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From Prescription to Possibility: Becoming a Writer in J.M. Coetzee's *Youth*

Craig Smith

In J.M. Coetzee's fictionalized memoir, *Youth*, the middle installment in the increasingly fictionalized autobiographical trilogy that begins with *Boyhood* and ends with *Summertime* <1>, the situation that the text presents to us is primarily one of personal transformation. In the book, John, the young, unknown, aspiring modernist poet who takes centre stage, undergoes a subtle process of change that by the narrative's conclusion leaves him on the cusp of becoming the world-renowned writer of complicated postmodern and postcolonial prose fictions that readers know as J.M. Coetzee. Displaying an author in the process of becoming, *Youth* concerns itself centrally with artistic ambition as a specific form of desire that drives a young man from the colonies to behave in a particular, and often ethically unattractive, way in pursuit of his goal. *Youth* thus strikes a familiar chord for readers of the author's other works as it follows a recognizable Coetzeean model insofar as its takes desire as one of its central concerns: perhaps more than anything else, what comes to the fore in *Youth* is Coetzee's exploration of what it means to want to be a writer.

Despite the knowledge that many readers of *Youth* bring to the book prior to reading – namely, that John's engagement in the process of becoming an author will be succeeded by the condition of his being one, and a rather well-known and widely-celebrated one at that, that he will, in short, satisfy his desire and get what he wants – John's experience of becoming an author, as Coetzee represents it, is simultaneously one of "stymied creative potential" (Sheehan 25), frustration, loneliness, listlessness and boredom. Among the narrative strands that weave in and out of *Youth*, what remains consistent throughout the book is the scrupulous tracking of its protagonist's

waning creative output as he takes on a number of tiring and time-consuming jobs in Cape Town and London that cause "whole days to pass in a fog of grey exhaustion" (13) and engages in a series of unsatisfying sexual encounters that are "truly dysfunctional" (Sheehan 26). A colonial outsider living in uneasy isolation in an imperial center that he finds to be unwelcoming, John considers that he has composed only one poem "in the last year that he likes" that is "only five lines long" (60) and recognizes that his progress is towards an extreme form of minimalism: "The truth…is that the poems he writes are not only becoming shorter and shorter but – he cannot help feeling – less substantial too" (58). To John, the "wry little pieces" he has been reduced to writing that are "*minor* in every sense" (59) constitute a minimalism that is almost indistinguishable from silence:

> He has lists of words and phrases he has stored up, mundane or recondite, waiting to find homes for them. *Perfervid*, for instance: one day he will lodge *perfervid* in an epigram whose occult history will be that it will have been created as a setting for a single word, as a brooch can be a setting for a single jewel…Will epigrams be enough to build a career in poetry on? (61).

If the John who arrives in London from Cape Town initially has hopes of becoming a full-fledged artist and poet, one who follows in the footsteps of the American transplants he idolizes – Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot – he soon aspires to something less. John's vision of himself as a poet gives way to aspirations to a humbler career as an epigrammist, and then again to one who "experiment[s] with prose," writing a story with "no real plot" (61). John's ongoing residency in London carries him further along the same trajectory until, "into his third summer in England" (159), he is able to look back in dismay and realize that "[a] year has passed since he last wrote a line of

poetry" (160). As the account of the young artist's life and career in London nears its conclusion, John's only claim to being a writer is limited to "the Ford thesis, now nearing completion" that will gain him his Masters in English literature (160). Rather than the exhilarating and ennobling transformation that John expects when he decides to move to London, John's journey transforms him in a different, less inspiring way as he goes from being a poet, to a mere decorator of poems, to a prose writer, to a producer of academic criticism. If, as John believes, "[p]oetry is truth" (91), then his retreat from the heights of poetry to the depths of academic prose represents more than just a change in career plans: it signals his surrendering of the language of truth, signals, in the end, the demise of his voice.

