either autobiography or fiction by preventing foreclosures at either end. Iddiols argues that "by making his texts ultimately uninterpretable, Coetzee ensures a whole multiplicity of readings" (2009: 195). She suggests that Coetzee overloads his texts with hermeneutic possibilities in order to frustrate the process of singular reading, of interpretation.

Whilst Iddiols reads great mischief in this 'game', she argues that Coetzee makes a fundamental ethical contribution to literary criticism. She suggests that "we are textually prevented from engaging in the inauthentic readings of singular interpretation" (Iddiols 2009: 193). Drawing on Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation*, Iddiols defines inauthentic reading as violent interpretative endeavour that subsumes the text in an act of hermeneutic mastery. She argues that Coetzee's strategy is to warn us against the dangers of interpretation by ensuring that we relentlessly fail at our attempts to do so. Iddiols thus sees Coetzee as one who guides us towards responsible and authentic reading. Authentic reading, as defined by Iddiols, is an act which seeks to give its attention back to the text

"with all its originality and distinctiveness" (2009: 188). Unlike interpretation, authentic reading allows the text to remain open to all potential readings by actively failing to interpret.

In choosing to embrace Coetzee's work as uninterpretatable or anti-interpretative, a study of this kind assumes that Coetzee is much too savvy to offer an autobiographical invitation. The autobiographical invitation is seen as an interpretative lure, utilized by Coetzee in order to confound it. Thus, choosing to read for an invitation is a doomed critical activity as any invitation that we may detect already carries the seeds of its own destruction. Furthermore, Iddiols reads this lack of invitation as an ethical necessity; not only does she note the absence of a conventional autobiographical invitation but asserts the author's ethical right to refuse the extension of the invitation. Again, we have an extremely magnanimous gesture being made to the author. Coetzee is protected from the autobiographical invitation and he is awarded the right to remain free from our expectation of it.

However, in *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fictions of J.M. Coetzee*, Marais suggests that far from merely presenting the desire for absolute hospitality, Coetzee stages the aporetic complexity of putting this ideal into practice. Marais illustrates how Coetzee's characters, in their desire to host the other, often perform a series of unwitting betrayals. The literary text, like the economic exchange of conditional hospitality, bears an allegiance to history through its systematic representation that always seeks to assimilate difference. Marais illustrates the manner in

which both the characters and the author, Coetzee, struggle with the awareness of this fact. If they offer up the name of the other they inevitably betray it and return it to the 'language of the same', the discourse of history. Thus, the question that Marais sees as central to Coetzee's project is: "how can that which is hostile to the other be made into a home for it?" (2009: 95). For Marais, this is the difficult impasse that Coetzee's fiction constantly tries to negotiate. It grapples with the difficulty of wanting to create a home for the other without returning it to the 'language of the same'. Because of the difficulty involved in trying to host the other, Marais argues that Coetzee puts his own texts under necessary suspicion. Just like his characters, Coetzee implies that his texts are equally capable of betraying the other whilst trying to make a home for it. Thus, as readers, Marais suggests that we must accept the texts with a certain amount of incredulity and distrust as it is both devil and saviour of the otherness it seeks to reveal (Marais 2009).

Similarly, through the trope of the invitation in the triad, Coetzee makes an ironic revelation of John's betrayal of his own ideals of hospitality. If we return to the moment in *Boyhood* when John stumbles upon the happy event of expressing the depths of his being to Agnes, we see that this experience of love without pretence signifies absolute reception for John. As a result, John spends a lifetime trying to recover this moment. However, in *Youth*, it fails to resurface in his subsequent encounters with women and he grows to realise the rarity of what he experienced as a child. Desperate to have an experience of a similar kind, John decides that "from now on, he has decided, he will put himself in chance's way at every turn. Novels are full of chance meetings that lead to romance – romance or tragedy. He is ready for romance, ready even for tragedy, ready

for anything, in fact, so long as he will be consumed by it and remade" (Y 111). John discards his staunch sensibilities, quits his job at IBM and decides that he must accept risk and put himself in the path of the unexpected if he wishes to receive it. He frees himself up absolutely as a gesture of willingness to be hosted by his ideal woman. However, the intended irony is that John searches for and hankers after the unexpected in what can only be described as a literary model of the unexpected. He ironically follows an expected and practiced model of adopting a more bohemian countenance in order to encounter chance. And this attempt, Coetzee illustrates, does not bring about the expected-unexpected that John had hoped for but leads to more unexpected misery. This is, however, a surprise that John already appears to be acquainted with. His entire life, thus far, has been encapsulated by misery and John always assumes that happiness will be the unexpected arrival. The fact that more misery arrives is thus unexpected for John. He cannot embrace this experience of 'chance' because he expected something different of the unexpected.

This irony is elaborated in *Summertime;* despite John's wish for absolute reception we see that he is by no means free and open to chance. In the interviews, the women all express an awareness of John's great expectations. Julia says that "I never had the feeling that he was with me, me in all my reality. Rather, it was as if he was engaged with some erotic image of me inside his head" (*S* 52). And Adriana says, "if he was in love, it was not with me, it was some fantasy that he dreamed up in his own brain and gave my name to" (*S* 174). Upon receiving absolute hospitality from Agnes/Margot in the form of "being free to say everything on my heart" (*S* 97), John, rather ironically, turns this

moment into a repeatable model. He concretizes it into a manifesto of love and returns it to the economy of desire – of expectation and fulfillment. This is contrary to the kind of experience that absolute hospitality offers. It fails to allow for the surprise of the unexpected arrival. As a reader, it is easy to see that had John foregone his expectations of women, he may have surprised himself by encountering a new experience of love in and through them. But John, rather ironically, makes an unwitting return to the practice of conditional hospitality despite his scornful attitude towards conditional, 'economic' exchange.

We have to wonder if it is mere coincidence that this 'error' has occurred within post-structuralist autobiography. In *Autobiography*, Anderson cites the example of Barthes, who realised that his own expression of radical authorial freedom in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, may not be as absolute as intended. In his autobiography, Barthes attempted to attack the ideological imperative of autobiography as truth. He sought to achieve this through rampant self-invention. Aided by post-structuralist theories of language, he negates the essential subject in order to propagate the experience of a purely discursive one. Using the rhetoric of the Lacan's 'Mirror Stage', Barthes presents the subject as a series of refracted instances and illustrates that the construction of a unitary subject relies on fictional determinations that put the fragments together into a unified whole (Anderson 2001).

However, in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, what Barthes also presents is the admission that his intended destruction of the autobiographical subject does, in part at

least, defeat its own aims. In the fragment entitled, '*Le fragment comme illusion* ~ The fragment as illusion', Barthes states the following:

> I have the illusion to suppose that by breaking up my discourse I cease to discourse in terms of the imaginary about myself, attenuating the risk of transcendence; but since the fragment (haiku, maxim, *pensèe*, journal entry) is *finally* a rhetorical genre and since rhetoric is that layer of language which best presents itself to interpretation, by supposing I disperse myself I merely return, quite docilely, to the bed of the imaginary.
>
> (1977: 95)

Barthes notes that his use of the fragmented self of the 'Mirror Stage' inexorably ties his thesis to the initial premise of Imaginary wholeness of which, the rhetoric of fragmentation is only a product. Thus, what appears to disperse the ideology of the unified subject, nevertheless affirms it by marking it as a pre-originary wholeness of the subject (Anderson 2001).

In 'Structure, Sign and Play in the discourse of the Human Sciences', Derrida defines critical moves of this nature as a product of a destructive philosophical episteme. In this article, Derrida traces the development of the philosophical tradition of metaphysics and transcendental ontology. Ever critical of the structuralist desire for an ontological center, Derrida turns his examination towards the radical shifts and ruptures that occur within philosophy as a reaction to structuralism. He refers to this period of re-evaluation as an 'event' within European history when European culture could no longer sustain itself as

the centre of reference for scientific and philosophical discourse. And of this 'event', Derrida states:

> Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of present being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse.
>
> (Derrida in Lodge 1988: 109)

In order to challenge structuralist discourse, theorists began to embark on radical processes of decentering. In doing so, post-structuralism sought to negate the very "structurality of structure" (Derrida in Lodge 1988:109) by opening up the field of signification to infinite play. Derrida broadly locates the beginning of the philosophical break-away in the works of Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger. The kind of critique they offer, Derrida argues, comes in the form of a challenge and bears an evident desire to identify itself away from the history of the philosophical tradition. However, central to Derrida's argument in 'Structure, Sign and Play in the discourse of the Human Sciences', is the illustration that "these destructive discourses and are trapped in a kind of circle" (1988: 109). Derrida notes that whilst challenging the history of metaphysics and ontology, these theorists employ the terminology of the very tradition they seek to challenge. He argues that "we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest" (1988: 110). Despite seeing the critical necessity of

this philosophical movement, Derrida argues that post-structuralism fails to achieve its ends due to its unwitting inheritance of the tradition. Using the work of Levi-Strauss, Derrida illustrates the sheer difficulty of attempting to escape the logic of the sign through claiming opposition as a theoretical ground. The opposition, he argues, is part of the binary logic that structuralism has, in fact, invented.

Derrida's critique of post-structuralist discourse allows us to better identify this circular logic in post-structuralist autobiography. Skeptical of the metaphysical and transcendental weight embedded in the *autos* of autobiography, post-structuralism sought to challenge this process by disrupting its signification of truth. Post-structuralist autobiography turns to understanding the *autos* as an experience of pure discursivity and/or fiction. But as Barthes has noted in his own experiment, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, this seeming opposition still operates within the frameworks of truth. In order to make the declaration of the death of autobiography, one relies on the possibility of its life. Consequently, arguing that the author who writes is absent from the act of autobiography still leaves open the possibility that an essential subject still lingers, albeit as a deferred and extra-textual possibility. Thus, the intended destruction of the autobiographical invitation has, in fact, never occurred; it remains a suspended possibility with the potential to arrive. Despite the fact that post-structuralist autobiography can only conceive of the invitation as that which is irrecoverable in language, an autobiographer is still read in relation to it. And if we reconsider the responses to Coetzee's autobiographies that have been discussed in this chapter, we witness the ironic return to the binding invitation.

