

“He and His Man”: Allegory and Catachresis in J. M. Coetzee’s Nobel Lecture

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The audience that turned out for Coetzee’s Nobel Lecture in Stockholm in December 2003 must have wondered what on earth the new laureate thought he was doing. Instead of the customary distillation of a life lived for or through literature (in 1991 his countrywoman Nadine Gordimer had offered “Writing and Being”), Coetzee chose to read an odd little story ostensibly narrated by Robinson Crusoe – a character, as everyone knows, from a trilogy of novels published in the early eighteenth century. But those who had followed Coetzee’s novelistic career might on reflection have recognized “He and His Man” as a reprise of some of the writer’s most abiding concerns, most notably through its staging of a phenomenon that appears to be present – like a genetic defect, an original sin – in each and every act of writing and interpretation. Following Foucault and others, I have chosen to characterize this phenomenon as catachresis (Latin: *abusio*; English: “misuse”),¹ although at times a variety of other terms – such as displacement, slippage, figuration, allegory – insist on their utility for accuracy’s sake and will be employed. While it is true that this is by no means the first time that this aspect of language has been remarked, it is also true that, insofar as every instance of it is unique and not identical with any other, the term “catachresis” is itself a catachresis. Thus neither its staging in “He and His Man” nor the reader’s response to it – although the latter is, in a sense to be elaborated below, essentially otiose – involve simple repetition.

Coetzee has since 1996 been telling stories from the lecture podium, most of them featuring the character Elizabeth Costello.² But he first voiced his unease at being required to speak *as a novelist* in the discursive prose of the lecture format as far back as 1987, when he reminded his South African audience at the *Weekly Mail* Book Week that: “I do not even speak my own

language . . . [but a] fragile metalanguage with very little body, one that is liable, at any moment, to find itself flattened and translated back and down into the discourse of politics, a sub-discourse of the discourse of history" ("Novel Today" 3). As he went on to declare, "[s]torytelling is another, an other mode of thinking" (4). We might therefore infer that for the past ten years Coetzee has told stories rather than given lectures because they enable him to say things that cannot be said in any other way, things, moreover, that remain unsayable – do not exist, cannot exist – outside of the story in which they are embedded and from which they cannot in the end be separated.

"He and His Man" revisits a concern that has featured in Coetzee's writing from the beginning, but that he has returned to with renewed interest (or distress) in recent years – the way in which *language inevitably gets in the way of itself* – that is, the opacity and waywardness of words in their refusal transparently to represent, their refusal simply and unequivocally to perform or facilitate communication; in a (Derridean) word, the phenomenon of *dissemination*.³ Thus any attempt to describe this failure is itself doomed to fail: in pointing to the catachresis that waits at the interface between every intention and the speech act to which it gives rise, I too resort to catachresis. In the perspective that governs "He and His Man," every description is a betrayal because words are not things and every name is therefore the wrong name. Whatever the thing is that we would wish to describe, in the words of Lady Chandos, a Coetzee character whom we shall encounter in due course, "*Always it is not what I say but something else*" (Elizabeth Costello 228).

I am of course aware that what I have just said is more than sufficient necessarily to disable my own discourse. True fidelity to what Derek Attridge would call the "singularity" of "He and His Man"⁴ would probably require us as readers to silently ponder on the text, to try to recreate and reflect on our experience of reading the text, indulging the associations it evokes, allowing it to seep ever deeper into our consciousness, perhaps allowing it settle eventually on the frontier between conscious and unconscious styled by some *the imagination*. We could then tell stories of our own – perhaps about the man whose companionship saved Crusoe's life, the savage whom he civilized and named Friday, and who died of measles at sea but who one prefers to think of pining away within the weeping walls of London; or perhaps that other Friday, who could never master language because his tongue had been severed, but from whose mouth there issued without ceasing a slow stream, soft, cold, and dark, running northward and southward to the ends of the earth, beating against the eyelids of Susan Barton, and against the skin of her face (Coetzee, *Foe* 157).

Nevertheless – "under erasure," if you will, and in something like the spirit of whimsy that characterizes "He and His Man" – I shall proceed to (mis)interpret.