For readers searching for a greater understanding of a celebrated author's experience, looking to comprehend, that is, how one becomes a great author, the narrative progression of *Youth* is likely to be surprising and perhaps disappointing. As *Youth* ends, John is seemingly further away from his goal as he was when the book began and, rather than being a poet – by implication, one who is spoken and written about appreciatively – *Youth*'s protagonist is a writer only insofar as he writes appreciatively about others. His silence in what Pascale Casanova has referred to as the "world republic of letters" <2> seems to be the sure fate awaiting him, and, for that reason, the text comes to a grim and depressing conclusion as John, reflecting on the condition of a fellow colonial immigrant and computer programmer, imagines his own death:

> He and Ganapathy are two sides of the same coin: Ganapathy starving not because he is cut off from Mother India but because he doesn't eat properly, because despite his M.Sc. in computer science he doesn't know about vitamins

> and minerals and amino acids; and he locked into an attenuating endgame, playing himself, with each move, further into a corner and into defeat. One of these days the ambulance men will call at Ganapathy's flat and bring him out on a stretcher with a sheet over his face. When they have fetched Ganapathy they might as well come and fetch him too. (168-69)

The physical death that John imagines here, characterized by its anonymous and undifferentiated nature, is indistinguishable from the apparent non-career as a writer that looms before him. Lacking the career of a writer is, for John, to lack the only identity he considers worth living for; it is death, or might as well be. The concluding passage of *Youth* is thus striking both for what its grim pessimism suggests about the writer's experience and for the ironic distance that separates the elder Coetzee from his younger self's overwrought fantasy of self-annihilation. For, as Coetzee and his readers know, bigger and better things are in store for *Youth*'s protagonist: far from anonymous, the author of *Youth* is an international literary celebrity, one differentiated from readers, and even fellow writers, by his possession of "the blessed gift" (20), the major talent that as a young man he attributes to poets such as Pound and Eliot.

The questions thus remain: why is it that Coetzee's account of the young writer's experience "contains very few truly happy moments" (Vold 40)? Why does Coetzee's portrait of the artist as a young man end not in personal triumph, with its central figure adopting the singular adult identity for which he is well known, but on a note of defeat that is all the more poignant for its envisioning of an undifferentiated, anonymous end? Why does *Youth* have "some claim to being Coetzee's grimmest novel" (Sheehan 21)? The answers to these questions lie, I want to suggest, in the

kind of generic game-playing in which Coetzee engages in *Youth* and, more importantly, in what it is that Coetzee wants to suggest about the rules of writing that confront a young and impressionable artist. It is my contention here that *Youth* is an exercise in rule-bending that, rather than leaving readers with a specific understanding of what goes into the making of an author or providing readers with an idiosyncratic but authoritative guide on how to be an author, suggests that genuine artistic genesis does not emerge from the artist's adherence to prescriptive rules but in his or her recognition of the need to be open to alternative possibilities of how to be a writer and what being a writer means.

II

The reader seeking vicarious enjoyment of the personal triumphs of the protagonist in *Youth* will likely be frustrated by a narrative that focuses more on the failure to write than on the act of writing, more on writer's block than on inspiration. Standing behind the text, Coetzee's success may be a given – indeed, it is the precondition that makes *Youth*'s existence possible – but that success takes place beyond the pages of the book, remaining something to be anticipated rather than represented. That Coetzee denies readers the form of vicarious enjoyment they might otherwise reasonably expect is not entirely surprising in this "quirky and particularly Coetzee-like perspective on the genre of autobiography" (Kossew 9). As Carrol Clarkson observes in a general comment on Coetzee's writing, Coetzee is "preoccup[ied] with narrative as a form of rule-bound play" (4), and it is readily apparent in *Youth* that Coetzee writes with an eye to the narrative rules and conventions that structure the text.