In 'Wordsworth and the Recollection of South Africa', Vermeulen states, at the outset, his intention to work against the trend of using the 'Coetzee' of *Doubling the Point* as a central reference point for reading his autobiographical texts. Vermeulen implies that, in light of the ideological failures of narratological interpretation, critical reading *should* do without the ontological premises that always demand and distribute the desire for meaning, truth and the autobiographical invitation. This decision, infused with post-structuralist rigour, marks critical responses of the biographical kind as passé. However, this decision, based on a critique of the search for truth, nevertheless employs its structures. Upon appearing to embrace an indeterminability of truth, Vermeulen opts instead for a fictional model of authorship in order to read *Boyhood*. He turns the presence of the author of an 'autobiography' into the *absolute* absence of an author who writes fiction. As his textual analysis suggests, there is little difference between the author of *Boyhood* and the author of *Disgrace*. However, this radical position implicitly relies on the ontological binary of authorial presence and absence. It is a binary whose safety he ostensibly understands and utilizes. In marginalising the indeterminable invitation in such an absolute manner, Vermeulen betrays the same anxiety as that felt by those whom he criticizes in his introduction. Like those who reassure themselves by reading 'Coetzee' into autobiography and hence arguing for presence and truth, Vermeulen assures us that, as fiction, *Boyhood* is the exact opposite, all the while relying on the same generic distinction between autobiography and fiction. This proposition does not eliminate the possibility of the invitation but turns it into a more essentialised trope. By marginalising the author from his own text, from his own indeterminable

autobiography, the author's essential self is seen as existing safely *outside* of the framework of the text. This leaves open the possibility for an invitation even if it has not been actualised in *Boyhood.*

There is a similar difficulty with authorial presence in Iddiols's 'Disrupting Inauthentic Readings: Coetzee's Strategies'. Iddiols works from the premise that Coetzee's texts should be read as operating at the nexus of literary criticism and literature proper. She argues that by frustrating our attempts at interpretation, Coetzee guides us towards the act of authentic reading. Authentic reading is a noble proposition in itself, but it is here that Iddiols's language betrays more than she seeks to reveal. By arguing that her interest lies in "conserving the voice of the texts themselves" (Iddiols 2009: 185) the 'blind-spot' of ontological purity rears its head.

If we refer to Derrida's analysis of the Saussarian distinction between speech and writing in 'Différance' (1982), it is easy to spot the phonocentric logic that informs Iddiols's revealing choice of words. In 'Différance', Derrida argues that Saussaure's structuralist model of language makes a distinction between speech and writing as primary and secondary respectively. Saussaure implies that the voice is primary and can account for presence, purity and plenitude whereas writing is only the (somewhat sinister) secondary act that marks the absence of voice and Being (Derrida 1982). However, Derrida argues that Saussaure's binary understanding of speech and writing provides false reassurance by denying the contamination of *différance*. And *différance*, he argues, is the potential of

language and writing; it is the ability to escape the determination of presence and absence in its absolute forms[2].

Iddiols, in consistently choosing to describe Coetzee's texts as 'voice' and as 'original', ironically marks the act of interpretation as secondary to the 'voice' of the text. This is further reiterated by the fact that she is invested in "*conserving* the *voice* of the texts *themselves*," (Iddiols 2009: 185) (italics mine). The underlying assumptions of this are threefold. Firstly, it implies that interpretation can substitute the 'voice' of the text. Secondly, that in replacing the 'voice', interpretation can undermine and injure the 'voice' of the text, as implied by the notion of 'inauthentic reading'. Thirdly, it maintains that there *is* a 'voice' of the text, which is contrary to Iddiols's initial understanding of Coetzee's writing as already riddled with hermeneutic strategies, as already contaminated in itself.

The invested interest in this oversight lies in the fact that it expresses the anxiety of embracing autobiography without the need for an invitation. Through the structuralist ideals of the voice, Iddiols still manages to account for the presence of the author. The evidence of this can be seen in the following assertion; "this established distance allows Coetzee to approach some highly personal themes through the text under the protective veil of interpretive disruption" (Iddiols 2009: 194). The imagery of this statement gives rise to the perception of Coetzee's texts as literary fortresses. The texts are seen as that which employs the 'protective veil' of critical theory (which is secondary) *over* or *around*

[2] Derrida makes a similar critique of phonocentric models of communication in *Signature Event Context* (Kamuf 1991).

that which is essentially, still the presence of the author. Thus, Iddiols seemingly implies that, like the 'voice' of the text, there is a 'voice' of Coetzee that exists behind the veiling structures of critical theory. What this cumulatively serves to suggest is that the invitation is still possible but, due to the walls of the anti-interpretative fortress that Coetzee has constructed, we are refused the invitation. It suggests that the power to invite still belongs to Coetzee, and he exercises this power over us in the act of refusal. Far from expressing a sense of inherent contamination, Iddiols argument for authentic reading still seeks to preserve the invitation that lies hidden inside of the fortress[3].

Contrary to expectations, these two forms of response de-limit the radical gesture of absolute autobiographical hospitality that they appeared to extend to the author. For Pieter Vermeulen and Katy Iddiols, Coetzee is seen as one who exploits and utilizes post-structuralist techniques in order to mark the invitation as that which is textually refused to us as readers. Nevertheless, by still managing to account for the presence of the author as either external or hidden within the text, we see that what post-structuralism affords these critics is the theoretical means by which to justify Coetzee's lack of invitation and not the opportunity to escape from its binary of acceptance and refusal.

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[3] Furthermore, in 'Disrupting Inauthentic Readings: Coetzee's Strategies', Iddiols argues that Coetzee's strategy of disrupting interpretation is by no means simply that of an 'event' of pleasure for the reader to experience but an instrumental means for what, she seems to imply, are rather didactic ends. In Coetzee's texts she reads the 'warning' and the 'danger' of inauthentic reading, thereby imbuing the texts with the very sense of meaning that is assumed to be lacking. Yet we have to wonder if this sense of immanent 'danger' are concerns that belong to Iddiols, the critic, rather than concerns represented in Coetzee's texts. If we look at *Summertime*, Coetzee makes numerous so-called 'inauthentic' and dubious readings of his own texts in the novel. One example of this is Mr. Vincent's argument that relationships between men and women in Coetzee's novels are bound by a common theme; "it reflects his life experience"(*S* 81). Thus it seems odd to deny an 'inauthentic' reading of Coetzee's texts, if Coetzee himself is so willing to offer them to the reader and to allow for the pleasure that inevitably ensues. See also pgs 54-58, 60 and 200 in *Summertime*, for more examples.

However, in *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee*, Marais argues that Coetzee's fiction will have us look kindly on betrayals of this kind. He warns that these betrayals are a fundamental part of absolute hospitality and that it is short-sighted simply to dismiss betrayal as the return to the 'language of the same'. Marais argues that betrayal is inevitable because the host is always unequal to the task of hosting otherness. Thus, Coetzee's characters, all portrayed as willing hosts, are compelled to follow *and* compelled to betray.

Furthermore, Marais argues that Coetzee forestalls the reading of betrayal as the aporetic failure of absolute hospitality through the employment of open-ended desire. He maintains that while Coetzee illustrates the failed attempts at absolute hospitality, his characters keep their gestures of hospitality open through the perpetual expression of desire for the other. This sustaining of desire is significant for Marais because, he argues, it ensures that the other will never be excluded from history despite never being represented in it. Like Coetzee's prosopopeiac use of the figure of the lost child, Marais argues that the texts mark what cannot be represented within history and yet give place for what it refuses to exclude by showing a desire for it (Marais 2009). This leads him to conclude that it is not sufficient to read these novels as a supplementation of the history that it seeks to rival.

Reading in favour of desire and not betrayal, Marais argues that Coetzee's work maintains the idea of absolute hospitality as an irrevocable impossible ideal and as an

open suggestion for the reader. However, the triad, in its use of the trope of the invitation, offers a slightly divergent perspective on hospitality. *Scenes from Provincial Life* appears to undermine any attempt to call its reflection of absolute hospitality a sustained ideal. The significance and value of this is that, unlike what Marais suggests of Coetzee's fiction, absolute hospitality does not appear to be central to Coetzee's sense of ethical autobiographical hospitality. This leads us to assume that there is something very specific to his understanding of autobiographical hospitality that absolute hospitality cannot account for. Whilst Coetzee's fiction uses the desire of the host as an open indicator of its ideal of absolute hospitality, the triad compromises this desire by showing it to be imposed rather than willingly offered. The triad is extremely self-conscious in this regard; through irony, Coetzee illustrates how John's desire for absolute reception unwittingly translates into irresponsibility and selfishness.

In *Boyhood*, the most striking example of this is John's relationship with his mother. John wants to remain at the centre of her affection because she plays the unconditional host to his free spirit. In seeing that her hospitality towards him is absolute, he feels grateful to be spared the burden of reciprocation. He thus takes his liberties with her and behaves as cruelly as he dares. As a boy we see that John expresses a smug sense of glee at not having to obey all of her motherly instructions: "when all the other children have been called in and he alone is abroad, like a king" (*B* 25). All that his mother is left with is her characteristic silent rage whereas John gets to have a rather sovereign experience of his being.

Similarly, in *Boyhood*, when John is pouring out his heart to Agnes, he notes, "in silence she took it all in" (*B* 74). Her silence in this 'interaction' is palpable. Presumably, John does not want to be interrupted during his emotional outpouring. But this leaves her with no opportunity to respond or to have an experience of a similar kind. Furthermore, John is so caught up in the awe of being received that he does not retract even when he notices that "Agnes was wearing nothing but a thin cotton dress; her feet were blue with cold" (*B* 74). As his host, Agnes gives space to John's secrets in silence and physical discomfort, details to which John is evidently privy to but they still fail to deter him from his experience of absolute reception.

If we jump ahead to *Summertime*, we have a seeming confirmation of this analysis. "She agreed to marry him, certainly, but did she agree they were in love?" (*S* 99) asks Margot as John recalls the surreal moment from their childhood. As she fails to remember it as a moment of love, we assume that this was far from her experience of it. During this dialogue with John, Margot expresses a sense of boredom and irritation at having to listen to her cousin's abstract conversation. Her question is one that she keeps to herself while he continues talking. It serves to convey Margot's exasperation at having her version of the moment overridden by his and of constantly having to leave her thoughts and opinions unheard. The dynamic of John's relationship with Agnes/Margot appears to be that of instrumentality; *through* her comes the experience of love and not from or of her. Agnes/Margot is thus a means to an end, the host through which John can have an experience of himself, an experience that he defines as the reception of love. Yet by offering us Margot's voice, Coetzee makes evident the burden of hosting. When John's

car breaks down on the road, he and Margot choose to wait out the night in the car. John falls asleep on her shoulder and she, still awake and restless, finds herself in the regrettable and usual position of "bearing the weight of a somnolent male" (*S* 114). The burden of having to watch while he sleeps and listen while he talks drives her towards silent irritation.

Using the device of other characters, Coetzee allows us to encounter the missing voice of Agnes in *Boyhood* in Margot's *Summertime* narrative. Similarly, Coetzee emphasises the burden of playing host to John by repeating the feeling of deep-seated resentment in the narratives of Julia and Adriana. During Julia's interview, she states that "I never forced John to expose himself. I was the one who did the courting. I was the one who did the seducing. I was the one who managed the terms of the affair. I was even the one who decided when it was over" (*S* 65). Julia realises that John is a rather shy and reserved man. She chooses to accommodate his personality and never forces him to act or speak if he does not wish to do so. By allowing for his eccentricities she assumes the role of hosting him as absolutely as she can. However, this is something she felt happy to do until the burden of self-denial that he imposes on her became too much to bear. Julia thus leaves us with the verdict that "John Coetzee was not my prince" (*S* 80). She is somewhat embittered by his failure not to assume that role in her life. She argues that if John had been more willing or proactive, he could have rescued her from a bad marriage and a lot of heartache.