* * *

"He and His Man" seems not to be about Crusoe and Friday, as its epigraph would lead us to assume,³ but about Crusoe and Defoe. The conflation of real and fictional worlds is crucial to Coetzee's purposes here. He has spoken of fiction's "rivalry" with history, of novels so powerful and original – so "singular" – as to serve "to show up the mythic status of history" and usurp its authority ("The Novel Today" 3). Here the mutual contamination of the factual and the fictive is so extensive as to blur the difference – perhaps like the drunk man in time of plague, placed on the dead cart by his neighbors, a living and therefore fictive corpse indistinguishable from the true corpses he sleeps among.

The "He" of the narrative's title is Robinson Crusoe, elderly, retired, seeing out his days in solitude and obscurity in the coastal city of Bristol. The first ten paragraphs of the story consist of "news of Lincolnshire" received by Crusoe in what he calls "reports" from "his man." The fact that these reports – of the treacherous decoy ducks or duckoys, of the engine of death in Halifax – are lifted almost verbatim from Defoe's *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* suggests that this industrious correspondent of Crusoe's is none other than Daniel Defoe.⁶ (The verisimilitude of Coetzee's fanciful inversion is enhanced by the fact that Defoe's *Tour* presents itself as a series of letters addressed to a nameless "Sir" by a peripatetic "Gentleman" [*Tour* (b) 41] who signs himself "Your most humble/and obedient servant" [*Tour* (b) 112].)

Paragraphs 11 to 17 of "He and His Man" tell us something of the later life of the one-time castaway and adventurer – and the story's focalizer – Robinson Crusoe. While we know (or have good grounds to believe) that the Crusoe trilogy – *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures*, *The Farther Adventures*, and *Serious Reflections* – consists of stories invented by Daniel Defoe, they of course purport both to be written by Crusoe himself and to be true in every particular. Scholars nowadays seem to assume that readers of the first and most famous volume would not have been duped into believing that they were reading a factual first-hand account (see e.g. West 257), but we really have no way of knowing. What we do know is that, by the time Crusoe sat down to write the *Serious Reflections*, he felt obliged to use the Preface to "defend himself against charges that his life-story is made up, that

it is simply a romance, that he is not even a real person" (Coetzee, *Stranger Shores* 17). I have just quoted words from Coetzee's introduction to the 1999 Oxford World's Classics edition of *Robinson Crusoe* (words that he in turn had borrowed from Defoe), for no other reason than that they were already there and it suited me to use them. But Coetzee is fascinated by Defoe's much more purposive ventriloquizing (the Preface is signed "Robinson Crusoe") and he poses a vital question: "When the writer of these words says that 'Robinson Crusoe' is a living person, what, beyond maintaining the by now tired autobiographical charade, might he mean?" (18). Conceding that the most likely non-literal interpretation to have prevailed among Defoe's first readers would have been that "Crusoe is Everyman, that every man is an island, and every life, seen in an allegorical light, a life of isolation under the scrutiny of God" (18), he goes on to say:

But the preface seems to hint as well at a personal and even confessional level of meaning. "I can affirm that I enjoy much more solitude in the middle of the greatest collection of mankind in the world, I mean, at London, while I am writing this, than ever I could say I enjoyed in eight and twenty years confinement to a desolate island." The castaway returned in late life to the country of his birth seems at this moment to merge with the sixty-year-old Londoner, Daniel Defoe, from whose head he was born.

(21)

Coetzee thus introduces one of the obvious concerns of "He and His Man" – the manner of existence of a fictional character and the relationship between the character and the author who invented him or her. In Coetzee's most recent novel, *Slow Man*, the protagonist Paul Rayment and the author-figure Elizabeth Costello struggle for control over the unfolding plot. The dual premise is, on the one hand, that the character who thought he simply existed as a man discovers that he may in fact be, or may also be, a character in a story being written by someone else. On the other hand, the "author" intervenes to prod her character to act in a particular way – either because he has made some bad decisions and fetched up on the horns of a hopeless dilemma (which he has); or because he has simply not turned out to be as interesting or promising a subject for novelistic treatment as his creator would have liked (with which this reader would tend to agree). The situation envisaged by Coetzee is that neither author nor character acts unilaterally – that, whatever the provenance of the character, he or she and the author in a quite literal sense need each other in order to exist. He and his man, or in this case, a triangle formed by the addition of he and his woman, and she and her

man – rather like the Holy Trinity, three persons who are simultaneously only one person, J. M. Coetzee.

