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Allegories of the Bioethical: Reading J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*

Stuart J. Murray

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Abstract This essay reads J.M. Coetzee's novel, *Diary of a Bad Year*, as an occasion to problematize contemporary bioethical (and neoliberal) paradigms. Coetzee's rhetorical strategies are analyzed to better understand the "scene of address" within which ethical claims can be voiced. Drawing on Foucault's Socratic understanding of ethics as the self's relation to itself, self-relation is explored through the rhetorical figure of catachresis. The essay ultimately argues that the ethical voice emerges when the terms—terms by which I relate to myself, to others, to my own body, and to the bodies of others—are themselves subject to catachrestic refiguration.

Keywords Bioethics · Catachresis · J.M. Coetzee · Michel Foucault · Rhetoric

Introduction

On September 12, 2011, an ethically freighted exchange took place at a G.O.P. presidential debate. In the pages of the *New York Times*, Paul Krugman summarizes the event as follows:

CNN's Wolf Blitzer asked Representative Ron Paul what we should do if a 30-year-old man who chose not to purchase health insurance suddenly found himself in need of 6 months of intensive care. Mr. Paul replied, "That's what freedom is all about—taking your own risks." Mr. Blitzer pressed him again, asking whether "society should just let him die."

And the crowd erupted with cheers and shouts of "Yeah!" (2011)

This troubling exchange represents some of the problems a neoliberal worldview poses for bioethics. It is not merely the cool calculation of Ron Paul's "freedom" or the cruelty of the crowd. Their speech is subtended by a pervasive public discourse of hyper-individualism, privatization, and a faith in deregulated free market economies. Under this discourse, ethics and social costs have become increasingly abstract and unthinkable; community, the public good, and the welfare of others has been supplanted by individual risk and responsibility. More

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troubling still, in some respects, Ron Paul and his audience are curiously *aligned* with the tenets of mainstream bioethics, insofar as bioethics privileges respect for autonomy and self-determination and makes of these the basis of human dignity and ethical decision-making. Indeed, taking your own risks *is* what freedom is all about—when freedom and autonomy are instrumentalized in neoliberal terms. Responding to this fictional case, then, we might even say that by letting this man die, we are obeying the dominant principles that inform the practice of bioethics today (Beauchamp and Childress 2009). Namely, we have respected his “autonomy,” and we have “done no harm” (though he “freely” harms himself); and if we define “justice” as the safeguarding of individual rights and liberties, then, in a perverse turn, we might even say that we have “benefited” him.

The political subject as Ron Paul describes him—an individual presumably “free” to take his own risks—is responsible for the conditions of his own life and responsible unto death. But this neoliberal subject lacks the means to question the conditions of his life, for those conditions are thought to belong to him as well, even as these terms precede and exceed him. I suspect that this man’s experience would tell a different story: the story of a subject divided, the story of a subject whose illness, decline, and possible death cannot be privatized. Where is the voice of bioethics in this scene? Whose, the voice of political right? To whom is it spoken? And whence does it emerge? The fictional 30-year-old man seems to have no voice. Under what conditions could he and others like him speak? And how might we rethink bioethics discourse as a condition for such speech? This essay takes the problematic social scene of bioethics and develops a reading of J.M. Coetzee’s novel, *Diary of a Bad Year*, as a framing device. In the reading of Coetzee’s novel, I claim, we might begin to think differently about bioethics: not by importing some ethical “content” from which to advance propositional claims (literary reading is incommensurable with such a project) but to begin to read bioethics itself as a matter of textual form. This is not to say that bioethics is entirely fictional; however, it is to say that bioethics is a matter of relationships, of language, of narrative form, voice, and context. Coetzee’s text provides an occasion for thinking through these dimensions of ethical relationship and responsibility.

Literature has long been understood to hold ethical import. Literary texts ostensibly allow us to inhabit the subject position of another person, to live for a moment in intimate proximity with that character’s inner life. Through identification, we might be said to think the thoughts of the other, with the other. Martha Nussbaum describes this as the literary imagination: “the ability to imagine what it is like to live the life of another person who might, given changes in circumstance, be oneself or one of one’s loved ones” (1995, 5). And Nussbaum argues passionately for the ethical utility of the novel, particularly in the field of law. I take a different tack: this essay argues for the ethical value of the novel in the field of bioethics. Specifically, I am not concerned with the reader’s identification or empathy with the novel’s characters—identity too quickly returns us to the notion of autonomy, and bioethics cannot originate here. Indeed, I have chosen to read *Diary of a Bad Year* in part because it is difficult to identify with the characters, and this “failure” is productive because ethics begins where self-identification stumbles on its limits. The other is not an alter ego but is to some extent unassimilable, even as we remain responsible for this other and must constitute him or her in such a way that we can hear an ethical call. Coetzee’s novel dramatizes this relationship; its rhetorical form forces the reader to constitute textual fragments and the significance of the relationships they represent. Thus, the novel is of value for bioethics, I contend, not just because it touches on bioethical themes (illness, senescence, care) but because its rhetorical form demands that the reader read and think in ways that summon up different ways to think and speak the bioethical. That is, the novel calls for a style of thought that would interrupt traditional and institutionalized bioethics discourse and help us to think ethics otherwise, in a more human and humane idiom.

