CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My intention in writing about J. M. Coetzee’s work is perhaps most easily defined by negatives. Much excellent criticism of Coetzee—and, it might be said, some less-than-excellent criticism as well—puts his work in context: historical, political, literary, and theoretical. Laura Wright, in the introduction to her book Writing “Out of All the Camps,” gives a useful summary of the political and historical dimension of his work. Dominic Head’s Cambridge Introduction to J. M. Coetzee is particularly good on the links between Coetzee’s ideas and his creative work. David Attwell’s book J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing explores literary, historical, and political contexts with subtlety and sophistication. Michela Canepari-Labib in Old Myths, Modern Empires concentrates on explicating literary and theoretical “intertexts” to Coetzee’s novels. A myriad of other critics have discussed the work in relation to the major literary theorists and in their South African context.

However, it was not until I read Derek Attridge’s J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading and his other essays on Coetzee that I found a critic with whom I felt I shared an interest in trying to understand how Coetzee
uses narrative form and how the reader experiences the text, rather than regarding it as “an object whose significance has to be divined” (Attridge, “Against Allegory” 67). One is caught by something unique and valuable in art, and one feels the urge to explain its effects. It is all too easy to become caught up in explication of what the artist means to say, though this often misses the point and fails to account for one’s experience of the work. As Attridge points out in his discussion of *Waiting for the Barbarians*,

> Once we attend to the details of our encounter with the novel, these seem far in excess of the allegorizations we are tempted to produce—and more explanatory of our enjoying and prizing of the novel than the political, historical, or moral truths that we can apprehend perfectly well without Coetzee’s aid. (“Against Allegory” 71)

Coetzee’s novels are often described as “novels of ideas” because of their undeniable intellectual force. However, the ideas in his novels are, significantly, always embodied and tested up to and beyond their limits in a suffering, mortal being, and the language and narrative forms in which they are expressed are constantly interrogated.

So, I am not interested in examining the “what” or even the “why” of Coetzee’s work in any detail, although such questions inevitably arise from time to time in the following pages. I want to discover the “how”: whence does Coetzee’s work derive its power? A discussion of themes, influences, and allegorical meanings, it seems to me, tends to bleach out the experience of reading, and this experience is surely the reason for choosing to read Coetzee. An allegorical or thematic reading often ignores style, language, point of view, and narrative structure. Sometimes linguistic analysis can be brought to the service of such a reading. John Douthwaite’s articles on *Disgrace*, for example, provide some interesting insights into Coetzee’s use of language, choice of names, and so on, although this approach can lead to some dubious interpretations when taken too literally.

I am also not concerned to any great degree in this book with questions of influence, either generally or in specific cases where books are
clearly based on the works of earlier writers—Defoe, Dostoevsky, Kafka, and so on. I tend to agree with Nadine Gordimer when she writes, “I would...raise an eyebrow at, if not take issue with, critical contention that the difficulties of Coetzee’s novels require that the reader shall have read the same books the author has” (Preface x–xi). Once again, a catalogue of intertexts says nothing about Coetzee’s power and value as a writer.

Writing about a writer with Coetzee’s ferocious intellect and breadth of reference is daunting. When novelist Paul Auster, speaking at Writers’ Week in Adelaide in 2008, remarked that he is stimulated to write about things he does not understand, I felt this explained my wish to write about Coetzee. His books are endlessly fascinating because they are not finally explicable: a residue of mystery remains. It is for this reason that much of my criticism is tentative and open-ended. Dominic Head notes how Coetzee’s novels

wilfully resist any critical attempt to master or reduce. This means that the element of misrepresentation that is evident in all criticism is, perhaps, highlighted most especially in criticism of Coetzee’s novels. And this may sound like a particular hostage to fortune at the beginning of an introductory volume of this kind; but it does give me the opportunity to place stress on the need for openness in the reading of a novel by Coetzee, even while acknowledging the difficulty of sustaining that openness. (Cambridge xi)

I read this passage just as I was preparing my final draft of this book and found it heartening. As Attridge says, “If Coetzee’s novels and memoirs exemplify anything, it is the value (but also the risk) of openness to the moment and to the future, of the perhaps and the wherever” (“Against Allegory” 79). The kind of reading both Attridge and Head recommend brings the focus back to the text and cannot be separated from it.