“He and His Man” concludes with what seems to be an emphatic and moving asseveration of the gulf between author and character who occupy, after all, separate and incompatible planes of existence. But by then, the identities of he and his man seem to have shifted:

How are they to be figured, this man and he? As master and slave? As brothers, twin brothers? As comrades in arms? Or as enemies, foes? What name shall he give this nameless fellow with whom he shares his evenings and sometimes his nights too, who is absent only in the daytime, when he, Robin, walks the quays inspecting the new arrivals and his man gallops about the kingdom making his inspections?

(para. 40)

The one who shares Coetzee’s evenings and nights is presumably J. M. Coetzee, the celebrated composer of fictions; during the day the solitary John Coetzee, a semi-retired professor recently arrived from South Africa, mild-mannered and reserved by nature, might well be “walking the quays and inspecting the new arrivals,” but is more likely to be found riding his mountain bicycle down the leafy avenues of Adelaide. In this figuring, John has no more authority over the-one-who-writes than poor Robinson – who after all owes his very existence to his man Defoe – and is no more real than a character in a story made up by J. M. Coetzee, a character like Paul Rayment, for instance:

He fears there will be no meeting, not in this life. If he must settle on a likeness for the pair of them, his man and he, he would write that they are like two ships sailing in contrary directions, one west, the other, east. Or better, that they are deckhands toiling in the rigging, the one on a ship sailing west, the other on a ship sailing east. Their ships pass close, close enough to hail. But the seas are rough, the weather is stormy: their eyes lashed by the spray, their hands burned by the cordage, they pass each other by, too busy even to wave.

(para. 41)⁷

* * *

It is time to back-track and follow Robinson’s train of thought in the intervening paragraphs. These consist largely of borrowings from what is

quite probably Defoe's greatest con-trick, *A Journal of the Plague Year*.⁸ The transition occurs in paragraph 18, after Robin (as Coetzee calls him) begins to speculate as to "what species of man" his report-gathering man might really be. His mind races through various possibilities – "a man of business, a grain merchant or a leather merchant" – before proposing "a manufacturer and purveyor of roof tiles" (para. 18) doomed to ruination and misery by a freak storm. While one supposes that it would matter a great deal to the manufacturer of tiles that it was he and not the grain or leather merchant whose fortune was washed away, it matters not a jot to Robin, who seems to have invented the story simply to serve as a figure for the misfortune that befell him when once he was shipwrecked and marooned on a desert island. Though reversing the figuration, Coetzee is alluding to the critical tradition of reading *Robinson Crusoe* as a form of autobiography (see e.g. Backscheider, *Daniel Defoe: His Life* 412-36); the inversion is sustained in the reference to Defoe's bankruptcy, the man "ruined" and hounded by debtors, obliged to "seek hiding in the most wretched of quarters" (para. 18). But note that for Robin, the question that he sets out to address, the question of the identity of "his man," of the one who files reports of "spectacles of death" (para. 17), has been quite forgotten in the very process of its formulation. That is, Robin intends or purports to say one thing, but ends up saying another. It is as if his thoughts have been commandeered in the very process of their articulation by another, more urgent agency – the agency of narrative, driven by the linguistic logic of figuration and enfolding the imperative of interpretation. The passage is itself a figure for what Coetzee has said elsewhere about the experience of writing, about the agency of "an automatism built into language: the tendency of words to call up other words, to fall into patterns that keep propagating themselves. . . . What [writing] reveals (or asserts) may be quite different from what you thought (or half-thought) you wanted to say in the first place" (*Doubling the Point* 18). The process of displacement or slippage is finally interrupted by Robinson's interpretive intervention: his inchoate narrative is after all allegorical of nothing but his own life. The manner in which he means to say one thing, but says another, while his ability to understand what he says remains restricted to the facts of his own experience, is itself a composite figure for the catachretic identity of writing and interpreting. This notion is reinforced by subsequent paragraphs in "He and His Man" that reproduce incidents and descriptions from *A Journal of the Plague Year*, often verbatim (paras. 19-24, 28-31).⁹ These are all subjected to allegorical interpretation, and the allegory – which grows increasingly fanciful, parodic, absurd, in its unlikely yokings of narrative and meaning – relentlessly figures aspects of Robinson's castaway experience.