Diary of a Bad Year cannot, in any straightforward sense, be called an allegory for bioethics. My title relies on a catachresis of sorts, a purposive violence to conventional uses of “allegory” and “bioethics.” I hope to upset the urge to treat allegory or bioethics themselves as substantives, nouns, or knowable objects. It is not the case that “the ethical” is somehow objective and knowable, existing prior to or “behind” an allegorization that would more or less faithfully represent it as a “case” to be studied. As Derek Attridge has argued apropos of Coetzee’s oeuvre, we ought to resist or be “against allegory,” if by allegory we mean the impulse to seek “beyond” the text, “to treat elements in the text as symbols or metaphors for broader ideas or entities” (2004, 39). My purpose is to seek “within” rather than “beyond” the text, to “allegorize” the rhetorical scene within which the ethical address takes form—to engage the enabling conditions under which broader ideas or entities, symbols or metaphors will appear to the reader as exigent, meaningful, livable. Responding to a text that self-consciously agonizes over the act of authoring and authority, an ethic of reading becomes allegorical. In other words, I take inspiration from the reading of Coetzee’s text not so much for what it means but for what it does. Hence, my use of “the bioethical,” an incomplete locution and a properly adjectival form forced to function as a noun, intends to call into question the ethical address by withholding the purported object of bioethics—the substantive, the noun that this adjective, “ethical,” is supposed to qualify. For it is this qualification more than the object that is in question, or more precisely, it is the means, the rhetorical force, by which this adjectival work is accomplished, the epithet voiced: an *ethical* life, an *ethical* action.

What follows is a reading of Coetzee’s novel inspired in part by Michel Foucault’s (2005) late understanding of ethics as the self’s relation to itself (*un rapport à soi*), which I characterize as a rhetorical relation in which the terms of the subject are themselves at stake—terms that precede and exceed us but terms for which we are responsible all the same. The purpose is to perform a reading across the novel’s multiple voices and textualities, to suggest that this crossing itself is both allegorical and fruitful, ethically. I demonstrate how the novel’s readers, just as its characters (who are also readers in their own right), undergo a struggle to account for the constitution of their ethical subjectivity in relation to the other’s body and the other’s text, even as body and text falter and commingle. This problem is germane to the study of bioethics, I suggest, because we find analogous incommensurabilities in the biomedical sphere where the language of biomedicine—presumed to be originary, often violently imposing its norms as scientific “truth”—confronts the phenomenology of illness, death, and human disaster.

As a whole, this essay is neither intended as a contribution to a growing body of Coetzee criticism, much of it on ethics (e.g., Anker 2008; Attridge 2004; Leist and Singer 2010), nor will it qualify as bioethics in the conventional, institutionalized sense of the term. Instead, the essay ventures a rhetorical approach to bioethics, an attempt to theorize the ethical subject through an interdisciplinary reflection on the rhetorical scene—on those conditions within which the ethical subject might be said to emerge. As Judith Butler (Butler 2005; Murray and Butler 2007) has argued, we cannot fully account for the terms of our emergence as ethical subjects either fictionally or nonfictionally; at the same time, we must nevertheless be bound by and held accountable for these terms and the ways in which they constitute us as responsible subjects in the world. But how can we do so in good faith? That is, like the 30-year-old man in the case above, how can we be responsible for the conditions of possibility of our own emergence, for those conditions that precede and exceed us, when our experience, our destiny, is to suffer, to fall ill, to decline, and to die? How, from this lonely and destitute position, might one venture an ethical claim? And who, or what body, will have the moral authority to speak, when that speech is marked by senescence, loneliness, and death, and marked, moreover, and from the start, by the failure of language to tether the subject to some legible origin?

Rhetorical form in *Diary of a Bad Year*

Diary of a Bad Year is a polyphonic text, most pages divided into two or three sections separated by horizontal lines, each section its own voice. The top section comprises a collection of short essays written by the 72-year-old author-protagonist who is referred to as “JC” or sometimes as “Señor C,” “El Señor,” “Juan” or, simply, “C.” We learn that JC’s brief essays are destined for publication at a German press in a book entitled, *Strong Opinions*, in which he and five other “eminent writers pronounce on what is wrong with today’s world” (Coetzee 2008, 21).¹ The other two sections on the page read, more or less, as first-person narratives written in the form of a personal diary, voiced by JC himself and by the character Anya, a 29-year-old woman who instantly becomes the object of his erotic desire. JC quickly persuades Anya to work for him, transcribing his essays for publication. The essays in Part One of the novel, “Strong Opinions: 12 September 2005–31 May 2006,” deal with contemporary philosophical, political, and ethical problems announced by such chapter headings as: “On the origins of the state”; “On anarchism”; “On democracy”; “On Machiavelli”; “On terrorism.” What follows in Part Two of the novel, which is called “Second Diary,” are “a gentler set of opinions” (145), written on Anya’s suggestion, because she finds JC’s strong opinions to be too old-fashioned and overbearing.