The power of narrative to grip the reader’s attention and wrench one away from the demands of everyday life has little to do with political messages or literary influences. This question of the power of the writer is one that Coetzee revisits often and has perhaps not entirely resolved in his own mind. He has consistently resisted requests to interpret his
own work. His discomfort at being thought a powerful writer was evident in his interview with Tony Morphet in 1987: “‘Successful author’ is a barbed phrase, here, a highly barbed phrase. … In this interview, I am being installed in a position of power—power, in this case, over my own text” (Morphet 462). *Foe* and *Master of Petersburg* engage quite directly with the dangers of authorial power; *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, perhaps, deal more with its limits: the writing personae in the later novels, although eminent, have not achieved the pinnacle of success and recognition in the same way Coetzee has. But the kind of power that I have in mind is not the power that an author arrogates to himself, but the power that emanates from writing like Coetzee’s. The strength and force of his vision compels the reader to face squarely whatever he presents, however appalling, knowing that the writer is also appalled but that he has nevertheless resisted the temptation to avert his eyes or to find consolation in ideology or theory.

In the following seven chapters, I have tried several approaches to Coetzee’s narratives. Chapter 2 examines the type of resistance to be found in his work, a resistance which seems to have little basis in a political belief or a rational philosophy of justice. I chart the evolution of Coetzee’s public position on politics and writing and look at how his reluctance to claim power or to place trust in political solutions has been manifested in his books. In chapter 3, I trace the effects of Coetzee’s choice of point of view in each of his books: how it interacts with questions of complicity and impressions of realism, how it relates to the subject matter and characters he is dealing with in each case. I consider aspects like the sex of the various narrators and the level of identification which is possible between Coetzee and his alter egos, as well as the simple distinction between first- and third-person narrators and the rhetorical position of each book.

Chapter 4 is an exploration of the place of the comic arts in Coetzee’s work. This is a subject which has routinely been dismissed by critics who have failed to discern any humor in the novels. My contention is that a sense of the ridiculous and absurd is implicit in much of Coetzee’s narrative prose and can be seen in the underlying structure of all his books.
Chapter 5 concerns his use of language and languages: the choice of tenses, the surprising flights of imagery to be found amidst the taut elegance of his narrative style, and also the multilingual sensibilities he shares with many of his characters, not excluding the nonverbal language of music.

In the next two chapters, I follow a thematic approach. The subject of sex and desire has, it seems to me, attracted less critical attention than various other themes, and, of those critics who have considered it, most seem bent on extracting allegories of sexual politics, for example from *Disgrace*, which are not necessarily warranted by a close examination of the texts. In chapter 6, I dispute some of these readings and suggest some other ways of considering the subject. Chapter 7 looks at another uncomfortable aspect of Coetzee’s books: his treatment of the bond between parents and children. Children can be significant as either presences or absences in the novels; parents or parent figures are often rivals or oppressors. Childhood itself has many shades of meaning, in memory or imagination, and real children often fail to fulfill the roles projected by hopeful adults, despite their potency as symbols of the future.

In the last chapter, I turn my attention to the endings of Coetzee’s narratives in the belief that the endings inevitably color all that comes before. My aim is to see how the choice of conclusion—time, place, point of view—contributes to the possible meanings and impressions left by each book. Many of these endings are enigmatic and resist interpretation: the end of *Disgrace* is particularly puzzling and has provoked some ingenious critical attempts at explication. Again, my hope is to see not what these endings signify but how they operate to project the reader’s attention back to the rest of the book.

Rita Barnard warns, when discussing the final scene of *Disgrace*, that “it is essential that we do not, as it were, try to beat it into convenient shape with a critical shovel” (223). The temptation of wielding a critical shovel, or “of triumphantly tearing the clothes off its subject and displaying the nakedness beneath” (*DP* 106), is inimical to the subtleties of Coetzee’s art. When I have failed to resist this temptation, I hope I have been tentative enough to be spared from accusations of violence and triumphalism.
In the 1980s, when it seemed that the situation in South Africa would never improve, debate raged about the responsibility of South African novelists to act as witnesses to and opponents of apartheid. Some believed that white writers, especially, should use their privileged position in the fight. Nadine Gordimer was prominent among those who felt it was essential to be, in J. M. Coetzee’s words, a “stripper-away of convenient illusions and unmasker of colonial bad faith” (“Awakening” 7) in the realist convention, rather than a spinner of postmodern metafolios.

Gordimer, born in 1923, was by then already a major figure on the world literary scene. Her first book was published in 1949, and by 1980, she had produced seven novels and nine volumes of short stories. She had won the Booker Prize in 1974 for The Conservationist. Coetzee, born in 1940, was a relative newcomer. His first novel, Dusklands, was published in 1974, and his first Booker win came in 1983 for his fourth, Life & Times of Michael K. Reviewing the novel in the New York Review, Gordimer complained that “while it is implicitly and highly
political, Coetzee’s heroes are those who ignore history, not make it.” She went on:

[T]his is a challengingly questionable position for a writer to take up in South Africa, make no mistake about it. The presentation of the truth and meaning of what white has done to black stands out on every page, celebrating its writer’s superb, unafraid creative energy as it does; yet it denies the energy of the will to resist evil. That this superb energy exists with indefatigable and undefeatable persistence among the black people of South Africa—Michael K’s people—is made evident, yes, heroically, every grinding day. It is not present in the novel. …

A revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions rises with the insistence of the song of cicadas to the climax of this novel.