To ask what Coetzee's purpose is here is to of course to submit to what we may as well call the doom of catachresis. But we have no option, and that is finally the most important point to be made, or that is being made (to the extent that it is possible for me merely to point to points already made by Coetzee).

In the first instance, we are of course being reminded that all writing and reading is autobiographical, a notion that Coetzee has in the past gone to some lengths to insist upon: "all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it" (*Doubling the Point* 17). The equally inescapably autobiographical nature of interpretation has been memorably theorized in psychoanalytic terms by the Norman Holland: "all of us, as we read, use the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves" (Holland 123).

Secondly, Coetzee is clearly making fun of Crusoe's inveterate tendency to allegorize his experience, which is of course to make fun of his Puritan creator's apparently sincere insistence on the morally instructive burden of his story. This insistence is formalized in the third volume of the trilogy, *Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. It is in the Preface that Crusoe rejects allegations that his story has been "feigned, that the Names are borrowed, and that it is all a Romance; that there never were any such Man or Place, or Circumstances in any Mans [sic] life; that it is all form'd and embellish'd by Invention to impose upon the World" (n.p.), and asserts:

I *Robinson Crusoe* being at this Time in perfect and sound Mind and Memory, Thanks be to God therefore; do hereby declare, their Objection is an Invention scandalous in design, and false in Fact; and do affirm, that the story, though Allegorical, is also Historical; and that it is the beautiful Representation of a Life of unexampled Misfortunes and of a Variety not to be met with in the World, sincerely adapted to, and intended for the common Good of mankind, and designed at first, *as it is now farther apply'd*, to the most serious Uses possible.

(n.p.)

We can never know with certainty what tone informed this utterance, this barefaced lie prefacing a text which includes a lengthy chapter on the virtue of honesty, even a section warning readers of the temptation "Of Talking Falsely" (111-18). But a scholar like J. Paul Hunter would argue that the sustained deception is a necessary part of Defoe's entirely serious ethical project in the Crusoe books, books innovative by virtue of their "formal realism" (Watt 32) but nonetheless securely located in the "emblematic"

traditions of spiritual biography, Guide literature and Providence literature. In this view, Defoe is not joking when he begins his Preface in the following way:

As the Design of every Thing is said to be first in the Intention, and last in the Execution; so I come now to acknowledge to my Reader, That the present Work is not merely the Product of the two first Volumes, but the two first Volumes may rather be called the Product of this: The Fable is always made for the Moral, not the Moral for the Fable.

(n.p.)

But in “He and His Man,” Robinson’s somewhat less guarded narrative seems to suggest that the Moral is something derived after and from the Fable, on the basis of some perceived (or imagined) resemblance.¹⁰ This logic is clear in the way in which Robinson’s figurative interpretation unfolds: “And all of this – the wave of water, the ruin, the flight, the pennilessness, the tatters, the solitude – let all of this be a figure of the shipwreck and the island where he, poor Robin, was secluded from the world . . .” (para.18). “[L]et all of this be . . .”: the mood of the verb is imperative, its effect nakedly performative; it gives exemplary expression to the natural tendency of the interpreter to position himself as the sole subject in a world of objects, to fill that world with his own being and in so doing reduce its otherness to the experiential same.¹¹

Coetzee appears wryly to be following the example of Robinson in prompting us to treat the latter’s interpretative gambit as a figure for the kind of reading typically elicited by his own stories. An early salvo in the sustained onslaught of philosophical and historical allegorizing to which Coetzee’s novels have been subjected was Teresa Dovey’s *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*; since then, critic after critic has pushed the texts through the grid of his or her assumptions and interests, and in so doing – like Coetzee’s Robinson – has effectively reduced them to a composite figure for his or her own subjectivity. This mode of readerly response has been characterized by Umberto Eco as “overinterpretation” (see *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* 45-66; *The Limits of Interpretation* 22-63) and construed as the residue of a pre-modern habit of thought he dubs “Hermetic drift,”

the interpretive habit which dominated Renaissance Hermetism and which is based on the principles of universal analogy and sympathy, according to which every item of the furniture of the

world is linked to every other element (or to many) of the superior world by means of similitudes or resemblances.¹²