Perhaps most obviously, in *Youth*, Coetzee is more than willing at times to stray from the realm of factual accuracy – for instance, the protagonist of *Youth* is single while Coetzee was not – and to present these fictionalized wanderings, unmarked and unannounced, alongside what are commonly understood to be true biographical details of the author's life during the years that are the subject of the book. The representational strategy at work in *Youth*, then, brings the assumption that it belongs to the genre of autobiography into question as Coetzee contravenes what Philippe Lejeune describes as the *autobiographical pact*: a tacit contract between the author of an autobiography and his or her reader in which the author promises, as far as it is possible, to tell the truth, or, at least not to deceive the reader deliberately or wilfully. As Lejeune explains, autobiography "does not include degrees" and "is not a guessing game" but instead "is exactly the opposite" (13). For reasons that should by now be clear, *Youth* is precisely that which, according to Lejeune, autobiography is *not*: it is characterized by degrees of truthfulness, concerned more with the "aura of truth" (138) than it is with factual accuracy, and it certainly does invite its readers to play guessing games about what really happened and what did not, and even about which experiential details to believe or disbelieve. Implicit in Lejeune's conceptualization of autobiography, then, is the idea that, despite whatever forms of humour that are permissible, the genre is one which takes itself and its subject seriously. In contrast, one detects in *Youth* an almost overwhelming refusal by the text to take itself or its hapless, miserable subject too seriously. For instance, John's feeling that "[m]isery is his element," where he "is at home…like a fish in water" (65), may or may not engage the sympathies of readers, but the question of whether or not to feel sorry for John for his present experience or Coetzee for his past one is easily superseded by another

question: Is there anything or anyone to feel sorry for? Either the representation of Coetzee's past misery is authentic, and we might feel moved to pity an author we respect in the present, or Coetzee is pulling our leg by representing the exaggeratedness of youthful experience, in which case mild amusement at an overly-dramatic individual might be a more appropriate response than pity. Though this reader may personally favour the latter interpretation, I cannot settle on a position with certainty because, as Clarkson observes, *Youth* is "devoid of explicit retrospective commentary or value judgements" (27). The effect of a text such as *Youth* is to leave its readers, even and perhaps *especially* those readers with prior knowledge of and about the author, in a state of hermeneutic hesitation concerning the text's contents and meaning.

By Lejeune's standards, *Youth* must fail if judged as strictly as an autobiography. It is too uncertain, potentially too tongue-in-cheek in its treatment of event and character, to reveal truth with sufficient authority. Alternatively, *Youth* may qualify as an autobiographical fiction, or as a work of fiction with autobiographical elements, but such a characterization of Coetzee's book is ultimately as unsatisfying as identifying it as autobiography. *Youth*, like *Boyhood* before it, can rightly be seen as both a work of fiction and an autobiographical work (Vermeulen 50) <3>. Crucially, however, it is not predominately either fiction or autobiography with elements of the other mixed in but a genuine intermingling of the two. It is autobiography and novel in one, simultaneously both a retrospective career memoir and a *Kuntslerroman* and neither of these things at one and the same time. <4> Like each of the genres that constitute it, *Youth* makes personal and creative adversity of central importance to its narrative account of artistic genesis, but, unlike its component genres, does not treat

adversity as a rhetorical or plot device designed to be but a stage within a larger linear narrative.