Also in *Summertime*, we see that Adriana looks disdainfully at John's attempt to woo her. Upon receiving his intimate letters, she says that "if you have fallen in love with a woman you do not sit down and type her one long letter after another, pages and pages, each one ending 'Yours sincerely'. No, you write a letter in your own hand, a proper love-letter, and have it delivered to her with a bouquet of red roses" (*S* 172). From John's understanding of love, this *is* real love; an endless stream of letters sharing everything that is on his heart. Yet it seems that John is so caught up in self-expression that he fails even to pause to consider that she might desire a different kind of invitation into romantic love. These letters make Adriana feel claustrophobic during a very difficult time in her life and, just like Julia, she remembers John as an extremely selfish human being: "it was very lonely for me, I cannot tell you how lonely. Worse than Luanda, because of the loneliness. If your Mr Coetzee had offered us his friendship I would not have been so hard on him, so cold. But I was not interested in love" (*S* 176). By viewing women as instrumental in attaining (self)love, John develops a rather myopic approach to their personalities and ultimately fails to meet their needs and desires. The resentment that they express is clearly linked to the fact that John imposed a huge burden on them by making their desires seem irrelevant in relation to his own.

In *Youth*, this is evident in John's understanding of the position of the author. Of his artistic and authorial rights, John states: "but fortunately, artists do not have to be morally admirable people. All that matters is that they create great art. If his own art is to come out of the more contemptible side of himself, so be it. Flowers grow best on dungheaps, as Shakespeare never tires of saying" (*Y* 30). The irony of the statement evolves out of

the narrative; judging from events, we already know that this is the only justification that he can scramble for while facing his contemptible and irresponsible behaviour in London. Nevertheless, it draws our attention to the kind of authorial power that we have oftentimes afforded authors and artists by presenting it as a convenient doctrine that John can rely on in order to assert his right to receive absolute hospitality. By understanding the artist as one above more commonplace considerations and empathy, we grant them the sovereign authority to exercise him/herself not just in the world, but upon it.

However, John's instrumentalisation of his hosts does not deviate from the precepts of absolute hospitality. Following Derrida's discussion in *Of Hospitality*, it is precisely the result *of* it: "so indeed it is the master, the one who invites, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage – and who really always has been" (2000: 125). Absolute hospitality requires the host to relinquish his/her power and position in honour of the other. In bringing about this obliteration of distance and difference between host and guest, the Law of absolute hospitality overrides the hierarchical relationship of conditional hospitality and thus, make a home for the other (Derrida 2000).

In *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fictions of J.M. Coetzee*, Marais refers to this process as 'inspiration'. And by reading the inspiration of the host as part of a willed desire that comes from the host, the ideals of absolute hospitality remain true in Coetzee's fiction. Marais's analysis thus allows him to conclude that absolute hospitality is what Coetzee strives for in his narratives and in the practice of writing (2009). However, by staging John's 'inspiration' of others as enforced, the representation

of absolute hospitality is far from a romantic proposition in the triad. Coetzee implies that a more cautionary approach towards the practice of absolute autobiographical hospitality must be heeded.

If we examine the trope of the invitation in the triad, Coetzee uses it to describe actively the hidden antimony of *hostis*. As Derrida argues in *Of Hospitality*, absolute hospitality, just like conditional hospitality has the same rooted legacy in hospitality and hostility and thus, is equally capable of what he describes as acts of violence (2000). Through a presentation of John's 'violent' imposition on others, the triad allows us to bear witness to the unwitting practice of hostility under the guise of hospitality. Furthermore, by making us aware of the inherent perversity involved in the extension of absolute hospitality towards a guest, we are allowed to re-evaluate what our gestures of absolute autobiographical hospitality towards the author entail. For, it is not difficult to witness how our identity as critics, just like those who attempt to host John in the triad, has undergone instrumentalisation.

In 'Disrupting Inauthentic Readings: Coetzee's Strategies', after an analysis of Coetzee's characters as those who fail at their own interpretative endeavours, Iddiols comes to a telling conclusion:

> With them in mind, it would be understandable to conclude this chapter with a somewhat pessimistic suggestion of the impossibility of responsible interpretation. Should we, as readers of Coetzee (who have already had our job complicated by his refusal to offer his texts to us

> without a hermeneutic fight), translate the unrelenting failure of interpretation in his fiction as a textual warning to us all?
>
> (2009: 195-196)

Iddiols assumes that Coetzee's ideal is for the reader never to settle on a singular hermeneutic framework whilst reading his texts. Yet as she notes, this does indeed make responsible interpretation an impossible act for the critic to perform. With an undertone of subtle defeat, Iddiols makes known the burden of offering absolute hospitality. In parenthesis she suggests that we *must* make accommodations for Coetzee who 'fights' against *our* desire for an autobiographical invitation. Furthermore, the tentative manner in which she phrases the question, "*Should we*, as readers…" (Iddiols 2009: 196) (italics mine), alludes to a measure of making good with the card we have been dealt by Coetzee. It alludes to the subtle frustration that this is far from something we have chosen for ourselves.

By embracing Coetzee's right to remain uninterpretative and/or fictionalized, our desire to read autobiography as an invitation into the author's life and to accordingly interpret this as the story of his life are all hindered. This desire is held captive by our attempts at offering absolute hospitality to the author. As Iddiols expresses in her reading of *Diary of a Bad Year,* "it would be a brave (or foolish) reader that would attempt definitively to claim this as an insight into J.M. Coetzee, the writer and the man" (2009: 194), we have come to accept that it is naïve to expect an invitation from Coetzee. As a result, the critic becomes wary and tentative to approach Coetzee with a desire to interpret, let alone read Coetzee for an autobiographical invitation; this dissertation being a case in point. As

literary critics willing to respond to Coetzee, all that is left for us is to speculate over the possible reasons as to why, and how, we are without an invitation with a sense of mourning for our suppressed critical desires.

However, while this statement conveys Iddiols's own critical hesitancy, it also draws attention to the critical 'policing' that surrounds the desire to read Coetzee's texts for an autobiographical invitation. One is discouraged from such an act in order to avoid being dismissed as either, to use Iddiols's words, 'brave or foolish'. This statement makes evident the fact that reading refusal has become a homogenized critique that pre-empts any text authored by Coetzee. Through methods of critical policing, there is a common consensus that always assures our arrival at refusal. Thus, far from what we might expect, this refusal may, in fact, have very little to do with the texts under discussion.

If we continue to follow the trope of the invitation in the triad, this scenario is one that the Coetzee makes lucid through the familiar device of irony. In *Youth*, John says the following:

> He invites Ganapathy to lunch the next day, giving him precise instructions for how to get to Major Arkwright's. Then he goes out, searches for a shop that is open on a Saturday afternoon, and buys what it has to offer: bread in a plastic wrapper, cold meats, frozen green peas. At noon the next day he lays out the repast and waits. Ganapathy does not arrive.
>
> (*Y* 147)

Taking a job at International Computers, John makes friends with an equally isolated Indian named Ganapathy. Feeling pity for their equally lackluster situation, John takes the initiative to invite him for a meal at his flat. Coetzee gives us an elaborate portrayal of John doing everything right to ensure his guest's arrival. Yet somehow – he fails to ensure his guest's arrival. He is left waiting and alone. Because his invitation is so abruptly snubbed, John goes off on a frantic string of questions that is worth quoting in its entirety:

> Is there something about the whole business that he has failed to understand, something Indian? Does Ganapathy belong to a caste to which it is taboo to eat at the table of a Westerner? If so, what is he doing with a plate of cod and chips in the Manor House canteen? Should the invitation to lunch have been made more formally and confirmed in writing? By not arriving, was Ganapathy graciously saving him the embarrassment of finding a guest at his front door whom he had invited on an impulse but did not really want? Did he somehow give the impression, when he invited Ganapathy, that it was not a real, substantial invitation he was extending, merely a gesture toward an invitation, and that true politeness on Ganapathy's part would consist in acknowledging the gesture without putting his host to the trouble of providing a repast? Does the notional meal (cold meats and boiled frozen peas with butter) that they would have eaten together have the same value, in the transaction between himself and Ganapathy, as cold meats and boiled frozen peas actually consumed? Is everything between himself and Ganapathy as before, or better than before, or worse?
>
> (*Y* 148)

John engages in a diatribe of self-doubt because he finds it ridiculously hard to stomach the rejection of his sincere invitation. John examines and questions his invitation,

wondering how Ganapathy could have construed a lack of invitation in his invitation. He is at a complete loss as to how Ganapathy could have read this rather exceptional invitation as part of his more general tendency not to invite. In this incident we can read a reflection of the curious dynamic that informs our critical approach to Coetzee's work. Just like Ganapathy who presumably reads John's invitation as part of a perverse trick, we, as critics, have come to assume much the same of the author by reading the refusal of the invitation as a ceaseless hermeneutic strategy.

In 'Autobiography as *Autre*biography: The fictionalization of the self in J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*', Collingwood-Whittick admits that "one of the major obstacles to accepting *Boyhood* as an unambiguous record of the author's personal history is, of course, the notoriety of Coetzee's reputation as a fiercely private person" (2001: 15). And in his article, 'Wordsworth and the Recollection of South Africa', Vermeulen mentions the surprise that surrounded the arrival of *Boyhood* simply because it was written by an author whose personality can be described as reticent, aloof and evasive (2009). As critics, we must admit a certain liability in the use of this image of J.M. Coetzee in automatically assuming a refusal. One has to wonder, if we did not have this overriding public image of Coetzee by which to pre-interpret and contain the surprise of his autobiographical works, would we be less inclined to dismiss them as evasive?

It is *Summertime* that appears to be 'vocal' in its parody and critique of this critical impasse. It achieves critique by incorporating the public perception of the author in the text. In *Summertime*, Mr. Vincent, Coetzee's biographer, during an interview with Mme.

Denoël, makes a case for Coetzee to be read as something other than the heavily institutionalised image of J.M. Coetzee.

> Coetzee was never a popular writer. By that I do not simply mean that his books did not sell well. I also mean that the public never took him to their collective heart. There was an image of him in the public realm as a cold and supercilious intellectual, an image he did nothing to dispel. Indeed one might even say he encouraged it.
>
> Now, I don't believe that image does him justice. The conversations I have had with people who knew him well reveal a very different person – not necessarily a warmer person, but someone more uncertain of himself, more confused, more human, if I can use that word.
>
> (*S* 235)

As words written by Coetzee himself, this makes us pause to reconsider what our textual determinations have, in fact, created. Mr. Vincent serves as an advocate for a 'Coetzee' that has failed to emerge during the course of his life. He makes us aware of the fissures in the image that we employ as central to our reading of Coetzee's refusals. In taking the lead from a deserving author, we have attempted a gesture of absolute autobiographical hospitality that seeks to accommodate an individual whom we perceive to be reticent and aloof. However, our persistence in reading Coetzee, as both author and man, who will not invite, has delimited the surprise that something other than what we already know may, in fact, be equally true. Hence, the very otherness of the author which we sought to host has diminished into a palimpsest of refusal. Not only have we deprived ourselves of the surprising arrival of the other that absolute hospitality makes possible, but we have refused to make the experience of absolute reception available to Coetzee, to the very author to whom we attempted to offer it to. By choosing to include this image of himself

as just another hermeneutic possibility, we witness the failure of our gesture of absolute hospitality. This iconic image, as part of the interpretative endeavours of the characters in *Summertime*, forces us into a position of grave reconsideration. It makes evident the fact that we, as critics, have become inhospitable to difference.