(*Limits of Interpretation* 24)

The phenomenon – the reduction of the various to the same through allegorical overinterpretation – is recognized and deprecated by Derek Attridge in his excellent study *J. M. Coetzee & the Ethics of Reading*. But Attridge cannot in the end argue for anything other than a *less* rather than *more* allegorical approach, because (in a chapter entitled "Against Allegory"), he quotes Fredric Jameson – "Interpretation is . . . an essentially allegorical act" – and suggests that:

To say what a fictional work is "about," or to find any kind of moral or political injunction in it, is to proceed, in an extended sense of the word, allegorically. If a wholly nonallegorical reading of a literary work were possible, it would refrain from any interpretation whatsoever, and would seek rather to do justice to the work's singularity and inventiveness by the creation of a text of equal singularity and inventiveness.

(36)

Attridge also quotes from Susan Sontag's famous essay "Against Interpretation," in which she maintains that any act of interpretation necessarily assumes that *the text is saying something other than what the text is saying*: "The interpreter says, Look, don't you see that X is really – or, really means – A? That Y is really B? That Z is really C?" (37). Interpretation is an act of translation, of substitution; considered as a figure, it is catachresis.

But the figure of catachresis is larger than the instance of interpretation: in this perspective, catachresis threatens to stand for all linguistic activity. This is of course hardly a new insight: for instance, Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* (110-114) and Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (405-38) offer strikingly similar accounts of "the development of the concept of language" (Gadamer 405). "Originally," writes Foucault,

everything had a name – a proper or peculiar name. Then the name became attached to a single element of the thing, and became applicable to all the other individual things that contained that element: it is no longer a particular oak that is called *tree*, but anything that includes at least a trunk and branches.

(113)

Or, as Gadamer puts it, this “spontaneous and inventive seeking out of similarities” develops through “classificatory logic . . . [into] the formation of a concept by a process of abstraction” (qtd. in Cooper 257, 258). Perhaps the best-known application to the activity of reading of this idea of conceptualization as a form of rhetorical substitution is to be found in Paul de Man’s *Allegories of Reading*:

The text indeed distinguishes the act of naming (tree *A* and tree *B*) which leads to the literal denomination of the proper noun, from the act of conceptualization. And conceptualization, conceived as an exchange or substitution of properties on the basis of resemblance, corresponds exactly to the classical definition of metaphor as it appears in theories of rhetoric from Aristotle to Roman Jakobson.

(de Man 146)

This is what David E. Cooper calls the “primacy of metaphor” thesis (Cooper 258), the notion that there can be no purely literal utterances because every utterance is forged by and charged with metaphor. Trees are only called trees through a process of metaphorical extension predicated on perceived similarity. Foucault prefers “catachresis” to “metaphor” because, as Hayden White puts it:

for [Foucault], no two things are similar to one another in their particularity. *All* language therefore constitutes an abuse in so far as it gives a single name to things different in their ‘internal natures’, their location in space, or their external attributes. It is *all* catachretic in origin, although the myth of literal or ‘proper’ meaning obscures this origin and thereby permits the reduction of catachresis to the status of a figure of rhetoric which arises out of simple misuse of ‘proper’ speech.

(White 94)

The logic of catachresis may be rendered thus: “X is Y – every equation that does not express identity (a dog is a dog) is [a metaphorical] extension” (Dwight Bolinger, qtd. in Cooper 259).¹³

* * *

Consider now the following extract from “He and His Man”:

And all of this – the man Robert and wife keeping communion through calls across the water, the sack left by the waterside – stands for itself certainly, but stands also as a figure of his,

Robinson’s, solitude on his island, where in his hour of darkest despair he called out across the waves to his loved ones in England to save him . . .