If the adversity of the protagonist that *Youth* presents to its readers is highly conventional given what type of book it is, the note of pessimism, indeed fatalism, on which the text ends runs counter to the narrative conventions that make the overcoming of adversity a primary focus of retrospective life-narrative genres. Indeed, almost nothing in *Youth* is overcome or accomplished. The young, aspiring writer readers encounter at the text's outset is not, and still has not yet become, the celebrated author by its end: "John" never becomes "Coetzee" within the pages of *Youth*; the apprentice of modernist luminaries Pound and Eliot is not yet, to use a word integral to the Coetzeean corpus, the *master* of a younger set of apprentices with literary ambitions. The persistence of this situation from the beginning of *Youth* to the end and, particularly, the omission of the moment (illusionary moment, might Coetzee say?) when the protagonist overcomes his personal shortcomings and triumphs against the obstacles placed in his path by a society of indifferent philistines directs readers of the book to question the epistemological comfort that accompanies the typical autobiography-as-career-retrospective or *Kuntslerroman*. In *Youth,* we learn about the author in a qualified, contingent way only: we read an account of a period in the author's past, the veracity of which we must somehow decide for ourselves, and we know of the protagonist's eventual success, but what *Youth* leaves in doubt is the relation between the bleak past of the now-successful author and the bright future of a protagonist who seems unable to make anything noteworthy of his life. Between what Coetzee knows and refuses to tell about his transformation from aspiring poet to

successful author and what readers think they know about the author but cannot independently confirm lays a chasm that, by design, *Youth* is incapable of bridging.

Insofar as *Youth* allows readers to learn anything at all about its author, it allows us to follow the movements of its protagonist. Crucially, John's physical movement in space from Cape Town to London, undertaken in an attempt to transcend the artistic limitations of his place of birth, finds its textual parallels in the intellectual movement he makes away from an undergraduate focus in mathematics to his taking up of graduate work in the field of English studies, in the multiple changes in employment he makes, as well as the string of successive sexual misadventures that frequently take center stage in the text. This flurry of movements that parallel each other constitutes much of the narrative action of the text and draws attention to confinement and escape as two of *Youth*'s central motifs. Indeed, throughout the text, John frequently conceives of his multiple movements, from place to place, from job to job, from intellectual discipline to intellectual discipline, and from woman to woman – and one man (79) – as a kind of flight from confinement, a transformative journey from the condition of being a non-writer that opens John to the potential of becoming that which he truly wishes to be.

That John's expectations and hopes are thwarted consistently as the narrative develops is crucial to the work that Coetzee, as the author of the text, undertakes in *Youth*. Coetzee presents readers with a younger version of himself whose feelings of being trapped are most closely related to his putative provinciality, a deeply-felt provinciality that is in a sense double because he comes not just from the far-flung reaches of the British Empire where people speak a language, Afrikaans, that in the eyes of the English is "like speaking Nazi, if there were such a language" (127), but

also from a provincial suburb in a provincial city; and yet, Coetzee suggests, the true source of John's feelings of captivity is not the place of his birth and upbringing but, rather, his slavish devotion to a particular group of Anglo-American modernist writers whose shackles he must learn to cast off before becoming a bona fide writer.

III

Youth draws its readers' attention to John's tendency to imitate and be guided by writers he respects almost from the beginning when the narrative describes the day-to-day lifestyle of the young undergraduate in Cape Town:

> The needs of his body he treats as a matter of simple common sense. Every Sunday he boils up marrowbones and beans and celery to make a big pot of soup, enough to last the week. On Fridays he visits Salt River market for a box of apples or guavas or whatever fruit is in season. Every morning the milkman leaves a pint of milk on his doorstep. When he has a surplus of milk he hangs it over the sink in an old nylon stocking and turns it into cheese. For the rest he buys bread at the corner shop. It is a diet Rousseau would approve of, or Plato. (2-3)

What is striking about this passage, aside from Coetzee's portrayal of his younger self's desperate need to gain the hypothetical approval of the acknowledged masters of a particular philosophical mode of writing, is the extent to which the younger John is active in constructing the guidelines by which his chosen masters might judge him and his diet. That is to say, although neither Rousseau nor Plato is shy about dictating how one ought to act and live, or even what and how much one ought to eat, John's dietary regimen is not the simple product of slavish imitation of either philosopher. Removed from the living environments of his models by history and

geography, John is incapable of simply replicating the ideal diet of a Rousseau or a Plato due to differences in region, climate, and food production technologies. Instead, John is forced by circumstance to choose for himself a dietary regimen that he hopes would gain the approval of his philosopher mentors if it were possible for him to make a direct personal appeal to their individual judgments. The activity in which John engages, then, involves his assumption of a personal knowledge of and relationship with the philosophers Plato and Rousseau that is based solely on his reading of their respective writings.