Furthermore, in *Summertime*, Coetzee makes an apparent allusion to the process of absolute hospitality as John literally arrives *through* the mouths of others. In staging the act by which John, now dead, is 'written', Coetzee very cleverly explores the aspect of self-interest that interrupts this process of hosting. Whilst telling her story, Julia always pauses to insist that:

> You commit a grave error if you think to yourself that the difference between the two stories, the story you wanted to hear and the story you are getting, will be nothing more than a matter of perspective [...]. Not so. Not so. I warn you most earnestly: if you go away from here and start fiddling with the text, the whole thing will turn to ash in your hands. I *really* was the main character. John *really* was a minor character. I am sorry to be lecturing you on your own subject, but you will thank me in the end. Do you understand?
>
> (*S* 44)

In Julia's interview, the desire to construct John as cold and supercilious is inspired by her personal narrative determinations. By choosing to portray him in this manner, her actions stand as justified and her sense of self affirmed. Thus, she warns, far from the interview being revelatory about John it is, in fact, more of an expression of personal desires that have been left unheard and unexpressed. Similarly, throughout the rest of the

interviews, we witness the production of an image of J. M. Coetzee that is always part of a desire that belongs primarily to the interviewees concerned.

In this, I believe that we are meant to read the culpability and co-operation of the critic. It is evident that our self-interest in reading Coetzee as one who does not invite stems from the fact that it offers us protection against the potential anxiety of surprise. The assurance lies in the safety of interpretation of a new kind, of anti-interpretative interpretation. The level of comfort with which we read invitational refusal in Coetzee's work is telling; so pervasive is this reading that it is ideologically infused into every text that is authored by Coetzee. This suggests a circularity that is always comfortable but never new. By interpreting Coetzee as one who consistently refuses to invite, we are never at a loss for a response to his autobiographies. Thus, ironically enough, an invitation from Coetzee is a gesture that we are now, perhaps, unwilling to receive. It would deny us the satisfaction of our interpretative mastery. Much like the characters in *Summertime*, we assume the powerful position of speaking for the author. We make accommodations not for him, but for a narrative that best suits our own hermeneutic interests. However, in 'Disrupting Inauthentic Readings: Coetzee's Strategies', Iddiols argues that Coetzee disrupts his own reputation as an evasive individual through endless acts of textual self-reference (2009). From this statement we can ascertain the strength with which the critique that *Summertime* issues can and, in all likelihood, will be appropriated into the circularity of reading refusal.

However, the point of this dissertation is not to defend critics, neither is it to serve as a defense of the author. By alluding to the fallacies of working under the presumption of absolute autobiographical hospitality, Coetzee's use of the trope of the invitation in the triad allows us the opportunity to examine whether absolute hospitality is the *best* approach for the genre of autobiography in general. For the ironic impasse that we have arrived at is by no means specific to our situation, but typical of the configuration of absolute hospitality itself.

As Derrida explains in *Of Hospitality*, what absolute hospitality brings about is a collapse of the differential distance between host and guest (2000). The implication of this is that it completely hinders the act of exchange. Because there is no distance and difference between host and guest it becomes impossible for transmission and reception of an invitation to occur. If a host gives his/her place to the guest, the host no longer holds any position from which to offer an invitation. Similarly, if the guest is already 'at home', then he/she need not require an invitation or have his/her otherness attended to. Thus, once again, what results is the complete collapse of the concept of hospitality, giving way instead, to hostility.

In perceiving Coetzee's texts to be hermeneutically evasive, we as critics understand ourselves to be 'read'. Yet, in doing so, we have, in fact, 'written' the author. We have 'authored' an image of J.M. Coetzee while believing it to be the product of *us* taking the lead from Coetzee. Evidently, it is no longer easy to tell who is leading and who is following. It is no longer easy to distinguish the guest from the host. And this has given

rise to the impasse reflected in this chapter – a confusion of mutual hostage-taking in which all exchange appears to be halted.

It is precisely because of this antinomic result that Derrida maintains that absolute hospitality must be approached with a measure of caution as practicable hospitality. He argues that since absolute hospitality is always idealistic, its application is bound to bring us less than satisfactory results of the aporetic kind. Thus, its very fault lies in its utopian framework out of which no action ever occurs (Derrida 2000). The use that Derrida sees in the Law of absolute hospitality is the opportunity it allows for imagining the abstract ideals of hospitality, yet in doing so, it cannot, by itself, turn these ideals into practicable and effective actions that mirror its gestures of hospitality. By insisting on absolute hospitality, one never practices any hospitality at all.

The triad makes the same paradoxical critique of John's longing for absolute hospitality. In *Summertime*, Margot recalls the following conversation with John:

> 'I thought languages exist so that we can communicate with each other,' she says. 'What is the point of speaking Hottentot if no one else does?'
>
> He presents her with what she is coming to think of as his secret little smile, betokening that he has an answer to her question, but since she will be too stupid to understand, he will not waste his breath revealing it to her. It is this Mister Know-All smile, above all, that sends Carol into a rage.
>
> 'Once you have learned Hottentot out of your old grammar books, who can you speak to?' she repeats.

> 'Do you want me to tell you?' he says. The little smile has turned into something else, something tight and not very nice.
>
> 'Yes, tell me. Answer me.'
>
> 'The dead. You can speak to the dead. Who otherwise' – he hesitates, as if the words might be too much for her and even for him – 'who otherwise are cast out into everlasting silence.'
>
> She wanted an answer and now she has one. It is more than enough to shut her up.
>
> (*S* 104)

John's willingness to communicate with the dead becomes ironic when we witness his struggle to communicate with those in his immediate surroundings. *Summertime*, in making known the unheard voices of those in John's world, makes explicit the fact that John's yearning for absolute hospitality ultimately aids him in evading his ethical responsibilities towards others; others who may, in fact, be the unexpected 'dead' that he could have become an advocate for, as Adriana had hoped of him. In *Summertime*, all the characters note the drastic fissure between theory and praxis, between the utopianism of John and the real world, with a sense of exasperation. Despite his desire to make a connection and make an impact on the world as a writer, a teacher and a human being, it is ultimately his ideals that cripple his actions and, more importantly, his interactions.

Through an illustration of John's desire for ideals that never arrive, Coetzee suspends them as open, imaginative possibilities in an indeterminable future. As we see in the epigraph to this chapter, the longed-for invitation is always one that does not come. In *Summertime*, John, in the undated fragments towards the end of the text, is left to utter: "all of his intercourse with the world seems to take place through a membrane. Because

the membrane is there, fertilization will not take place. It is an interesting metaphor, full of potential, but it does not take him anywhere that he can see" (*S* 261). This membrane, it seems, is the very interference that comes with holding up the ideal of absolute hospitality to the world. As I have argued, in doing so, John can only conceive of people as instrumental and halts the process of exchange that makes hospitality possible. Furthermore, there is yet another intriguing example of the effects of habouring absolute hospitality, in this instance, as an authorial ideal. In *Summertime*, Julia offers Mr. Vincent a rather apt and pragmatic piece of advice about his approach to writing, "well, you can't keep your mind open indefinitely, not if you mean to get your book written" (*S* 82). Similarly, an author who wishes to write an autobiography cannot maintain the ideals of absolute hospitality in an attempt to inscribe his otherness. The imaginative project must concretize itself as text and ultimately it must compromise its ideals.

And just as the triad implies that absolute autobiographical hospitality is an impossible ideal for an author to maintain, it is an equally unsustainable ideal for us, as critics, to expect of the genre. As I have illustrated in this chapter, in our attempts to accommodate Coetzee within autobiography, we have curtailed our critical and theoretical demands for the invitation. However, in doing so, we perceive ourselves as subject to a rather 'unwelcome' and obstinate personality and ultimately, deprive ourselves of the otherness that absolute hospitality suggests. By institutionalising Coetzee's refusal of the invitation, this rather 'violent' homogenisation of the theoretical field has resulted in an ironic form of mutual hostage-taking in which all exchange is halted in favour of the safe assurances of circularity. Ironically, we show ourselves to be fundamentally unwilling to receive an

invitation from Coetzee. The fact that it is uncomfortable to conceive of Coetzee as an autobiographer who might, just like any other autobiographer, be equally willing and/or capable of offering an authorial invitation is evidence of the illusorily nature of what we practice under the guise of absolute autobiographical hospitality. Indeed, it may be the case that it is an invitation that we cannot see because the distance between host and guest has been so severely compromised.

I argue this point because, following the trope of the invitation in the triad, it appears as if Coetzee sees value in sustaining the role of the invitation in autobiography. As I have aimed to illustrate in this chapter, there is much effort invested in staging absolute hospitality as a hostile event as opposed to an aporetic ideal. And this, I believe, is because absolute hospitality makes the invitation an obsolete and unnecessary event. In a rather remarkable instance in *Boyhood*, John relinquishes the dream of calling the farm his home: "he may visit the farm but he will never live there. The farm is not his home; he will never be more than a guest, an uneasy guest" (*B* 79) and this is reiterated:

> The farm will never belong to him, he will never be more than a visitor: he accepts that. The thought of actually living on Voëlfontein, of calling the great old house his home, of no longer having to ask permission to do what he wants to do, turns his giddy; he thrusts it away. *I belong to the farm*: that is the furthest he is prepared to go, even in his most secret heart.
>
> (*B* 96)

John senses his inappropriate desire to make the farm a home, to make it *his*. With an extraordinary sensitivity, he relinquishes the dream of absolute reception, accepting instead to keep the exchange of the invitation that allows him to be received as a humbled

guest. I wish to suggest that the ethical discomfort that John experiences is perhaps not very different from that of the author. Like John who comes to the realisation that the farm is bigger than him, the author too, must experience the weight of the genre, both past and present, in which his contributions are only ever miniscule. Like John who comes to the ethical realisation that he can only ever be a guest, I imagine that an author too, might find it overwhelming to have the dynamics of autobiographical hospitality reconfigured in favour of him/her.

Furthermore, for John, we gather that part of the pleasure of the farm *is* to be invited in. He enjoys proving himself worthy of the time he spends on the farm and to have his desire for the farm renewed by having distance from it. Similarly, I imagine that these feelings inform an author's interaction with literature, for surely there must be great pleasure in feeling that one's literary endeavours are not received as a given of absolute hospitality; that it arrives as part of an invited experience rather than as one imposed.

In conclusion, allow me to quote John's words again: "*I belong to the farm*: that is the furthest he is prepared to go, even in his most secret heart" (B 96). In this instance John accepts his position as a guest of the farm by stating his humble subservience to it. This gesture is one that seemingly follows the hierarchical model of conditional hospitality. However, it is significant to note that the allegiance that John pledges to the farm comes from 'his most secret heart'. As previously discussed, conditional hospitality cannot allow for the expression of John's secret self, let alone allow for it to express a sense of belonging. Consequently, we are left to assume that the kind of invitation gestured to in

this moment does not belong to the economy of conditional hospitality. And once again, the triad leaves us with the question of the invitation; of how best to conceive of the invitation as an ethical autobiographical gesture.