(para. 23)

Coetzee seems here to be dramatizing (with gentle humor) the inevitability of allegory in interpretation, and the inevitability of catachresis in linguistic activity. If things only ever stood for themselves (“a dog is a dog”), in a strict sense there could be no meaning. Steven Mailloux usefully returns to the Latin (*interpretatio*) in formulating his “working definition” of interpretation as “acceptable and approximating *translation*” (emphasis added, Mailloux 121). When we ask of something, “But what does it mean?,” we are assuming it to be an allegory of its actual self in need of “approximating translation.” In other words, in interpreting we produce an allegory, we allegorize. (In this sense, interpretation is a figure for all linguistic activity. To speak of something is to substitute for it a referent already constituted in language and tied to an arbitrary signifier.

? Signification is itself catachretic.)

Right from the beginning, Coetzee’s work has evinced a thorough-going suspicion of language’s ability to represent, that is, its ability accurately or transparently to reproduce a pre-existing reality. In *Dusklands* and in *In the Heart of the Country*, the conventions of verisimilitude are subverted by metafictional strategies, such as the unresolved inclusion of alternative versions of the same event. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate ponders whether “whatever can be articulated is falsely put” (64), and later parodies the enterprise of interpretation by inventing “allegorical” meanings for the poplar slips (110-12). In *Life & Times of Michael K* Coetzee imagines his character’s resistance to interpretation, that is to say, to any attempt on the part of other characters or the reader to traduce his otherness by allegorizing it. Even when K is vouchsafed an illumination about himself, the signifier will not stick and slippage sets in at once:

K tossed restlessly on the cardboard. It excited him, he found, to say, recklessly, *the truth, the truth about me. ‘I am a gardener,’* he said again, aloud. On the other hand, was it not strange for a gardener to be sleeping in a closet within sound of the beating of the waves of the sea?

I am more like an earthworm, he thought. Which is also a kind of gardener. Or a mole, also a gardener, that does not tell stories because it lives in silence. But a mole or an earthworm on a cement floor?

(181-82)

But the most direct expression of Coetzee's skepticism about language and representation prior to "He and His Man" is to be found in *Elizabeth Costello*. In the first lesson, "Realism," Coetzee has Elizabeth Costello say:

"There used to be a time when we knew. We used to believe that when the text said, 'On the table stood a glass of water,' there was indeed a table, and a glass of water on it, and we had only to look in the word-mirror of the text to see them.

"But all that has ended. The word-mirror is broken, irreparably, it seems."

(19)

Costello is presumably making the point that we are no longer able simply to slip through the words "glass" and "table" to get to the glass and the table. She appears to be talking about the comfortable certainties of representation in nineteenth-century fiction that Modernist self-consciousness has permanently destroyed. But her scepticism is surely anticipated by the cracks that appeared in the word-mirror in the Early Modern era (conventionally, at the end of the sixteenth century), when belief in the world as God's Book, in the notion of fixed and necessary correspondences between Nature and eternal spiritual verities, was beginning to break down and yield to the paradigm of modern science. In an enigmatic Postscript to *Elizabeth Costello*, the "Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos, to Francis Bacon," Coetzee expressly directs our attention to the moment identified by Foucault as marking the transition to the Classical *episteme* (Foucault 50ff.)

Coetzee's "Letter" responds to the "Letter of Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon" published by Hugo von Hofmannsthal in 1902. The date is important. Von Hofmannsthal's "Letter" is generally regarded as a founding document of European Modernism; Coetzee's "Letter" first appeared in 2002, exactly a century later, and is presumably to be regarded as an updated report – from a post-Modernist / Postmodernist perspective – on the vexed issues addressed by von Hofmannsthal.

The "Letter of Lord Chandos" describes the fictional author's loss of confidence in language. He perceives himself to have fallen from a state in which he "conceived of the whole of existence as one great unit: the spiritual and physical worlds seemed to form no contrast" (132). "[I]n everything," he writes, "I felt the presence of Nature, in the aberrations of insanity as much as in the utmost refinement of the Spanish ceremonial; in the boorishness of young peasants no less than in the most delicate of allegories; and in all expressions of Nature I felt myself" (132). This sense of seamless unity, he suspects, is enabled by the fact that "all was allegory and that each creature

was a key to all others; and I felt myself the one capable of seizing each by the handle and unlocking as many of the others as were ready to yield" (132). Thus the allegory of mutual implication in a shared narrative or discourse (that I suspect Chandos would have called "God," but that his post-Romantic ventriloquiser prefers to call "Nature") is what enables meaning to enter the world.