In marked contrast to JC’s opinion essays, particularly those in Part One, the novel’s first-person narratives are somewhat more typical of the novelistic genre in voice, tone, and content: JC’s infatuation with Anya, Anya’s growing friendship with him and her increasingly strained relationship with her neoliberal investment consultant boyfriend, Alan, and with the dynamic among all three—in short, personal matters and the “metaphysical ache” of desire, flesh (7). And yet there is no clear “inner voice” that belongs either to Anya or to JC: we are the projected readers of his *essays*, and we are the imaginary readers of both Anya’s and JC’s personal *diaries*—the written word, rather than the spoken word, stylized as writings that are often self-consciously anxious *about* writing. We are aware of the interface, and while we are privy to their written words, we do not forget that we are reading these characters’ thoughts, not “listening” to them from the inside, as it were. There is no novelistic ruse that we have direct access to their inner lives, no ready identification. When there is a direct address, it is described, recounted as a past event, or it is an apostrophization, and we must either trust or doubt the author’s description, veracity, or memory. The novel’s sections are also inherently dialogical: Anya’s diary comments on JC’s “Strong Opinions,” for example, and both Anya and JC recount Anya’s criticism of JC’s essays and their conversations on the subjects they treat. But JC confesses to his diary (and to us) that his opinions have “softened” under Anya’s influence. We see these effects when we read the “soft opinions” in Part Two of the novel. And we eventually learn—through a letter written from Anya to JC, recounted by JC in his diary—that JC’s “soft opinions” were never published but that he sent a copy of them to Anya along with a copy of the published book, *Strong Opinions* (193). Were these intended for Anya’s eyes only, written for her and her alone? Their tone sharply contrasts the opinions in Part One: they are personal, even sentimental, with chapter headings such as: “A dream”; “My father”; “The kiss”; “On the erotic life”; “On ageing”; “On the writing life”; and “On compassion.” They do not “pronounce on what is wrong with today’s world” but are written to share joys and sorrows, a self-reflexivity and a suffering that finds the courage to speak only, one imagines, in the ethical embrace of another.

While the novel’s sections are dialogical, there is no clear or necessary correlation between them. Indeed, there is no narrative voice distinct from the characters’ writings, no “inner voice” to invite a readerly identification, no god’s-eye view. The texts are fragments, traces of distinct subjectivities positioned below the public, authorial voice of JC, “eminent writer” of “Strong

Opinions.” Each section opens onto the gap between life and text, and this distance is multiplied as we read across sections and in dialogue with the reader. And while each on its own tells a more or less coherent story, read together, we often doubt that coherence. It is at times difficult to imagine that the author of “Strong Opinions” is really JC, author of the diary; it is difficult to see JC without at once seeing Anya’s perspective and vice versa. The reader is forced either to assume the role of narrator or to suspend this urge and dwell in ambivalence. Moreover, the materiality of the novel is consistent with its textual strategies to displace agency: individual sections often cut across sentences, pages, and chapters, leaving it to the reader to interpret the significance of Coetzee’s textual placement. Indeed, the first ethical decision the reader confronts is *how* to read this text: do I read the sections of each chapter sequentially, in their entirety, flipping back and forth between pages and sections, or do I read one page at a time, forced to keep in mind three distinct but interrelated fragments, sometimes cut off mid-sentence, and to piece them together as a unified narrative?

Unsurprisingly, theorists of the novelistic genre have been intrigued by the novel’s form, since it upsets generic conventions and the reader’s expectations or rules of engagement (see McDonald 2010). Are JC’s “opinions” those of Coetzee himself (e.g., Attwell 2010; Dancygier 2010; McDonald 2010)?² Certainly Coetzee stands in relation to his fictional counterpart, JC, who is also an author and who inhabits a troubled relation with his own texts. Admitting Coetzee’s voice into the novel adds yet another layer of ambivalence. Should we read *Diary* (2008), together with *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002), and *Summertime* (2009), as the third of four fictionalized autobiographical memoirs, only set some time in the future (JC is 72, Coetzee was 67 at the time the novel was published)? The search for some true and legible origin rather misses the point. Jonathan Lear correctly suggests, I think, that Coetzee’s textual strategy is “to defeat ersatz ethical posturing and promote genuine ethical thought in his reader” (2010, 68), though I am less persuaded by Lear’s claim that *Diary*’s sections are designed to reflect the three different parts of the Platonic soul (one could just as easily propose psychoanalytic or semiotic topographies). On my reading, *Diary*’s different parts stage a textual ambivalence that stands as a critical analogue to the subjective ambivalence of ethical life, to our relations with others as well as with the self. Certainly, to speak of “genuine ethical thought” will always beg the question of authenticity, but Coetzee’s novel offers no such closure, no meta-ethical position. The authorial voice is displaced, multiple, radically indeterminate. The authorial voice, the self, is in crisis—and this self-reflexivity marks a turn to ethics.

In a chapter of his strong opinions titled “On authority in fiction,” JC writes:

In the novel, the voice that speaks the first sentence, then the second, and so onward—call it the voice of the narrator—has, to begin with, no authority at all. Authority must be earned; on the novelist author lies the onus to build up, out of nothing, such authority. (149)

To what extent might fiction provide a space for invention, free from the burden of origins from which the subject is said to emerge, free to consolidate authority anew? Seeking to earn and to build up authority, the narrator’s voice emerges *ex nihilo*, and yet we learn from “the voice that speaks the first sentence, then the second” that this self-same voice belongs to a subject whose identity is always irrevocably circumscribed in advance. The novel’s first sentences:

Every account of the origins of the state starts from the premise that “we”—not we the readers but some generic we so wide as to exclude no one—participate in its coming into being. But the fact is that the only “we” we know—ourselves and the people close to us—are born into the state; and our forebears too were born into the state as far back as we can trace. The state is always there before we are. (3)