It is difficult, at moments such as this, not to detect Coetzee's humourous reflection on his own readers and their assumptions about him, as *Youth*, and indeed the virtual entirety of Coetzee's most recent publications from *Elizabeth Costello* to *Summertime*, have challenged readerly familiarity with the author, his personality, and views. As I suggest above, *Youth* refuses to provide easy and comfortable (not to mention comforting) answers as to how a young man who Coetzee "contrives to depict…in as poor a light as possible" (Head 15) – as a callow, selfish, cowardly, derivative and clichéd poser <5> – could become the author of a body of writing that is original, ethically generous and courageous, and intellectually challenging; unsurprisingly, then, it renders ridiculous the notion that the reader might attain enough of an understanding of the author to be able to anticipate what he thinks or what he may or may not approve of: as John wonders, almost speaking directly to the reader, "If he is a mystery to himself, how can he be anything but a mystery to others?" (132). As is frequently the case in *Youth*, though, the humour that emerges in the protagonist's futile efforts to gain the approval of authors long dead is tempered by empathy and compassion as the young John readers encounter is in many ways a

double of Coetzee's readers, who, quite probably, would not find Coetzee's approval objectionable. <6> The assumption of a personal relationship between reader and author may be ridiculous and impossible, but it is also comprehensible and forgivable.

This eagerness on John's part to live his life as he thinks his chosen historical models would say he ought to leads easily and naturally into his similar tendency to accept the literal direction of writers closer in time to him. As a would-be disciple to the still-living, successful poets Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, John appears to readers as an unquestioning student, attentive to the "lesson[s] for him…driven home on every page of their poetry" (20). Among these lessons in reading and writing, Pound, on the one hand, "has taught him to smell out the easy sentiment in which the Romantics and Victorians wallow, to say nothing of their slack versifying" (21), to read Flaubert and to refrain from reading Hugo, who "is a windbag" (24), and of the need to "be able to pick out the voice of the authentic master amid the babble of mere fashion" (135). On the other hand, from Eliot, John absorbs the dictum "'Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion…Poetry is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality'" (61); he also learns from Eliot that "the test of the critic is his ability to make fine discriminations" (135). As it turns out, however, John is not in the habit of distinguishing between true art and mere fashion for himself. Instead, on the collective authority of both Pound and Eliot, he "dismisses without a glance shelf after shelf of Scott, Dickens, Thackerey, Trollope, Meredith" and decides that "anything that came out of nineteenth-century Germany or Italy or Spain or Scandinavia" is not "worthy of attention," while "as artists Russians have nothing to teach" (25). From both of his literary masters, then, the lesson that John learns is that there are things he ought to leave behind, things he should pay no attention to,

and things, including his past and personal, national, and ethnic identity, from which he must escape. The obverse of this lesson, of course, is that there are places that he ought to go, "London, Paris, perhaps Vienna," places "where life can be lived at its fullest" (41); poets and authors he should read, such as "Baudelaire and Nerval, Corbière and Laforque" (22), Gustave Flaubert (24), and Ford Madox Ford, whom Pound deemed "the greatest prose stylist of his day" (53) and on whom John writes his Masters dissertation; experiences he must undergo, such as "suffer[ing] obscurity and ridicule until the day when he is revealed in his true powers and the scoffers and mockers fall silent" (3); being "transformed, even transfigured" by a "beautiful, worldly-wise mistress" (4); and being "rid of his old self and revealed in his new, true, passionate self" (111).