Quite abruptly, however, Chandos loses his belief in the signifying capacity of language, in its claims to instantiate truth or to bring disparate entities together in coherent relationship:

For me everything disintegrated into parts, those parts again into parts; no longer would anything let itself be encompassed by one idea. Single words floated round me; they congealed into eyes which stared at me and into which I was forced to stare back – whirlpools which gave me vertigo and, reeling incessantly, led into the void.

(134-35)

(One cannot help but recall the opaque otherness of language as experienced by the young Michael K as he "stare[s] at the word *quotient*. It did not change, it did not dissolve, it did not yield its mystery" [Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K* 110].)

Chandos has since been leading an existence "lacking in spirit and thought in its flow" (135), with the exception of sporadic moments when "something entirely unnamed, even barely nameable . . . reveals itself to me, filling like a vessel any casual object of my daily surroundings with an overflowing flood of higher life" (135). These mystical moments, in which his being seems to "flow" into other objects (138), produce in him a "mysterious, wordless, and boundless ecstasy" (139). Chandos seems to be attempting to use words to describe an apprehension or cognition or intuition (he calls it thinking "with the heart" [138]) produced by an encounter with reality untouched by scientific or rational discourse; that is, an encounter unmediated by language – which is to say an encounter untainted by the alienating and falsifying contagion of catachresis.

In his response to the Chandos letter, Coetzee has Lady Chandos describing how she, too, experiences "moments when soul and body are one" (228). She calls these her "raptures": they come to her when she "is in [her] husband's arms" (228), and we assume that she is invoking the wordless ecstasy of sexual bliss, which is, or is a figure for, a mystical experience of transcendence:

Soul and body he speaks to me, in a speaking without speech; into me, soul and body, he presses what are no longer words but flaming swords.

We are not meant to live thus, Sir. *Flaming swords* I say my Philip presses into me, swords that are not words; but they are neither flaming swords nor are they words. It is like a contagion, saying one thing always for another (*like a contagion*, I say: barely did I hold myself back from saying, *a plague of rats*, for rats are everywhere these days). Like a wayfarer (hold the figure in mind, I pray you), like a wayfarer I step into a mill, dark and disused, and feel of a sudden the floorboards, rotten with the wetness, give way beneath my feet and plunge me into the racing mill-waters; yet as I am that (a wayfarer in a mill) I am also not that; nor is it a contagion that comes continually upon me or a plague of rats or flaming swords, but something else. *Always it is not what I say but something else.*

(228)

Elizabeth's experience of words giving way beneath her feet like rotting boards is her version of the other Elizabeth's "shattering of the word-mirror," the end of the certainties of traditional allegory, the failure of language to do its work of representation, and the concomitant inevitability of a new and vertiginous allegory in terms of which meaning is endlessly deferred as one word after another stands in for the thing that is never named – that never can be named. Coetzee is presumably alluding to the Derridean concept of *differance*, via Lacan's "defiles of the signifier," when he has Elizabeth insist that her "rapture" and its variant, her "rush," "are clear to my eye, *my eye* I call it, *my inner eye*, as if I had an eye inside that looked at the words one by one as they passed, like soldiers on parade, *Like soldiers on parade* I say" (229). But I suspect that he also has in mind Hegel's famous characterization of the relationship between the individual's thought and language: "What I only mean or suppose is mine: it belongs to me – this particular individual. But language expresses nothing but universality; and so I cannot say what I merely *mean*" (*Ich kann nicht sagen was ich nur meine*; Hegel, *Logic*, qtd. in MacKenzie 118). In other words, in order to make meaning and communicate using language, the individual must necessarily submit to the figurative drift that we have identified as the catachretic identity of language itself.¹⁴

In the meantime Lord Chandos is living, it seems, in a constant state of rapture, having seemingly reversed the Fall into language and returned to a pre-verbal trance of undifferentiated plenitude, where each thing can stand

for any other thing, or indeed, all things: "All is allegory, says my Philip. Each creature is key to all other creatures. A dog sitting in a patch of sun licking itself, says he, is at one moment a dog and at the next a vessel of revelation . . . *Not Latin*, says my Philip – I copied the words – *not Latin nor English nor Spanish nor Italian will bear the words of my revelation*" (229, 230).¹⁵ But, Elizabeth pleads, this encounter with a world unmediated by language is overwhelming, "*We are not made for revelation*, I want to cry out, *nor I nor you, my Philip*, revelation that seers the eye like staring into the sun" (229).