Chapter Three – The Aporetic, Atopic Invitation

> He is going to have to abandon some of his personal projects and be a nurse. Alternatively, if he will not be a nurse, he must announce to his father: *I cannot face the prospect of ministering to you day and night. I am going to abandon you. Goodbye.* One or the other: there is no third way.
>
> *Summertime* 265-266.

In this dissertation I have spent the first two chapters marking out the trope of the invitation in the triad, *Scenes from Provincial Life*, as that which actively describes the aporetic failures of both conditional and unconditional hospitality. I have argued that critical endeavours in relation to Coetzee's autobiographical texts, in practicing either form as autobiographical hospitality, mirror the aporetic failures of hospitality that are staged in the triad. By and large, this would lead to the easy assumption that there is some 'third way' by which to negotiate our way out of this double impasse of hospitality in which both the critic and author are bound. However, in the epigraph above, we have a succinct summation of John's predicament; the realization that "there is no third way" (*S* 266). In this chapter I will explore the implications and significance of this presentation of the trope of the invitation in relation to autobiographical hospitality.

A good place to begin is with Derrida's *Aporias* (1993). Derrida brings us closer to thinking and grasping our precarious position with regard to autobiography by providing descriptions of the unique forms that the aporia can assume. The kind of attention that he affords the aporia is expansive in this text; Derrida chooses to understand the aporia not as a homogenous philosophical impasse but as a pluralistic concept that takes the expression of different *kinds* of aporias.

"In one case," he says, "the nonpassage resembles an impermeability" (Derrida 1993: 20). The first kind of aporia that Derrida identifies is one that employs a visible border that proves to be uncrossable once reached. Derrida approaches his discussion of the aporia in relation to death by expanding on the philosophical inability to know and talk about one's own death. He points out the irony that once one is already dead, one cannot utter the 'I' by which to speak of it. Thus, uttering 'my death' is always, ironically, a phrase that is more generalised as opposed to the singularity that it seeks to evoke (Derrida 1993). I find this to be an apt description of the kind of aporia that is made apparent through John's experiences with conditional hospitality in the triad. As discussed in Chapter One, in choosing to accept conditional hospitality, John struggles to maintain a sense of individuality that would allow for him to conceive of himself as a subject. It thus gives rise to a line that is impossible to cross over as oneself. The illustration of death that Derrida employs in *Aporias* is rather fitting here; it marks the impossibility that an autobiographical subject faces when choosing to accept the generic pact of conditional autobiographical hospitality. If the author actively works to meet demands of truth, he/she is forced to construe a version of him/herself that fulfills this expectation. Thus, in effect, the gesture equates to consenting to one's death by delimiting the expression of the self that autobiography is supposed to make possible.

The second kind of aporia that Derrida describes is that which "stems from the fact that there is no limit. There is not yet or there is no longer a border to cross, no opposition between two sides: the limit is too porous, permeable, and indeterminate. There is no

longer a home [*chez-soi*] and a not-home [*che-l'autre*]" (1993: 20). Derrida assigns this form of philosophical aporia to the discourses of death that seek to transgress the discursive borders of death by choosing to understand truth as finite and hence, crossable. Again we have a diagnosis of the kind of aporia that absolute hospitality presents. In Chapter Two, I illustrated the kind of impasse that arises out of John's desire to be received without limits and borders. The triad consistently marks this as a failed endeavour by showing the confusion that ensues from attempts to realise absolute hospitality as a practicable form of hospitality. Furthermore, we have noted this same impasse within autobiographical studies, reiterated in the post-structuralist critical responses to the triad. By understanding autobiography as that which can exist without rules, as a transgression of the invitation, the systematic and healthy exchange of the invitation is compromised to the point of confusion, making autobiography a hostile event for both author and critic.

And hence, we arrive at the very problem that the tradition of Western philosophy has always assumed the aporia to be. As Derrida highlights, the Greek word *problēma* bears a double meaning: it can take the meaning of a task to be accomplished by seeing the border as something to be crossed, *or* as a border to hide behind in an act of self-protection. (1993). Derrida explains that the aporia is always something that the philosophical tradition has sought to overcome by envisaging ways out of the impasses that present themselves or recoiling in acts of denial. Considering the ethics of autobiographical hospitality, we see that we have also been thrust in-between two equally

untenable options that both fail at hospitality once it is put into practice. We too have arrived at the precipice of the problem.

Intriguingly enough, the triad makes no attempt at granting John, or us, a solution to the problems of hospitality. In *Boyhood,* Coetzee represents John as caught between communal etiquette and his boyish narcissism. In *Youth,* this 'battle' is staged as John's vacillation between the real world and the desire to be delivered from it by the transcendence of love and writing. And in *Summertime*, as we see in the epigraph, John must either fulfill his filial duties towards his father or continue his pursuit of privacy. The purgatorial imagery that arises out of the triad is consistent; John is left suspended in-between his wish for absolute reception whilst existing on the boundaries of the conditional invitation. He thus oscillates, rather uncomfortably, from one incident to the next, giving rise to the pathetic portrait that we have come to associate with him. Yet in doing so, it becomes apparent that Coetzee does not envisage any form of 'salvation' for John.

The significance of John's perception that he has no 'third way' out, I wish to argue, is not merely to characterize John as myopic. The allusion to having no 'third way' appears to be a crucial element in Coetzee's sustained question of the invitation; a question, it seems, in which no ready answers present themselves. Perhaps it is up to each theorist to consider whether he/she wishes to approach this as a problem, as Derrida describes, in both senses of the word. Yet what the triad appears to lead us towards is the acceptance of this double impasse.

In *Aporias*, part of Derrida's aim is to take to task the pejorative experience of the aporia that Western philosophy has construed it to be. In an attempt to try to think more endearingly about the aporia, he finds it possible to conceive of it as:

> An experience of the non-passage, the experience of what happens [*se passé*] and is fascinating [*passionne*] in this nonpassage, paralyzing us in the separation in a way that is not necessarily negative: before a door, a threshold, a border, a line, or simply the edge or the approach of the other as such. It should be a matter of what, in sum, appears to block our way or to separate us in the very place where it no longer be possible to constitute a problem [...] where the project is impossible and where we are exposed, without protection [...] in this place of aporia, there is no longer any problem.
>
> (Derrida 1993: 12)

For Derrida, the aporia need not be experienced as a problem. This is not because solutions have been provided but because the problem can no longer be articulated in the aporia. What Derrida proposes in his text is an acceptance of the aporia by arguing that it should be experienced in itself rather than be seen as a problem to overcome. Derrida asserts that by embracing the state of paralysis we afford ourselves the opportunity to rethink the negativity of the impasse and thus imbue it with a new sense of purposefulness. Hence we see that it is the third type of aporia that Derrida describes which is of interest to him: "finally, the third type of aporia, the impossible, the antimony, or the contradiction, is a nonpassage because its elementary milieu does not allow for something that could be called passage, step, gait" (1993: 21). In choosing to

see the aporia without a problem, we consent to the experience of paralysis. We enact the step which is not a step. We take an active part in not acting.

As we see in the triad, John's life is characterised by paralysis; the most typical symptom of the experience of the aporia. In the epigraph it is relevant to note that although John assumes that he must choose between fulfilling the conditional exchange between father and son and leaving to pursue the ideals of solitary writing, he does not. He does not choose because he cannot. Yet what I wish to consider here, is that he does not choose because he *must* not. I wish to suggest that John's form of dogged non-movement is that which *actively* declares movement impossible (for in all practical and literary terms, making a decision does not seem impossible in his situation). Consequently, it becomes important for us as readers to read John as more than an impotent figure of indecision; rather as one who marks and stages a very particular experience of the aporia. Accordingly, I choose to read this as part of the ethical configuration of the question of the invitation that is being staged by Coetzee; a gesture towards the experience of the aporia where we cease to see the aporetic failures of autobiographical hospitality as a problem to overcome or deny.

Yet still the question remains: "*what takes place, what comes to pass* with the aporia? Is it possible to undergo or to experience the aporia, the aporia *as such*?" (Derrida 1993: 32-33). In *Aporias*, Derrida is aware of the radical proposal that he sets in motion. He argues that an experience of the aporia calls for a new kind of logic. Unlike the Derridian abyss, the aporia is that which is conceived *as* doubt and undecidability and not doubt and

undeciability as a condition of opposition (as is the case with the abyss). While one may pass out of the abyss, this is never an option with the aporia. Hence, this new logic that Derrida asserts is a plural logic in which "the partitioning [*partage*] among multiple figures of the aporia does not oppose figures to each other, but instead installs the haunting of the one in the other" (1993: 20). The experience of the aporia relies on the loss of logic that dictates opposition and decision. In losing opposition, one loses too the conception of a problem and hence, a need for a decision to be taken. In employing a plural logic one sees instead a more complementary interaction between seeming oppositions by engaging them as concepts that enact a mutual haunting.

Intriguingly, it is precisely this form of plural logic that Derrida employs in *Of Hospitality*. Once noting the aporetic results of practicing conditional and absolute hospitality on their own, Derrida argues that the ultimate problem lies in the perception that these forms of hospitality exist in opposition to each other. It is the notion of opposition that leads us to assume that we have always to choose one over the other. Contrary to this logic of decision-making, Derrida argues that conditional and unconditional hospitality need not necessarily be perceived as in opposition to each other. For, he explains, each form of hospitality has the ability to compensate for the aporetic failures of the other. The laws of conditional hospitality, in its systematic formulation, can aid the Law of absolute hospitality to concretize its ideals and thus, prevent it from becoming abstract and idealistic. Similarly, the Law of absolute hospitality helps the laws of conditional hospitality to rethink its prescriptive expectations and hence, become more accommodating. Thus, Derrida asserts that both the laws and the Law of hospitality are,

in fact, in a constant complementary relationship with each other. They include and exclude each other in an exchange that is never symmetrical (Derrida 2000). Derrida envisions a form of 'mutual haunting' between the two forms of hospitality, seeing both as necessary in sustaining hospitality itself. They must show hospitality towards each other in order to keep the ethical gesture of hospitality alive.

In making an allusion to the aporia of autobiographical hospitality, Coetzee leaves us with the more practical question of what such an application involves. We are left to ascertain how the aporia will help to reconfigure our experience of the invitation such that it may allow for autobiographical hospitality to be made as a mutual and simultaneous gesture to both author and critic. Yet this, it would seem, is far from a romantic proposition; John's unceasing discomfort reveals the kind of disposition that this experience of the aporia requires of both writer and theorist.

In *Autobiography and the Cultural Moment*, James Olney, an established scholar in the field of autobiography, states an awareness that "one never knows where or how to take hold of autobiography" (1980: 3). It is a tenuous realisation that leads him to admit the following: "writing about autobiography in a context of literary studies involves one immediately, irremediably, and uncomfortably in paradox" (Olney 1980: 3). Somewhat disillusioned by the plethora of attempts to define the genre, Olney argues that one must, instead, accept the discomfort that is inherent to the practice and theorisation of autobiography. This is a realisation, he asserts, that will aid us in avoiding the false closures that give rise to the kind of contradictions that theorists often seek to avoid.