These words challenge the idea that authority can be earned because there is no emergence *ex nihilo*. The first sentences of *Diary of a Bad Year* (the text of a book inside a book) displace the agency of the author (JC and Coetzee) and interpellate the reader into the subjectivity of a collective “we,” a classic *mise-en-abîme*. The narrator’s or novelist-author’s crisis of authority is our own. It is impossible to account for the origins of the state and thus impossible to distinguish ourselves from it, to claim authority. And yet, as much as the state precedes us, founded *in illo tempore*, we—“some generic we”—are nevertheless responsible for it, implicated in and answerable for its effects. This is perhaps akin to the fatalistic responsibilities of the political subject as Ron Paul and his audience—certainly a “generic we”—understand him. As Coetzee points out, in the Hobbesian myth “our descent into powerlessness was voluntary” (3). But immediately he adds, paradoxically, that this is not something “we” ourselves have voluntarily chosen: the “choice” is now “irreversible” (4). The ethico-political subject dreamed to be the wellspring of dignity and goodness, autonomous and self-determining, turns out to be a fiction purchased on a myth of origins. After all, the state comprises the institutions (such as politics, medicine, bioethics) that sanctify the terms or tropes in and through which we understand ourselves, conceptualize our relation to the state, and govern our relations with others. The state legitimizes the norms by which we measure and regulate our ethical existence. And the state’s terms are not originary, even as they preside over our own individual origins, baptize us: “We are born subject” (4). Thus, the accounts we give of the state and the accounts we give of ourselves, will be fragmentary, prefabricated, and in a profound sense, fictional.

But this is not a closed economy. The novel’s opening lines, above, involve a strategic contradiction that presages the rhetorical play of the novel, its polyvocality, and the ethical promise of reading otherwise. To make sense, the novel’s opening lines presume a rhetorical distinction, however provisional, between we who ask and the “we” who is asked after. If we are born into the state, if we are subject, we nevertheless do not coincide with it perfectly, its terms are not quite our own, they are not quite irrevocable. The fact is that we ask: a moment of self-reflexivity, one that helps to forge the conditions—the scene—in which we question our own subjective constitution, as an ethical demand. Herein lies a productive ambivalence in our subjectivity, a doubling that is doubled again at the site of Coetzee’s narrative itself. For the voices that speak in and across the novel—and not least, the reader’s own as she is forced to navigate the intersecting texts—suggest a different approach for the understanding of ethical subjectivity and foster a different methodological strategy for its study. The act of reading dramatizes the inherent, irresolvable ambivalence of subjectivity, which cannot be dismissed as the temporal or epistemological distinction between two (or more) voices but must be understood quintessentially as the problem of ethics: the ethical obligation to question the conditions—the scene—of our own emergence and to question those institutions (again, such as politics, medicine, bioethics) that sanctify the terms or tropes in and through which we understand ourselves, conceptualize our relation to the state, and govern our relations with others. As Foucault writes, the subject “is not a substance”; rather, the subject “is a form, and this form is not primarily or always identical to itself” (1997, 290). We might say that the ethical subject is not at one with itself, that it is fragmentary, a body that coincides neither with its desires nor with the accounts it would give of itself. And an ethical tension is manifest in this vital difference: one that emerges between who I am and who I can *say* that I am. And it is in this opening that the subject becomes a question for itself, the kind of subject who counts as an ethical being, riven by uncertainty, dwelling at the limit, or in the loss, of any epistemic or calculative certainty. This, then, is how Coetzee’s text begins to “allegorize” the rhetorical scene within which the ethical address takes form.

Catachresis and the care of the self

According to Attridge, an ethics of reading calls for a nonallegorical response to Coetzee's novel, one "that occurs as an event, a living-through or performing of the text that responds simultaneously to what is said, the way in which it is said, and the inventiveness and singularity (if there is any) of the saying" (2004, 60). It is through just such a performative reading of Coetzee's text that I locate an "allegory" for the bioethical: in the incommensurability of multiple voices and genres organized around suffering, sickness, senescence, and, ultimately, death. For Attridge, the danger of allegory is that we too readily project our desires and our identifications into the text: in this light, reading allegorically is little more than "a reminder of what we already know only too well" (2004, 60). My use of "allegory" is catachrestic, an abuse of the term: I am attempting to allegorize the productive "failures" of those allegories we know only too well, to expose how they work, and to make this ethics of reading allegorical for a critical bioethics. I am deeply troubled that the exchange at the G.O.P. presidential debate, discussed above, might serve as a popular allegory for bioethics in the public sphere today. But for some, for too many, I imagine that the bioethical imperative is experienced through the forcibly imposed "freedom" to assume—to have always already assumed—one's own biological risks, to turn one's illness, decline, and death into something that is freely "chosen." In the neoliberal context, this is a story that we already know only too well. Instead, the event should haunt the ethical imagination; it should invite critical reflection on obedience, calculative reason, and risk-management, and it should return us to ourselves, slightly displaced, disoriented, sick at heart.

JC writes, "who is it who judges what sounds or does not sound right? Is it necessarily I ('I')?" (196). The question of judgment redounds upon the ambivalent "I," the distinction between who I am and who I can *say* that I am, between we who are asked and the "we" who are asked after, the saying and the said. These voices travel, hope to be received, and wait to be answered. Here we open onto a world in which the very terms of the self are at stake, a world in which it is not always clear who controls these terms, who has the authority to voice them, and what kind of world this will populate. Coetzee's novel obsesses over the question of authority and authorship, the crux of ethical studies, which begins, perhaps, with "a disquieting sense that the one I hear is not the one I call *myself*" (195). The reader shares this self-doubt as she inhabits the ethical tension between the characters' actions, their personal diary entries, the essay form, no less than the ways that these commingle. We interpret these relations and situate ourselves in relation to them. And each relation, variously and in its fashion, brings us into proximity with the human body in its singular capacity to suffer, to grow sick, and to die. Coetzee himself has commented on the importance of the body to his work. In an interview with David Attwell, he has said: "If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple ... standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not,' and the proof that it *is* is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt" (Coetzee and Atwell 1992, 248).