I don’t think the author would deny that it is his own revulsion. … The organicism that George Lukács defines as the integral relation between private and social destiny is distorted here more than is allowed for by the subjectivity that is in every writer. (“Idea” 6)

Coetzee is not combative. He seems not to enjoy arguing and prefers to leave interpretation of his work to others. He told Tony Morphet in 1983 that he had “no wish to enter the lists as a defender of Michael K” (Morphet 459). However, he has responded directly to Gordimer’s objections:

What kind of model of behavior in the face of oppression was I presenting? Why hadn’t I written a different book with (I put words in her mouth now) a less spineless hero?

To a reader taking this line, much of the text of Michael K is just one fancy evasion after another of an overriding political question: how shall the tyranny of apartheid be ended?…

How do I respond to such readers?

One writes the books one wants to write. One doesn’t write the books one doesn’t want to write. The emphasis falls not on one but on the word want in all its own resistance to being known. The book…in the heroic tradition, is not a book I wanted-to-write, wanted enough to be able to bring off, however much I might have
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wanted to have written it—that is to say, wanted to be the person who had successfully brought off the writing of it.

What, then, do I want-to-write? A question to prospect, to open up, perhaps in the present dialogue, but not to mine, to exploit. Too much of the fictional enterprise depends on it. Just as it is not productive to discover the answer to the question of why one desires: the answer threatens the end of desire, the end of the production of desire. (DP 207–208)

Coetzee is clear that he has no argument with those who cleave to the heroic tradition. He has always admired Nadine Gordimer—in 1978, he said, “I read Nadine Gordimer because I think she’s extraordinarily accomplished” (Watson 22), although he has reservations about her difficulty in accepting “that stories finally have to tell themselves, that the hand that holds the pen is only the conduit of a signifying process” (DP 341). He told David Attwell that he regarded it “as a badge of honor to have had a book banned in South Africa, and even more of an honor to have been acted against punitively. … This honor I have never achieved nor, to be frank, merited” (DP 298).

Nevertheless, in his most direct contribution to the debate of the 1980s, his 1987 address in Cape Town titled “The Novel Today,” he complains that “in South Africa the colonisation of the novel by the discourse of history is proceeding with alarming rapidity” owing to the “intense ideological pressure” of the time (3). He is at pains to point out that storytelling and history are both discourses, neither of which has a monopoly on the representation of reality, and

no matter what it may appear to be doing, the story may not really be playing the game you call Class Conflict or the game called Male Domination or any of the other games in the games handbook. While it may certainly be possible to read the book as playing one of those games, in reading it in that way you may have missed something. You may have missed not just something, you may have missed everything. (4)

There is a connection between the open-mindedness Coetzee is recommending here to readers and the kind of open-minded, nonanalytical
approach he finds necessary for the “fictional enterprise.” As a superb literary critic himself, he knows the enterprise from both sides and is wary of confusing the two roles. The deadening hand of reductionism in reading has its twin in the author’s attempt to self-censor or to direct stories towards a moral or political goal rather than letting them “tell themselves.”

One thing that may be missed by readers looking for political “games” or messages in Coetzee’s work is “a certain spirit of resistance” which he hopes is “ingrained in my books” (Morphet 464). This resistance to cooption or interpretation is linked to his feelings about freedom, which I take to be absolutely basic to all his work:

To be a herald you would have to have slipped your chains for a while and wandered about in the real world. I am not a herald of community or anything else…I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations—which are shadows themselves—of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light. I do not imagine freedom, freedom *an sich*; I do not represent it. Freedom is another name for the unimaginable. (*DP* 341)

The chains that his people have slipped are to a large extent representations imposed on them by others. Derek Attridge points out that

the task Coetzee seems to have set himself is to convey the resistance of these figures to the discourses of the ruling culture…and at the same time to find a means of representing the claims they make upon those who inhabit this culture. (*J. M. Coetzee* 13)

The figures to which Attridge is alluding here are Coetzee’s “others”—Michael K, the barbarians, Vercueil in *Age of Iron*. However, resistance of those characters who might be plausibly identified to some extent with the author himself is no small part of Coetzee’s vision, especially in his most recent books. A consistent refusal to be enlisted into civil society on its own terms can be found in *Disgrace*, *Elizabeth Costello*, and *Slow Man*, as well as his three fictional memoirs, *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*. 