However, what is most intriguing in James Olney's *Autobiography and the Cultural Moment,* is that paradox is seen as essential to the longevity of the genre itself. In his article he revealingly describes autobiography as "a guest, albeit still a rather shadowy one and probably uninvited, at the literary feast" (Olney 1980: 12). By expressing the awareness of the fragile nature of the genre, Olney draws our attention to the tenuous ground that autobiography holds in-between its neighbouring genres of fiction and non-fiction. Through the theoretical and practical acceptance of paradox, he seems to suggest that we can maintain the specificity of the genre by refusing to succumb to the opposition and decision between truth and fiction.

Furthermore, by arguing that autobiography is both 'guest' and 'uninvited', Olney implies that the exchange of hospitality between autobiography and its neighbouring genres is somewhat of an 'inappropriate exchange'. It is caught in-between the role of the congenial guest and the uninvited enemy; a paradox in itself. Yet, it is here, I believe, that we have a practical intimation of how to experience the autobiographical invitation in the aporia. It is that which disrupts the economy of the invitation by failing to meet the opposition and decision between acceptance and refusal. Thus, the invitation in the aporia rejects the decision between the economic acceptance and rejection of the invitation as truth or falsity and the aneconomic loss of the invitation as the transgression of truth. The invitation in the aporia accepts the, perhaps perverse, paradox of an inappropriate economy in which the exchange of the invitation is disrupted through its failure to choose between the ever-enduring opposition of/for truth.

And if we look at the invitation as it is staged in the triad, a seeming representation of such an exchange emerges. In *Boyhood*, the first mention of the invitation is made after John's father has left for war. His mother is left to care for him and his younger brother with insufficient resources to do so. John says that "during this time they were not invited to the farm" (*B* 80). His father's family, although having the means to offer respite to the poor mother and two children, never rise to the occasion and John and his family continue to live in expectation of an invitation to the farm that does not come.

The first mention of the invitation in *Youth* comes when John finds that Jacqueline, his lover, has moved into his apartment. John thus ponders: "looking back, he cannot remember inviting her: he has merely failed to resist" (*Y* 7). Here there is a complete reversal of the hierarchical scheme and temporal logic of the invitation. An invitation has arrived to the invitee despite one not being issued by the inviter. Jacqueline happily assumes that she is welcome in John's apartment and it seems perverse that an invitation manages to operate without being issued.

In *Summertime*, the first mention of the invitation is made in Julia's interview. She tells Mr. Vincent how her neighbourly gestures toward an odd young man eventually turns into a game of seduction. She recalls the initial stages of their relationship which all revolve around the awkwardness of making the first invitation. Julia tells Mr. Vincent about the time when she took a freshly baked batch of Brownies to his door: "looking suspicious, in fact looking quite irritated, he put aside his tools and took the parcel. 'I

can't invite you in, too much of a mess,' he said. I was clearly not welcome" (*S* 32). John appears to not like the invitation that she extends. He shuns her gesture through a display of disdain. He appears to understand that he is required to invite the woman into his home but he resists and uses his ramshackle house as an excuse for his lack of hospitality.

From each text I have taken the first appearance of the word 'invite', or its derivative form, in order to illustrate the discernable trend of the triad. All the instances of the invitation, as disseminating narrative events, never function as they *should* but suggest a more inappropriate use of the economy of invitational exchange. In the first instance from *Boyhood*, we see that the invitation simply never arrives. In the instance from *Youth* – it arrives without ever being issued. And in the instance from *Summertime*, it is issued but not received. In *Boyhood* the word 'invitation' and/or its derivative forms appear only four times, sixteen times in *Youth* and fourteen times in *Summertime*. Yet apart from these obvious and literal allusions to the invitation, the manner in which the exchange of letters, and letters as forms of invitation, proliferates into chaos is a poignant extension of this sense of utter derailment. Allow me to illustrate.

In *Boyhood*, John goes on a camping trip with the Boy Scouts. During the trip he attempts to swim in the river just like all the other boys. But unlike the rest of the boys who make it safely back to the river bank, John almost ends up drowning and needs to be rescued by the team leader. The hysteria that grips him whilst struggling to stay afloat is that of his mother receiving a letter announcing his death. In his mind he drafts this imaginary letter, he watches her read it and feels the ache of her pain. The emotional effect of an

imaginary letter is 'received' by John despite the fact that it never has to be written or received.

In *Youth*, the correspondence between mother and son continues. An extended meditation runs across three pages of the text. It is a ruminating conceit that accords this exchange importance in an otherwise terse text.

> EACH WEEK a letter arrives from his mother, a pale blue aerogramme addressed in neat block capitals. It is with exasperation that he receives these evidences of her unchanging love for him [...].
> She writes her letters on Sunday evenings and posts them in time for the Monday collection. He can imagine the scene all too easily, in the flat into which she and his father moved when they had to sell the house in Rondebosch. Supper is over. She clears the table, dons her glasses, draws the lamp nearer. 'What are you doing now?' asks his father, who dreads Sunday evenings, when the *Argus* has been read from end to end and there is nothing left to do. 'I must write to John,' she replies, pursing her lips, shutting him out. *Dearest John*, she begins.
> What does she hope to achieve by her letters, this obstinate, graceless woman? [...].
> She writes every week but he does not write every week in return. That would be too much like reciprocation. Only now and then does he reply, and his letters are brief, saying little except that, by the fact of their having been written, he must still be in the land if the living.
>
> (*Y* 98-99)

The letters arrive as a form of enforced hospitality for John. He is not willing to comply with the exchange that his mother burdens him with on a weekly basis. Far from creating a forum for exchange and intimacy, these letters create the obverse effect by stirring

feelings of resentment and obligation in John. Yet it is also marked by a hint of the perverse; the reply from John actually proves to be an unnecessary part of the exchange with his mother. She will continue writing letters despite their reception or his lack of response.

The second letter in *Youth* is one that comes after his cousin, Ilse, and her friend, Marianne, have passed through London on their European holiday. During this visit John has an awkward sexual encounter with Marianne and fails to contact her afterwards. However, happy that they have left London, John says,

> At least the episode is closed, closed off, consigned to the past, sealed away in memory. But that is not true, not quite. A letter arrives postmarked Lucerne. Without second thought he opens it and begins to read. It is in Afrikaans [...].
> The most hurtful moments in the letter are at the beginning and the end. *Beste John* is not how one addresses a family member, it is the way one addresses a stranger. And *Your cousin, Ilse*: who would have thought a farm girl capable of such a telling thrust!
>
> For days and weeks, even after he has crumpled it up and thrown it away, his cousin's letter haunts him.
>
> (*Y* 131-132)

Again we see the letter arrives as an unwelcome event for John. It is an unwanted extension of disgrace and it haunts John for days after it has been read and discarded. Contrary to the normal temporality of the letter which suggests that a letter arrives to provide new insight or information and is then discarded once this communicative function has been fulfilled, this letter marks a more obscure and vague temporal frame by

indicating that the shame it seeks to convey is already present before it arrives and is still present after it has been received and discarded. Furthermore, his cousin employs the formal decorum of polite letter writing that, in effect, is intended to offend rather than placate the feelings of the recipient. Far from relying on the letter as a formal means by which to convey a message, Coetzee subverts this notion by presenting it as a more disingenuous art.

The last and final appearance of the letter in *Youth* shows John's reliance on the function of the letter to make an offer of his skills:

> He writes to the Chinese Embassy in London. Since he suspects the Chinese have no use for computers, he says nothing about computer programming. He is prepared to come and teach English in China, he says, as a contribution to the world struggle. What he is paid is of no importance to him.
> He mails the letter and waits for a reply. Meanwhile he buys *Teach Yourself Chinese* and begins to practice the strange clenched teeth sound of Mandarin.
> Day after day passes; from the Chinese there is no word. Have the British secret services intercepted his letter and destroyed it? Do they intercept and destroy letters to the Embassy?
>
> (*Y* 153)

Here John waits for a fairly generic 'yes' or 'no' response. Yet even this simple response fails to arrive. Again, the letter is given a haunting quality as John worries that his letter has been intercepted en route to the recipient.

In *Summertime*, letters take on a tone of absurdity and are granted more narrative space and attention. The first appearance of the letter comes in Julia's account of how her affair with John began. During the early stages of their affair, Julia realises that John is avoiding her. Feeling hurt and irritated by his lack of correspondence, she tries to initiate contact:

> I wrote him a letter, an old-fashioned letter, and put a stamp on it and dropped it in the mailbox. 'Are you avoiding me?' I wrote. 'What do I have to do to reassure you I want us to be good friends, no more?' No response.
> What I did not mention in the letter, and would certainly not mention when next I saw him, was how I passed the weekend immediately after his visit.
>
> (*S* 38-39)

In this case, the intent and emotion of the letter lies hidden beneath the form and content of the letter. Julia uses restrained language and an 'old-fashioned' process of posting it in the mailbox. But by making evident the missing elements of the letter, such as Julia's irritation and urgency for an answer, we see that the letter enables a rather cunning and coy dalliance of courtship that alludes to subtle manipulation as opposed to truth. And then there is her exasperation with the delayed reply, "then at last I had a response to my letter. A phone call from John. First some cautious probing: Was I alone, was my husband away? Then the invitation: Would I like to come over for supper, an early supper, and would I like to bring my child?" (*S* 40). She arrives at the Coetzee household for the braai and it is a pathetic occasion with the two Coetzee men. Despite John's invitation, Julia is thrown by the fact that he made little fuss or preparation for her as his

guest. She quickly leaves the braai, feeling piqued at the effort she invested in inviting John into her life.

In Margot's account we have an extended representation of a letter that induces various forms of disruption. After leaving the farm, Margot is 'haunted' by her cousin's melancholic spirit and she decides to write him a letter. Margot "begins the promised letter that same night, sitting in her dressing gown and slippers at the table in her own kitchen" (*S* 135). The contents of the letter are relayed in its entirety. It streams over a page in length. Margot's expressed sentiments are deeply intimate and push past the formal boundaries of their conversations on the farm. However, in the narrative, Margot's act of letter writing is literally interrupted by her husband who distracts her with love-making. Yet once they are done, and her husband is asleep, Margot lies awake in bed:

> It is as if the ghost of her cousin still lurks, calling her back to the dark kitchen to complete what she was writing to him. *Have faith in me*, she whispers, *I will return.*
>
> But when she wakes it is Monday, there is no time for writing, no time for intimacies, they have to set off at once on the drive to Calvinia, she to the hotel, Lukas to the transport depot. In the windowless little office behind the reception desk she labours over the backlog of invoices; by evening she is too exhausted to pursue the letter she was writing, and anyhow she has lost touch with the feeling. *Am thinking of you*, she writes at the foot of the page. Even that is not true, she has not given John a thought all day, she has had no time. *Much love*, she writes. *Margie*. She addresses the envelope and seals it. So. It is done. Much love, but exactly how much?
>
> (*S* 137-138)

The letter is intended to serve as a vehicle to give sound advice, but it appears to have been part of a more transitory event that relied on feeling. Upon deferring the completion of the letter, a break has occurred in her consciousness that prevents her from presenting the entire message that she initially intended. The letter that she sends is ultimately incomplete. Yet, in keeping with the rest of the letter, she imposes a continuity of tone that she knows is superficial in relation to the truth of her change in feeling. Now aware of this hidden insincerity she wonders how much good this letter will actually do. The letter is shown to be unreliable, presenting only a transitory version of a 'truth' that ends even before the letter is written, let alone received.