The body in pain "counters" then, but it does not resolve the endless trials of doubt that consume the ethical subject. And while it "counters" human doubt, negatively, this negation is nevertheless a "standard," as he says, whether we read this standard as a moral norm or, in its earlier sense, as a flag, a banner, a rallying-point, as for an advancing army. Significantly, the body appears in Coetzee's formulation here as a double negative: "the body is not 'that which is not'"—it appears as that which *cannot* fail to appear, or which *cannot* disappear, neither a subject in the world nor an object of the world. It is known in its irremediable pain, its suffering. And while we might say that bodies motivate much of the action in *Diary of a Bad Year*, bodies are never exactly objects of positive knowledge; rather, they index frustrated desire, failure, senescence, and death—the limits of human experience, power, and language.

We might say that pain simply *is*, while suffering is an ineffable ethic, a complex reaction to and relation with that pain. In suffering, the self is inescapably thrown back upon itself, in intimate proximity with itself.

Hannah Arendt underscores the rhetorical and ethical dimensions of the self-self relation that is relevant to my reading of the (bio)ethical scene that Coetzee's novel helps us to understand. In her essay, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," Arendt defines speech and thought as practically synonymous, conceived in terms of the subject's relation to itself: "Since Plato," she writes, "thinking has been defined as a soundless dialogue between me and myself" (2005, 8). "Philosophy is a solitary business," she continues, "and it seems only natural that the need for it arises in times of transition when men no longer rely on the stability of the world and their role in it" (2005, 9). In Plato's *Apology*, for example, Socrates's character is not exactly coincident with itself—he "speaks" to himself and describes this soundless dialogue, this relation, as follows: "It is a voice, and whenever it speaks it turns me away from something I am about to do, but it never encourages me to do anything" (1997, 31d, 29). It is, then, an ethical voice that "counters," non-prescriptively. And while Socrates argues at his trial that it is unjust to sentence him to death, he nevertheless concedes that this sentence is "right," even that it is "a good thing," because his inner voice does not oppose it: "for it is impossible," he says, "that my familiar sign did not oppose me if I was not about to do what was right" (1997, 40c, 35). In Butler's formulation, we might say that this voice demands that I "give an account of myself," but in following Emmanuel Levinas, Butler assumes that this account is given first to the Other, "even if the addressee remains implicit and unnamed, anonymous and unspecified" (2005, 36). For Arendt as for Socrates, however, the self's relation to itself is primary: "my conduct toward others will depend on my conduct toward myself" (2005, 96).

The terms of the self-self relation are ethical—a doing, an *ethos*—and not epistemological or metaphysical. These terms do not belong to the subject: they reference a gap in speech, a tension that is irreducible to self-knowledge, which is figured in Arendt through what she calls *appearance*. "I have always believed," Arendt writes, "that no one can know himself, for no one *appears* to himself as he appears to others" (2005, 7). She italicizes the first instance of the word "appears." Self-appearance takes place silently, invisibly, in inner *speech*—a catachrestic "appearance" and "speech" that echoes Coetzee's understanding of the body as that which is not "that which is not." It is the Socratic voice that speaks to ethical life. And it is an obligation to be-with oneself because I cannot get free of myself, I cannot stop up my ears to this inner speech, as it were. I am condemned to live with myself, an inalienable alienation: "if I do wrong," Arendt writes, "I am condemned to live together with a wrongdoer in an unbearable intimacy; I can never get rid of him" (2005, 90). We open onto a singularity that does not figure in a privatizing individualism, in calculative risk and rationality. It is a voice that "counters" the voice of the mob that condemns Socrates to death just as soon as it does the 30-year-old man without health insurance.

Reading Plato's *Alcibiades I*, Foucault characterizes the self-self relation, *auto to auto*, as an ethical "care of the self," *epimeleia heautou*. At stake is the manner in which the self relates to itself, a relation that shares little with the Cartesian tradition of epistemological self-doubt. Indeed, for Foucault speech is a central metaphor, and the voice is foregrounded. It is not a relation that privileges the subject-position of speaker in relation to her speech. Instead, it is ontologically prior to that, pointing to the rhetorical conditions of possibility in and through which something can be said, heard or understood—the scene that lends the address its meaningful form. In the Socratic texts, "care of the self" means caring for one's soul, rather than for one's worldly possessions, one's reputation, etc. As Foucault writes:

Not, then: "What kind of animal are you, what is your nature, how are you composed?"
but: "[What is] this relation, what is designated by this reflective pronoun *heauton*, what

is this element which is the same on both the subject side and the object side?" ... We must know what is *auto to auto*. (2005, 53)

Thus, it is not simply the *kind* of animal we as humans are, nor is it simply by virtue of some adjectival attribution: *rational* animal, *speaking* animal. The relation itself is primary, a relation of care (*epimeleia*), a care of the soul that is figured rhetorically in the Socratic texts as *khṛēsis*:

So you see when Plato (or Socrates) employs this notion of *khṛēsthai/khṛēsis* in order to identify what this *heauton* [self] is (and what is subject to it) in the expression “taking care of oneself,” in actual fact he does not want to designate an instrumental relationship of the soul to the rest of the world or to the body, but rather the subject’s singular, transcendent position, as it were, with regard to what surrounds him, to the objects available to him, but also to other people with whom he has a relationship, to his body itself, and finally to himself. (2005, 56–57)

While the term *khṛēsis* can be translated simply as “use,” Foucault insists on its more extended and polyvalent signification: an attitude, behavior, or, in the language of phenomenology, a comportment, an existential and directed engagement, or perhaps even a being-in-the-world. It is linked with *ethos*, one’s lived character and attitude. We are not speaking here of the sovereign subject conceived as a free agent operating on (and in) an objective, independent world; the Greeks had no such concept of subjectivity, no such picture of worldhood, which is one reason Foucault turned to them as a “countervoice” (to borrow one of Coetzee’s terms) to Cartesian subjectivity and the forms of ethics and politics allied with it. As JC writes, attacking instrumentalist thinking, “What Cartesian nonsense to think of birdsong as pre-programmed cries uttered by birds to advertise their presence to the opposite sex” (132). And while we may agree, we are so steeped in modern scientific conventions that it is difficult to see otherwise. JC’s rejoinder is poetic: “Each bird-cry is a full-hearted release of the self into the air, accompanied by such joy as we can barely comprehend. *It* says each cry: *It! What a miracle!* Singing liberates the voice, allows it to fly, expands the soul” (132).

To grasp *khṛēsis* in its extended, non-instrumentalizable sense, it is instructive to turn to the rhetorical figure of catachresis—commonly defined as the abuse or misuse of a word or expression, a forced use outside of its conventional context. Rhetorical catachresis, somewhat like Socratic *khṛēsis*, refers implicitly to the context or scene within which the particular “use” takes place. While catachresis is a figurative “misuse,” it is figured in such a way as to expose the conditions in and through which the proper or normative use has been authorized or condoned from the start. The catachresis therefore voices a relation beyond itself, and while the abuse must make implicit reference to the conventional use, it speaks to, discloses, the limitations of the convention. Its truth is irreducible to a literal or generalizable fact (strictly speaking, birds do not have “selves” to “release” into the air, they do not say “I,” they have no “soul,” and technically, they neither speak nor “sing”—strictly speaking, of course, but whose strictures?). *Khṛēsis*, in some sense, relies on catachresis, for it is through this figure of speech that an abuse gets played precisely so as to expose the context or the scene in which the norm as such is upheld. In Paul de Man’s formulation, catachresis “gives face to the faceless” (1986, 44). This figures a shift in ethical subjectivity towards my responsibility for those conditions that will uphold—or perhaps critique—the terms by which the self relates to itself, by which the self is bound to the state and to others, and in which these relations can be voiced. It is just this “uncannily double status” that characterizes catachresis, according to Andrzej Warminski: “the abuse of trope by catachresis is not a negation—it is an (improper) abuse symmetrical to (proper) use—but just its wearing away, wandering, *erring*: a permanent exile of sense from

which there is no return to the transfers of sense in metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and the like. In catachresis, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche begin to wander" (1987, lv).

The catachresis operates by exposing the limits of the norm by carrying us beyond these limits, into an exceptional world where the norm is no longer upheld. The logic of the norm becomes pale, if not absurd, and we wander without a stable point of reference, unable to respond to ethical questions—indeed, unable to comprehend the logic of their form. “Which is worse, the death of an albatross or the death of an insentient, brain-damaged infant hooked up to a life-support machine?” (205). Insofar as Coetzee’s (or JC’s) text concerns bioethics, it points to the absurdity of ethical questions when their form stubbornly obeys logical terms such as “better” or “worse” than. The ethical question, as with the figure of catachresis, is better or worse than *what?*, an abuse or misuse of *what?* It is impossible to say, since the norm recedes like the horizon as we approach it. And as I have argued, it is precisely the constitution of the norm as such—a question of its authorizing scene or context—that is a rhetorical accomplishment in its own right, and a fragile one at that. “As the abuse of all tropes, catachresis threatens to open up the topological system and keep it from constituting itself, closing itself off, *as a system*” (Warminski 1987, liv). Catachresis therefore disrupts the norm, exposes the norm’s constitutive violence—a disavowed violence that “normally” stabilizes the topological system in the name of the norm itself. Through catachresis, norms are destabilized, and the topological system—the symbolic order—is opened up like a wound. This is the inauguration of ethical reflexivity.

An ethics of the voice

Turning back to Coetzee’s novel, we should have a better understanding of the way the novel’s rhetorical form works both allegorically and catachrestically. Catachresis is a purposeful misuse, it is intentional, but its intentionality is rhetorical, it relies on a shared language, a shared social scene, and on a certain recognition of the play of language. We are faced with the crisscrossing of multiple voices and genres, our own included, organized around bodily suffering, sickness, senescence, and, ultimately, death. Indeed, it is in this play that we must locate catachrestic agency (a catachresis *of* traditional agency), which, like ethical agency, does not originate in the autonomous, self-determining subject. There is therefore a productive ambivalence across language when the topological system is destabilized: my words are mine, but they no more belong to me than they belong to you. To whose *body*, one might ask, do these words belong? Whose is the voice of suffering? The voice of the ethical demand?