What underwrites John's acceptance of the barrage of lessons that come from Eliot and Pound is his belief in the authority of the "major poet," around whom buzz "a cloud of minor poets, like gnats" (20). One of the gnats, terrified of the even worse fate of being revealed as one of the "normal people [who] find it hard to be bad" and who are, accordingly, not like artists willing to suffer anything for their art (30), John takes it on faith that the aspiring artist should accept the prescriptive lessons of his idols, the lions, the "chosen" (20). He accepts as a given the notion that "artists can never be wholly present to the world" as "one eye has always to be turned inward" (31), which gives them license to think and act in a manner unrestrained by conventions of taste or morality. John's acceptance of these ideas means that, insofar as they intrude upon his consciousness, the political events of the immediate and wider world – a "worker's march taking place along De Waal drive" that takes place after "the carnage of Sharpeville" (37); the Cuban Missile Crisis (84-86); the closing of England's

borders to African and West Indian immigrants (104); American imperialism in Vietnam (152) – do not figure in what he writes. The poem that John deems his best recent work centres on "Portuguese rock-lobster/fishermen" (60), a subject far removed both from his personal history and from the geopolitical turbulence that is unsuitable material for poetry as he understands it. Having written a story, John moves from verse to prose in a moment that might otherwise have signalled the beginning of his transformation from "John" to "Coetzee" were it not for the fact that "[i]t disquiets him to see that he is still writing about South Africa" as "[h]e would prefer to leave his South African self behind as he has left South Africa itself behind" (62). For Paul Sheehan, the meaning of John's outlook is clear: "the modernist creed [of Pound and Eliot] has taught him to hate his homeland" (22). While I am in agreement with Sheehan's point here, it does not go far enough. The point *Youth* makes is not just that its protagonist finds in the writings of a pair of canonical modernist poets an excuse, free from the polemics of the political Left and Right, to hate his former home, with its racially unjust state of affairs and political quagmire. Rather, what the modernist creed teaches John is a matter of perception not emotion: from it, he learns to perceive himself as marked by his home as, indeed, it is a "handicap" (62), a "wound within him"(116) that shows though him in everything he dos and, especially, in everything he writes.

Pound and Eliot thus have a strong hold over John's views on art and on place through almost the entirety of the text. As John is represented through most of *Youth*, it is difficult to imagine his coming to a different point of view on these issues; and yet, it is Coetzee, the author of *Youth*, who returned to South Africa and authored celebrated, prize-winning books that spoke of and about that particular nation in

direct and indirect ways. It is Coetzee's suggestion, in *Youth*, that such events would not have taken place if not for two coincidental but pivotal moments in the narrative. These moments, in narrative order, though not necessarily in chronological order, are: John's discovery, in the "great, domed Reading Room" (136), of *Burchell's Travels*, which gives him "an eerie feeling to sit in London reading about streets – Waalstraat, Buitengracht, Buitencingel – along which he alone, of all the people around him with their heads buried in their books, has walked" (137); and his parallel and equally important discovery of Samuel Beckett's novel *Watt*, which he purchases from "a second-hand bookseller off Charing Cross Road" (155).

What John encounters in his reading of Burchell, the English colonial explorer of South Africa who sees the place through English eyes, is, paradoxically enough, the possibility of seeing a place anew. In a moment that foreshadows an event – the publication of Coetzee's first book, *Dusklands* – that will, from John's perspective, take place in the future, John realizes that he would "like to do it: write a book as convincing as Burchell's [about South Africa]" (138). What that book turns out be, some of *Youth*'s readers will know from Coetzee's other fictional and critical writings, is one which operates according to rules other than those operative in *Burchell's Travels*. In John's understanding of the task confronting him, he realizes that "[t]he difficult part will be to give to the whole the aura that will get it onto the shelves and thus into the history of the world" (138). The scene of discovery, as *Youth* represents it, constitutes an important lesson for John about writing, and is perhaps the first such lesson not to have come from Pound or Eliot: John learns the valuable lesson that art's power does not rest solely in truth, of which poetry is the language (91), but can be found in the (perhaps, by implication, deceitful) language of prose. More than a