But Coetzee is not content to end the episode there and the debacle of the letter continues. Margot is careful to inform us that "she has to wait ten days, until the Friday of the next week, for a reply" (*S* 138). This letter is also transcribed in its entirety in the text. It is a cold and formal letter from John and it leaves her infuriated: "is that all? The cold formality of his response shocks her, brings an angry flush to her cheeks" (*S* 139). Coetzee confounds the temporal logic of reception as Margot chews over John's measly response for a good few pages in the text. What this diatribe constitutes is a form of editing of her initial letter to John. She attempts to remove from and add to the contents of her letter in order to justify what she was trying to communicate to him. It is as if she is arguing with her cousin who is not there and who, furthermore, does not appear to care for correspondence.

In *Summertime*, the last and most fascinating display of the potential of letters to go awry comes in Adriana's account. She tells Mr. Vincent that Mr. Coetzee taught her daughter, Maria Regina, extra-English at school. At that time she sensed that her daughter took a slightly unhealthy liking to her teacher and, perceiving this to be a dangerous relationship, Adriana felt that more stable boundaries needed to be set. She recalls how she insisted that Mr. Coetzee come over to the flat so that she could have a word with him. Adriana recalls the first obstacle that she needed to overcome in order to do so:

> There is the question of the invitation, the correct way to phrase the invitation to your daughter's teacher to visit her parents' home and drink tea. I spoke to Mario's cousin on the telephone but he was no help. So in the end I had to ask the receptionist at the dance studio to write the letter for me. 'Dear Mr. Coetzee,' she wrote, 'I am the mother of Maria Regina Nascimento, who is in your English class. You are invited to a tea at our residence'.
>
> (*S* 158-159)

Adriana, a Brazilian, is not familiar with English and goes to great lengths to have the written invitation convey the right message in the appropriate language. Yet this meeting, despite its cordial pretences, turns out to have a rather crude agenda. Adriana badgers and interrogates Mr. Coetzee about his qualifications and issues a stern warning to stay away from her daughter. Still not satisfied with this meeting, she writes another letter to him as a repeat warning. In this letter, which she recalls verbatim, she wonders if her poor (since she struggles to write in English) choice of phrase caused all the confusion: "*expose your feelings outside the classroom* – that was not an invitation to him to pursue me, it was a warning to him to not pursue my daughter" (*S* 165). Yet contrary to her intentions, and

the rather frank expression of her letter, John ends up pursuing her. She says that "the next day, to my surprise, Maria Regina brought back a note from this teacher of hers, not an answer to mine but an invitation: would we like to come on a picnic with him and his father?" (*S* 165). Despite getting no real response to her letter, she takes her family along for the picnic. Adriana uses this picnic as an opportunity to stress the inappropriateness of John socializing with her and her daughter. "I hoped that would be the end of Mr. Coetzee. But no, a day or two later there arrived a letter from him, not via Maria Regina this time but through the mail, a formal letter, typed, the envelope typed too" (*S* 169), she adds. She is completely thrown by the contents of this letter: "could he meet me alone. Of course I asked myself where he got the idea that I would want to meet him, even want to receive a letter from him. Because I never said a word to encourage him" (*S* 169). She is rather bewildered that he has inferred some romantic feeling from her curt warnings to stay away from her daughter. She is soon overwhelmed by a deluge of letters from John. She describes the contents of these letters as "nonsense, worse than nonsense. It did not make me love him, on the contrary it made me recoil" (*S* 175). She eventually loses the will to fight this emotional tirade; "I put the letters in the bureau; some I did not even read" (*S* 172). Yet that is not the end of the burden of the letters. Adriana's daughter, Maria Regina, stumbles upon them and, in a jealous rage, accuses her mother of having an affair with her teacher. This unfortunate event nevertheless forces Adriana to take more definite action against these uninvited arrivals: "there was one more, but I did not open it. I wrote RETURN TO SENDER on the envelope and left it in the foyer for the postman to pick up" (*S* 190).

I have embarked on this lengthy illustration of the exchange of letters and the letter as invitation in order to make evident the sustained disruption of the economy of exchange. The letter and the invitation are never meant to be read as innocent vehicles of communication and meaning in the triad. As we see, this economy of exchange is made fallible. Its gaps are exploited to allow for the potential for a perverse pleasure that arises out of these paradoxical circumstances of misapprehension and confusion, of the non-arrivals and mis-arrivals of the invitation.

In order to explore the full significance of the disrupted economy of the letter, I wish to make reference to yet another Derridian text; the 'envois' section in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1987). In this text, the 'envois' serves as an epistolary preface that employs the letter as a vehicle for its own deconstruction. Derrida writes a sequence of letters that are penned by JD to an audience that ranges from Plato to Freud to an anonymous addressee. Just as in the triad, these letters are presented as items in an inappropriate economy of exchange and this is precisely why this text makes for difficult reading. Because Derrida is always one to show the ever-narrowing gap between literature and philosophy, his text operates as both narrative event and philosophical critique. This allows us the opportunity to explore the implicit philosophical implications of what the triad might be suggesting in employing a similar narrative device of epistolary and invitational disruption.

In the 'envois', despite all the hyperbolic playfulness and endless digressions, Derrida nevertheless de/constructs a clear picture of the discourse of the letter for us. The

discourse of the letter, he argues, is governed by what he terms as 'The Postal Principle'. It is a guiding principle that gives rise to the three posts (stations) of the post: the letter relies on the sender, the system of transmission and the destination. What 'The Postal Principle' assures us, according to Derrida, is the determinism that leads us to believe that a letter will always arrive at its destination. By regulating the three stations of the post, the letter is always one that arrives with meaning that is clearly communicable and always already discernable (Derrida 1987). As we can already surmise, it is the very same system of signification that governs the letter and the invitation.

In the 'envois', Derrida uses the image on Martin Paris's postcard painting of Socrates and Plato in order to illustrate how 'The Postal Principle' is not as omniscient as it claims to be. Derrida 'argues' that epistolary communication and language, like the postcard, marks a much more complicated experience than 'The Postal Principle' will allow for and admit to. The postcard, Derrida illustrates, encapsulates all that 'slips' past our desire for authenticity and meaning. The 'recto-verso' nature of the postcard does not allow us to distinguish clearly the back from the front – the image or the text? Hence, we lose the hierarchical division between the general and the particular, the vehicle of transmission and the message it seeks to transmit. Derrida argues that the reproducible image on the postcard is no different from the written message and the signature on the other side of the postcard, for in our signatures and our use of language we assign our 'deaths' in order to live. Playing with the Freudian fort/da, Derrida insists that the pronoun 'I' and the signature is something we send out in order to have it return to us as the reassurance of our Being and presence. It is in this manner that the 'epoch of the post' gives rise to a

closed system in which the letter always arrives. Yet Derrida argues that this form of address only allows us to address ourselves and not one another or the other.

In illustrating this aporetic communicative failure, Derrida argues that the full potential of the *envois*, the full potential of the letter (and language) is, contrary to the suggestion of Lacan, to *not* arrive. He challenges the destined logic of meaning by arguing that the proliferation of meaning that arises out the awareness of the substitutive nature of language escapes the economy of return, the fort/da of Being. Hence, the *envois* plays on the ability for meaning to remain caught up in the intrinsic processes of *différance*; of delay and detour without arrival at a determined destination. The full potential of the letter, Derrida asserts, is that which escapes the 'epoch of the post'. It is that which precedes its enforced logic. And so he discusses a return to the first *envoi*, which comes before the 'epoch of the post', in which the letter does not arrive. Furthermore, Derrida argues that the first *envoi* is always *envois*; part of a plural logic in which arrival can never be determined (1987).

Through Derrida's undertaking in the *envois*, we can begin to formulate the implications of the trope of the invitation as staged in the triad. In this chapter, I have illustrated that the trope of the invitation engages in a disrupted economy of exchange of both the invitation and the letter as invitation. And in bringing us towards this experience of the aporia of hospitality in the triad, it follows rather well that John, in *Youth*, would then express a desire for the kind of logic that this experience relies on and, in effect, creates:

> He is reading the history of logic, pursuing an intuition that logic is a human invention, not part of the fabric of being, and therefore (there are many intermediate steps, but he can fill them in later) that computers are simply toys invented by boys (led by Charles Babbage) for the amusement of other boys. There are many alternative logics, he is convinced (but how many?), each just as good as the logic of *either-or*. The threat of a toy by which he earns his living, the threat that makes it more than a toy, is that it will burn *either-or* paths in the brains of its users and thus lock them irreversibly into its binary logic.
>
> He pores over Aristotle, over Peter Ramus, over Rudolph Carnap. Most of what he reads he does not understand, but he is used to not understanding. All he is searching for at present is the moment in history when *either-or* is chosen and *and/or* discarded.
>
> (*Y* 159-160)

In expressing an awareness of the sinister nature of the binary determinism of computer logic, John intuitively follows the search for a more plural logic that will deliver him from its decisive actions. He is searching for a form of logic, he implies, that is more humane. With regard to the autobiographical invitation, as part of a disrupted economy, we have seen that adopting a plural logic is that which ultimately aids its escape from the discourses of truth in which only refusal or acceptance of the invitation are accurate destinations of its arrival. That is to answer the 'what' of the experience of the aporia. However, the question of 'how' this plural logic of the autobiographical invitation is to be experienced remains. How does one experience this invitation, as a step that is not a step in the aporia, as one without destination?

In *Autobiography and the Cultural Moment,* Olney argues that central to the genre is the realization that "criticism of autobiography exists *within* the literature instead of alongside it" (1980: 25). Here he argues that autobiography is inherently informed by a dual act of both its theory and practice. And hence, the autobiographical invitation, just like the recto-verso of Derrida's postcard, applies a plural logic that cannot sustain a normative theory/praxis division. Coincidentally, this is precisely the position that critics perceive Coetzee to be assuming in noting his role as both literary scholar and writer. However, it must be stressed, that as Olney insists, this condition is inherent to every autobiography, whether the author chooses to embrace or deny this, whether he/she chooses to deal with it as a problem, in either sense of the word.