We learn that JC has arthritis and likely suffers from Parkinson’s disease; he is losing fine motor skills, is probably incontinent. In the diary section of the chapter entitled, “On the body,” JC writes:

Last night I had a bad dream, which I afterwards wrote down, about dying and being guided to the gateway to oblivion by a young woman. What I did not record is the question that occurred to me in the act of writing: *Is she the one?*

This young woman who declines to call me by my name, instead calling me *Señor* or perhaps *Senior*—is she the one who has been assigned to conduct me to my death? If that is so, how odd a messenger, and how unsuitable! Yet perhaps it is the nature of death that everything about it, every last thing, should strike us as unsuitable. (59–61)

Above this, in the “strong opinions” portion of the text, we find a rather abstract treatment of the body, reflecting on the extent to which its various parts—leg, eye, brain, mouth, lips, teeth—can

be experienced as properly “belonging” to me. And the reader is offered a phenomenology of the suffering nonhuman animal body, far less abstract, which belies the way we normally speak:

We speak of the dog with the sore foot or the bird with the broken wing. But the dog does not think of itself in those terms, or the bird. To the dog, when it tries to walk, there is simply I am in pain, to the bird, when it launches itself into flight, simply I cannot. (59)

The reader is invited to reflect on the groundless conventions—the tropological system—by which we understand the body, experience it, and name its parts, and to read here a description of JC’s own ineffable suffering, which confronts the limits of language, and which does not let itself be accounted for or brought to account. Simultaneously, in the third portion of the chapter comprising Anya’s diary, the reader is privy to a quarrel between Anya and her boyfriend, Alan. Alan jealously accuses JC of having lecherous fantasies about Anya and writing about (as well as profiting from) them: “It is a means of exercising power over a woman when you can’t fuck anymore” (60), he says. But JC’s faith in the power of language is increasingly less certain as the story unfolds, and it would be hasty to equate authorship with phallic authority. He moves from strong opinions to less virile, “softer” ones: “I call them your Soft Opinions,” Anya writes, adding, “—I hope you don’t mind” (193).

It is thanks to Anya that JC begins to doubt his language, his mother tongue, and worries that his “strong opinions” might be perceived as quaint, out of date, without moral authority. “What has begun to change since I moved into the orbit of Anya,” JC writes, “is not my opinions themselves so much as my opinion of my opinions” (136). Are his ethical commitments old-fashioned in their insistence on unfashionable terms such as honor, shame, and piety? “The impious one brings down a curse upon his descendants; in return, his descendants curse his name” (51). Is it mere superstition to imagine our actions extending across space and time, to return in ways unforeseen, with the perlocutionary force of a malediction? Are we justified, today, in the modern world, a practical world, to speak of “the dishonour, the disgrace of being alive in these times” (140–41)? Are we—“some generic we”—not responsible, somehow, by virtue our very existence: condoning in our silence, complicit in our hesitations? Do we seek refuge in “the way of quietism, of willed obscurity, of inner emigration” (12), reassured that our responsibility extends only to the surface of our bodies, limited to what we have individually, autonomously, intentionally touched? Is a touch no more than this? We might say that for JC, ethics is unimaginable without the metaphysics of the curse—the performative utterance whose effects will visit punishment on future generations. The curse allows us to imagine an ethics beyond individualism: its authority is not ours to claim, its agency is in the saying, a performative speech-act. The wrongdoer is accountable not just for himself but for others in his family, his tribe, his community, now and in the time to come. “The curse comes into being at the moment when the man of power pauses and says to himself, *People say that, if I commit this act, I and my house will be cursed—shall I go ahead?* And then answers himself, *Pah! there are no gods, there is no such thing as a curse!*” (51).

In the “soft opinion” portion of the novel’s final chapter, “On Dostoevsky,” and with a nod to Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984) concept of polyphony at work in this text, JC offers a first-person gloss on Ivan Karamazov’s death in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, confessing that he found himself “sobbing uncontrollably” (223). Why, he asks, should this passage touch him so? While this experience might have occasioned a reflection on his own imminent death, he answers instead:

The answer has nothing to do with ethics or politics, everything to do with rhetoric. In his tirade against forgiveness Ivan shamelessly uses sentiment (martyred children) and

caricature (cruel landowners) to advance his ends. Far more powerful than the substance of his argument, which is not strong, are the accents of anguish, the personal anguish of a soul unable to bear the horrors of this world. It is the voice of Ivan, as realized by Dostoevsky, not his reasoning, that sweeps me along. (225)

It is by now too late for us to read Coetzee's (and JC's) text without being swept along by its personal accents of anguish, the voice of a soul (or souls) unable to account for the horrors of a world that we, too, share. We find little "reasoning" in the novel but rather, an indictment of Enlightenment reason and calculative thinking: "The presumption that any and every set of elements can be ordered leads, in the realm of moral questions, straight into a quagmire" (205). JC never answers why Ivan's anguish should move him to tears, if anguish is indeed the reason. Even so, JC's "soft opinions" figure a movement away from politics and toward rhetoric and story-telling, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. As Anya implores him, "Tell a few stories and you will come across as more human, more flesh and blood" (68). Though it appears that he writes these flesh and blood stories for her alone.