supplement to *Burchell's Travels*, the book that John begins to imagine writing, and which eventually becomes *Dusklands*, offers an alternative to Burchell, one that will pre-empt and supplant Burchell's story of South Africa by setting itself further back in time than Burchell's own and, impossibly, making of *Dusklands* eighteenth-century explorer-narrator Jacobus Coetzee a precursor to Burchell. The young artist that discovers *Burchell's Travels* for the first time and, as a result, begins to think for the first time about writing a novel emerges from the scene as a precursor, in his own right, to the J.M. Coetzee who, more than two decades later, argued in "The Novel Today" that a novel can either supplement history or act as a rival to history and that, by choosing rivalry, a novel "operates in terms of its own procedures and issues its own conclusions," rather than operating "in the terms of the procedures of history and eventuat[ing] in conclusions that are checkable by history" (3).

What John's encounter with Burchell's writing itself eventuates in, then, is an awareness of possibility: namely, the possibility that writing about a place, writing a history of a place, offers freedoms that are not checked even by putatively immutable facts. The encounter with Beckett's novel is similarly an eye-opening experience for John. *Youth*'s account of this experience is illuminating: *Watt* is quite unlike Beckett's plays. There is no clash, no conflict, just the flow of a voice telling a story, a flow continually checked by doubts and scruples, its pace fitted exactly to the pace of his own mind. *Watt* is also funny, so funny that he rolls about laughing. When he comes to the end he starts again at the beginning.

> Why did people not tell him Beckett wrote novels? How could he have imagined he wanted to write in the manner of Ford when Beckett was around all the time? (155)

Beckett's lesson to John, the lesson John takes from his reading and re-reading of Beckett, is that there are no immutable rules prescribing what it ought to do and proscribing what it cannot. As Derek Attridge explains, Beckett's comic prose is "wary of the great themes in the literary tradition" (73); more than this, it is wary of the mode of expression by which those "great themes" are treated. The flow of a voice that John enjoys in Beckett's writing constitutes an alternative means of addressing the themes that have taken center stage in Western literature – including art, love, and sex, themes central to *Youth*, it is worth noting – that is noteworthy for its irreverence. Not the "stuffed shirt" that Ford is (155), Beckett demonstrates for John the possibility, particularly in prose, of producing genuine art that is not overbearingly serious or grim or dour. In favouring Beckett over Ford, John does what he has heretofore been unable to do – make one of Eliot's prized "fine discriminations" of his own (135).

The possibilities that Beckett opens up for John include the possibility that disagreement with one's primary literary influences need not make one a literarily minor gnat to be brushed aside and the possibility that the rules governing art can be broken. In this, the lessons that John takes from his encounter with Beckett complements those he takes from his encounter with Burchell. From the intermingling of these lessons, other possibilities begin to multiply, including those that John previously had considered but ultimately dismissed. The possibility, for instance, that Eliot might "be secretly dull to his depths" and that his claim "that the artist's personality is irrelevant to his work [is] nothing but a stratagem to conceal his own dullness" (116) gains added force, as does the possibility that Pound may have made a mistake in taste in finding Ford "such a fine writer" (136). New possibilities such as the idea that it is possible to be "on the premises of an ancient university,

hobnobbing with the great" (157) without surrendering to obsequious subservience begin to become apparent to John, as does the possibility that "logic is a human invention, not part of the fabric of being" (159) and that "many alternative logics…each just as good as the logic of *either-or*" are possible (160).

IV

The broader trajectory Coetzee charts in *Youth* is from prescription to possibility. The text takes us from John's almost unquestioning acceptance of fixed ideas concerning how and what an author ought to write impressed upon him by literary luminaries such as Eliot and Pound to his startled and amused awakening to what an author can do with language, via his encounter with Beckett's *Watt*. Similarly, an uncritical perspective on place gives way, in Coetzee's writing if not fully in the mind of John, to a more mature and nuanced perspective that, for Lars Engle, is "[p]art of the point of Coetzee's book": the idea that "if you want to be literary, the wrong place can turn out to be the right place and the wrong way can turn out to be the right one" (47).