Yet perhaps it is Coetzee's erudite position as both writer and critic that affords him the opportunity to stage the invitation with such heightened awareness, to the extent of ushering us into the aporetic autobiographical experience. For the triad, *Scenes from Provincial Life*, in staging the *experience* of the aporetic autobiography, in presenting us with the question of the invitation, illustrates to us that the autobiographical invitation is always a critical gesture that questions itself in the act of writing making it possible to stage the very gesture of offering it. The invitation arising out of the aporia of autobiography is that which always formulates a question of its own gesture of hospitality and furthermore, suspends the arrival of an answer. For in arriving, we deliver ourselves back to the binary of truth and fiction which fails to make provision for the aporia in which autobiography *exists*. An uncomfortable proposition, according to James Olney, but a necessary one for autobiography, it seems: "I fear that this is all too typical – indeed

it seems inevitable – that the subject of autobiography produces more questions than answers, more doubts by far (even of its existence) than certainties" (1980: 5). In order to remain in the space of autobiography, the invitation, as part of a disrupted economy, as a question, is one that never arrives. And in embracing uncertainty, in remaining a question, it allows for the practice of autobiography. Thus, considering that the autobiographical invitation can only present itself as a question, it becomes possible for us to understand that we *do* stand as invited in the triad. The invitation as a question is precisely the experience that Coetzee affords us as readers of these texts, inviting us to acknowledge, embrace and experience the uncertainty of autobiography.

However, in this illustration of the autobiographical invitation as one that cannot arrive, it becomes difficult to mark the exchange between writer and reader, the very gesture of hospitality that an invitation is supposed to make possible. For in arguing that autobiography is inherently informed by its own criticism, Olney appears to understand it as a form of 'mutual haunting' that challenges again the configuration that one sees as necessary for exchange. He states that due to the self-reflexive nature of writing an autobiography, the author is always engaging in an act of criticism. And furthermore, he draws our attention to the fact that as theorists of the genre, our perspectives are always clandestinely informed by our '*autos*' and '*bios*' and '*graphē*' (as both reading and writing) (Olney 1980). Again, just like the recto-verso of Derrida's postcard, the autobiographical invitation cannot sustain the hierarchy of exchange that marks an extension of the invitation from author to critic or critic to author. This implies that

neither the author nor the critic has an exclusive and essentialised place from which to invite, from which to exercise hospitality.

In *Of Hospitality*, Anne Doufourmantelle, writing alongside Derrida's lectures, sees "so many signs addressed to this question of place" (Doufourmantelle 2000: 16). She notes that in Derrida's lectures this 'where?' of ethical hospitality is envisioned as a consistent problem that is never solved. And this question too, is one that is made apparent in the triad. Let us begin by looking at the epigraph of *Youth*:

> Wer den Dichter will verstehen
> muß in Dichters Lande gehen.
> – Goethe

To translate loosely, this means: who wants to understand the poet, has to go to the country/place/land of the poet. *Youth* makes explicit a thematic undercurrent that appears to run through the entire triad, an enigma of place with regard to the location of the author. Through John's topographical experiences, the triad searches not only for the space in which John can feel hosted by others as an author, but also for a place in which he can comfortably exist as one for himself.

In *Boyhood*, young John is aware of his precarious position in society. Not quite Afrikaans and not quite English, John sets off on a broader search for his sense of place in the world. He takes comfort first in the Rome that he links to Roman Catholicism and then later, we see that "he adopted everything Russian" (*B* 27). Also, John's fixation on the farm is striking. He says that "through the farms he is rooted in the past, through the

farms he has substance" (*B* 22). This is in direct comparison to Worcester, which he describes as the "purgatory one must pass through" (*B* 34). Yet, as I have discussed in Chapter Two, he already mourns the impossibility of life on the farm and the South Africa of John's young life remains a hostile space with no place for respite.

In *Youth*, Coetzee is quick to disrupt a simple nationalistic reading of the epigraph quotation from Goethe by presenting John as one who is already ready to leave South Africa, his country of birth. John goes to London to find his place in the world and to experience himself as a poet. But contrary to his expectations, this never happens. In London, John finds himself feeling alienated and disaffected in his adopted homeland. He had hoped for a warmer reception. Yet no one seems to be interested in him and the ones who are tend to be rather hostile. Ultimately he fails to write and fails to love London and by the end of *Youth* John suggests a possible escape to further shores.

Summertime begins with John's undated fragments in which he records his return to South Africa after ten years abroad. Almost immediately, there is a sense of his extreme displacement; "so this is what he has come back to! Yet where in the world can one hide where one will not feel soiled? Would he feel any cleaner in the snows of Sweden?" (*S* 4), he already asks. South Africa, for John, is consistently used as a topographical mark of experiences that are "alone and friendless" (*S* 5). Lacking in hospitality, both politically and personally, it fails to bring him towards himself and towards others. The house too, in which he lives with his father, is "now so rotten with damp" (*S* 6). And again in *Summertime*, there is the utopic farm: "*he speaks of the Karoo as if it were*

paradise" (*S* 108). John assumes that he must settle down in the Karoo in order to fulfill his childhood dream and thus end his lifelong search for the feeling of home. Yet his decision is met with opposition in the text. His cousin Margot states that "she cannot believe her ears. 'You want to buy property? You want to live in Merweville? In *Merweville*?" (*S* 107). She undercuts his decision by showing him how ridiculous and impractical his dream is and he ends up not following through with his plan.

Ultimately, it is in *Summertime* that Coetzee poignantly ties up his treatment of physical place with that of hospitality. Through the biographer, Mr. Vincent, Coetzee poses this question to Martin: "in his case, would you say that the habit you describe, of treating feelings as provisional, of not committing himself emotionally, extended beyond relations with the land of his birth into personal relations too?" (*S* 211). The text presents us with a topographical scheme for reading John's restless engagement with hospitality. By presenting us with a journey that leads John away from the pre-conditioned conformism of South Africa and keeps him outside of the utopian frameworks of the farm and an elusive overseas destination, Coetzee leaves John essentially 'homeless' in the triad.

Accordingly, it becomes possible for us to discern that autobiographical hospitality cannot conceive of itself in the discourse of property, of homes. This space of autobiographical hospitality appears to be much like the one that Barthes conceives of in the fragment titled 'L'atopie ~ Atopia' in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977). It reads as follows:

> *Pigeonholed*: I am pigeonholed, assigned to an (intellectual) site, to residence in a caste (if not a class). Against which there is only one internal doctrine: that of atopia (of a drifting habitation). Atopia is superior to utopia (utopia is reactive, tactical, literary, it proceeds from meaning and governs it).
>
> (Barthes 1977: 49)

For Barthes, the assumption of the atopic space is necessary in order to escape the homogenous intellectual practice that seeks to produce and govern meaning. This system of control, he notes, does not only inform rigid institutionalism but is also inscribed in more utopian models of intellectual practice. Thus, in an endeavour to elude the violence of fixed signification, he opts to 'reside' in the atopia, a drifting habitation without the topographical configurations of truth and the so-called opposite of the utopia.

In *Aporias*, the experience of the aporia is, for Derrida too, that which lacks topographical dimensions by always leaving us suspended "before a door, a threshold, a border, a line, or simply the edge or the approach of the other as such" (1993: 12). The very importance of the paralysis of the aporia is that it completely negates the discourse of borders and property by failing to see a border that is approached as traversable or in-traversable. In doing so, Derrida argues that we fail to declare what is proper to us, just as one cannot speak properly of one's own death.

Thus, the allusion to the aporia of autobiographical hospitality suggests that both the theorist and the practitioner of autobiography lose the ability to state what is proper to each, making the invitation a more mutually embedded practice of autobiography. The

atopic space, as a placeless place in which no one can consider themselves to be at home, means that each must be invited in by the other in order to engage in and with autobiography. Thus the invitation here, in the aporia of autobiography, *must* be a mutual affair of invitation, an event of mutual hospitality. But what then, of reception?

In *Aporias*, Derrida concludes that the aporia is where we can await one another. Yet in this act of awaiting each other, we do so "knowing *a priori*, and absolutely and undeniably, that, life always being to short, the one is waiting for the other there, for the one and the other never arrive there together, at this rendezvous" (Derrida 1993: 65). The autobiographical invitation, in being offered, is one that comes too early or too late. In the act of writing, the author evokes the history of the genre and invites future response to his/her work. And a critic, in choosing to respond to autobiography, invites a particular text into consideration as they examine the work in relation to the genre and theorise the future of autobiography in light of what the work suggests. Yet, both these invitations, although mutual and equally necessary in sustaining autobiography, never cross paths. To suggest that the invitation is one that comes too early or too late is to accept that we navigate the field of autobiography with only a wish for mutual consensus but never with any guarantees. The temporal dance of autobiography is that of surprise and uncertainty and so the arrival of the invitation remains "an impossibility that one can await or expect" (Derrida 1993: 73). Despite the fact that it is impossible, this gesture sustains the hope of a meeting. It is a wish we can never discard if we are to remain hospitable. Yet, in this, I also wish to read an expression of the fundamental incompleteness of autobiography, of

the aporia in which our exchanges are mutual but never symmetrical, allowing the genre to remain dynamic as a hospitable drifting habitation within the literary field.

Conclusion

In this dissertation I have used J.M. Coetzee's invitation as it is staged in the triad, *Scenes from Provincial Life*, in order to explore and examine the structural trope of the invitation in autobiography. In alluding to the aporetic aspects of hospitality, Coetzee's autobiographies, as we have seen, leave us with the realization that autobiography relies on embracing the aporia, not only to sustain itself as a genre but also to remain an ethical one.

The aporia, I argued, is a site in which the conditional and the absolute forms of hospitality meet; their strengths and weaknesses co-existing in mutual exchange. Through this plural logic the aporetic invitation becomes a necessary means by which to resist the determined demands for truth and also to de-limit any equally irresponsible gestures of rampant fictionalisation *and* the accusations thereof. It is in this capacity that the invitation asserts its necessity as a trope by which we experience autobiography.

In seeing the aporetic invitation as specific to autobiography, we must also cease to see autobiography as a somewhat loose and hybrid genre that results out of the opposition between the neighbouring genres of fiction and non-fiction. The aporia of autobiography resists the classification as an unclear opposition between truth and fiction in which clarity arrives through an investigation of intention. It involves an acceptance of the inability to arrive at intention – both that of the author and that of our critical endeavours – by accepting that it is always the excesses of intention that reside here and never the production/results of it. By freeing the genre from the burden of intention we set

autobiography afloat as a drifting habitation in the literary field such that it may exist *outside* of the sliding scale of truth and fiction. It is in failing to see opposition that critics and authors can begin to truly invite one another to have an experience in/of autobiography in the aporia.

In conclusion, the invitation as question, far from what theorists have suggested of Coetzee's work, does not stand as a device that ultimately serves to alienate and distantiate us as readers. In alluding to the aporia, where critical reflexivity and creative act co-habit as an intrinsic gesture of autobiography, the staged elucidation of the invitation as a question cannot be seen as external to the act of writing; an argument by which critics would suggest that Coetzee is staging the act of inviting whilst not inviting. I have used this dissertation as a means to suggest that the invitation as question cannot be seen as part of Coetzee's repertoire of meta-textual devices. It resists being appropriated by this overriding perception of Coetzee's *oeuvre* by standing instead, as a frank, and even humble, acknowledgement of the only autobiographical invitation that *can* be ethically offered. Thus, the invitation that is offered by Coetzee retains the intimacy that is inscribed in the act of autobiography and its gestures of hospitality. By inviting us into autobiography itself, Coetzee invites us to a place that is as specific and unique as the aporia. The only place, it seems, where both writer and critic can endeavour to receive one another as ethical agents of autobiography.

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