JC's diary portion of this concluding chapter is given over entirely to Anya, quoting the letter she has sent him from Brisbane, after leaving her boyfriend Alan. JC's voice is absent. And it is Anya's voice that closes the novel at the bottom of these pages. We learn that Anya has contacted Mrs. Saunders, who lives in the same block of flats as JC, and has asked Mrs. Saunders to let her know if JC takes ill, goes into hospital, or worse. These plans are made unbeknownst to JC, and she begs Mrs. Saunders's discretion. While the final passages are given over to Anya's voice, it is unclear to whom she speaks, when she says:

I will hold his hand. I can't go with you, I will say to him, it is against the rules. I can't go with you but what I will do is hold your hand as far as the gate. At the gate you can let go and give me a smile to show you are a brave boy and get on the boat or whatever it is you have to do. As far as the gate I will hold your hand, I would be proud to do that. And I will clean up afterwards. I will clean your flat and put everything in order. I will drop *Russian Dolls* and the other private stuff in the trash, so you don't need to have sinking thoughts on the other side about what people on this side will be saying about you. (226)

I will hold *his* hand. I can't go with *you*.... Despite the phrase, "I will say to him," in the sentences that follow, we feel a shift from indirect to direct address, we overhear a private conversation—*Russian Dolls* and other private stuff—and sense a hesitation before the novel's closing lines on the next page:

All that I will promise him, and hold his hand tight and give him a kiss on the brow, a proper kiss, just to remind him of what he is leaving behind. Good night, Señor C, I will whisper in his ear: sweet dreams, and flights of angels, and all the rest. (227)

In contrast to the curse as JC understands it—a metaphysical malediction—we have in this voice a benediction, a blessing, a body beyond the limits of human experience, power, and language. What is the voice of ethics here in the promise, the salutation? Whose voice speaks? And to whom is it spoken? It is uncertain if Anya speaks to herself, to JC, to some unknown listener or to us; it is uncertain how it will be received or if this even matters. It is an address to the dead. The voice itself seems to travel, to shift registers, contexts. The voice belongs to Anya and yet it is not entirely hers, for the final lines invoke Horatio's last words to Hamlet at his death, a death also troped as sleep: "Good night, sweet prince:/And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest." We may recall Hamlet's dying request to Horatio, his trusted friend, that he

live to tell his story: “If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart/Absent thee from felicity awhile,/ And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,/To tell my story” (*Hamlet*, Act 5, scene 2). Has Anya answered this call, to turn from felicity and draw her breath in pain, to tell JC’s story, to safeguard it? Is this an ethics of community, of the public good, where the voice travels, and is received, and is variously passed on, answered? This too is uncertain, for this is where the novel ends. At most we might say of the voice that, in this mortal moment, it speaks. But it does not emerge *ex nihilo*, and its authority is not its own. It speaks to tell the story of a life lived. It honors the dead.

Conclusion

While Coetzee’s novel is not a “case study” for bioethics, the reading of Coetzee’s novel, I have argued, provides an allegory for the bioethical, figuring for the reader a tropological scene in which the self’s relation to itself, and to others, is staged. The normative terms that define the ethical subject might, then, be grasped for the fragile rhetorical accomplishments that they are—and the constitutive functioning of politics, medicine, and bioethics might be opened to critique. This is no ethics of identity. Who voices the ethical demand, to whom, and in what (or whose) terms? By what (or whose) authority will that demand be recognized as “ethical,” so that we might, on this authority, hear this voice, know that we have been addressed, and judge whether our response can be deemed “ethical”?

In reading and speaking we are *doing* something though perhaps we are not “doing” bioethics in any straightforward sense. We may even be doing, performing, a kind of violence in the name of bioethics or in the service of neoliberal ideologies of rational choice and freedom and self-determination or autonomy, much as Ron Paul and his audience do, and with righteous zeal at that. I refuse this allegorization, ethically and politically. In reading and speaking, whether we are aware of it or not, we are consolidating the conditions of the bioethical—the conditions or scene in which this adjectival utterance, “ethical,” will qualify what we say or do *as* ethical. In so doing, we enter that discourse and serve either to reproduce it or to question it, to critique it. We cannot be neutral. My task here has been to disorient the narrow and institutionalized incarnations of bioethics, to suggest from a critical perspective that in reading and speaking about texts like Coetzee’s, we are summoned to different ways of thinking and speaking the bioethical. It is time for new allegories (from the Greek *allos*+*agoreuein*, to speak otherwise, differently—*allos*, and in the *agora*—publicly, politically). This turn to ethics happens, I have claimed, when the terms by which our own subjectivity is consolidated start to break down, when the tropological system fractures, when our bodies, in suffering, throw us back upon ourselves, too, and when we question ourselves as readers and speakers, as we must when we find ourselves in Coetzee’s rhetorical grip.

Ethics is not, then, an obedience to principles, an identity with or the apprehension of an “alter ego”—the extension of the “I” by analogy, the experience of your suffering as mine. We might say that ethics begins, rather, as it errs, in the catachrestic relation between me and myself, in a relation that is marked by a certain failure of my terms to avow or account for the self. Stated more schematically, the critical (bio)ethical impulse arrives in the moment in which the vital terms—terms by which I relate to myself, to others, to my own body, and to the bodies of others—are themselves subject to catachrestic refiguration. An ethical voice emerges from this mortifying space, speaking to, disclosing, the limits of our self-appropriation, telling us the ways in which we are bound to others, and ensuring, we might imagine, that our political ties are ethical ones, too. What sort of ethical and political speech could such finitude inaugurate?

Endnotes

¹ All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text.

² *Strong Opinions* may be a play on Vladimir Nabokov's discursive writings published under the same name. Both Coetzee and Nabokov are well known for disavowing any interest in sociopolitical concerns, and yet both deploy literature to this end. I thank Dana Draguniou for this insight. For a discussion of Nabokov's "supreme indifference," see Draguniou (2011).

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