Given the positive implications of this broader trajectory, which can be separated from the seemingly more chaotic nature of John's life in Cape Town and London as he lives and experiences it, the almost unrelieved gloom of the book's conclusion may seem mystifying at first glance. In an attempt to shed some light on this mystery, I want to suggest that the implication *Youth* carries is as follows: the movement from prescription to possibility that John makes is a necessary pre-condition to his finding his voice, but it is not sufficient to his becoming an author, or at least the particular author that Coetzee is. Indeed, the implication that I seek to draw out here is that, for Coetzee in *Youth*, the larger movements from Point A to Point

B that take place within the covers of the book, from Cape Town to London, from poetry to prose, and from prescription to possibility, are but parallel fragments of the larger arc that is Coetzee's life narrative. As readers familiar with Coetzee's biography will already know, that arc took him from South Africa to England, from England to the United States, and from the U.S. back, until relatively recently, to his native South Africa where he spent the majority of his writing life up to and including *Youth*. So too, as a writer, Coetzee's movement circles back on itself: if John learns in *Youth* to cast aside prescriptive ideas of what good writing should look like and to accept the myriad of possibilities of what can constitute good writing, the elder Coetzee, author of award-winning, increasingly canonized novels and of *Youth* itself, completes the circle by returning from what he can write to a modified notion of what he ought to be writing. What makes the elder Coetzee, guided by a sense of what type of fiction he ought to be writing, different from his younger counterpart John is that in Coetzee the *ought* of writing is generated internally: the lesson that *Youth* makes of an author's life, in a text that is deeply skeptical of lessons but full of them all the same, is that the freedom that is an author's to discover is not a freedom *from* rules, handicaps, or limitations but a freedom *to* engage with the world responsibly and ethically.

Notes

1. The three works have subsequently been republished collectively as *Scenes from Provincial Life*.

2. See Tonje Vold's "How to 'rise above mere nationality'" for a persuasive reading of *Youth* as a work "engaged in a dialogue with literary criticism of world literature" (34) that draws effectively on Casanova's book.

3. It is the third of Coetzee's autobiographical pieces, *Summertime*, that truly pushes the boundaries of autobiography in that its central conceit, that its author J.M. Coetzee has died and that someone else is writing a book about him, is obviously false. It is a striking feature of the autobiographical trilogy that the closer in time it gets to its author the more obviously further from factual truth it becomes.

4. Pieter Vermeulen argues that *Youth* ought not to be viewed as a "straightforward *Kuntslerroman*" as it contains the "double dismissal of the models of experience-as-enrichment and of the confessed insight into the vanity of experience" (56).

5. Delivered straightforwardly, the following sentiments and stereotypes would be cringe-worthy, indeed: "What would cure him, if it were to arrive, will be love. He may not believe in God but he does believe in love and the powers of love" (3); "The French are the most civilized people in the world" (75); "Without descending into the depths one cannot be an artist" (131). What is striking about this small sampling of John's thoughts and opinions is precisely just how *un*thinking they are: the thoughts are repetitions of the thoughts of others; the opinions borrowed from other sources. John's point of view is presented to us so that we may gauge not only the (presumed!) distance of the elder Coetzee from his younger self's sentimentality but also John's tendency to subscribe to hyper-conventional notions of what being an artist entails both in terms of behavior and attitude.

6. It is John, rather than Coetzee, who is rather free with his approval of, among other things, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament's "agitation" against "a nuclear strike [on Russia] in which American bases in Britain would participate" (84) and "the Cubans and…Fidel Castro" who "vow that, missiles or not, they will defend their revolution to the last drop of blood" (86)

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