No, we are perhaps not made for revelation. As Conrad's teacher of languages in *Under Western Eyes* puts it, "Words are the great foes of reality" (3); but "words also" says Marlow in *Lord Jim*, "belong to the sheltering conception of light and order which is our refuge" (293). To draw these parallels is of course again to interpret, which is to allegorize, which is to compromise the singularity of "He and His Man." This essay is nothing but a composite figure for my sojourn in a strange land, where, like Robinson Crusoe on his island, with time on my hands – *on my hands*, I say, as though my hands had cupped and weighed each empty hour as it passed – it dawned on me that the world is but a place of many words where man appears a mere talking animal not much more wonderful than a parrot (*Under Western Eyes* 3); a parrot, say, belonging to our man Robin, who says and says again "Poor Poll!" – which must be what he means to say.¹⁶

NOTES

1. The *OED* defines the term as "Improper use of words; application of a term to a thing which it does not properly denote; abuse or perversion of a trope or metaphor." The rather more radical sense in which it is used in this essay echoes that of Foucault in *The Order of Things* (see below).

2. Eight stories or "lessons" featuring this character – an Australian novelist and reluctant public intellectual – are collected in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003); she also has a prominent role in *Slow Man* (2005).

3. Language's failure to refer transparently is a failure which, ironically, enables language to work. Coetzee's texts exist and can say what they do about language and the ineluctably allegorical nature of all writing and reading not because language 'fails' but because, in Derrida's words, the absence of the referent creates the mark.

4. See Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* and J. M. Coetzee and the *Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*.

5. The epigraph is an excerpt from *Robinson Crusoe*:

But to return to my new companion. I was greatly delighted with him, and made it my business to teach him everything that was proper to make him useful, handy, and helpful; but especially to

make him speak, and understand me when I spoke; and he was the aptest scholar there ever was.

“He and His Man” could be construed as an elaborate subversion of the facility that Crusoe assumes to characterize the enterprise of speaking and understanding. The reader also of course notes Crusoe’s unconscious cultural imperialism and his condescending instrumentalization of Friday as colonized subject. To trace this theme in the lecture – via the decoy ducks, for instance, who betray their fellows to please their masters – is tempting, but would clearly risk the sort of “overinterpretation” (see below) that the lecture itself parodies.

6. See (a) *A Tour through England and Wales*. Vol. 2, 95, 98-100, 200-2.

7. Coetzee may well have had in mind Borges’ adumbration of this existential schism in “Borges and I” (Borges 282-83). It is a topic memorably explored in Paul Auster’s novel *City of Glass*; in the “Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory” in *The Red Notebook*, Auster remarks: “The self that exists in the world – the self whose name appears on the covers of books – is finally not the same self who writes the book” (*The Art of Hunger* 301).

8. Once again, my sense is that scholars are too sanguine in their belief that “probably no reader has ever thought H.F. [the initials appended to the narrative] ‘real’ or the ‘real author’ [of *Journal of the Plague Year*]. Significantly, *Memoirs of a Cavalier* has been thought to be an authentic journal, but *A Journal of the Plague Year* never” (Backscheider, *Daniel Defoe: Ambition and Innovation* 136; cf. Burgess 19).

9. See *Journal of the Plague Year* 31-2, 112-16, 175, 194, 238.

10. This ambiguity points to the liminal position of a text like *Robinson Crusoe*, squarely situated in what Foucault has called the Classical *episteme* but pretending to an allegiance to the sixteenth-century *episteme* of correspondences (see below).

11. Coetzee has elsewhere clearly indicated his opinion on the priority of “fable” and “moral” in writing: “It is naïve to think that writing is a simple two-stage process: first you decide what you want to say, then you say it. On the contrary, as all of us know, you write because you do not know what you want to say. Writing reveals to you what you wanted to say in the first place” (*Doubling the Point* 18).

12. Eco goes on to say, neatly glossing the process on display in “He and His Man,” “The main feature of Hermetic drift seems to be the uncontrolled ability to shift from meaning to meaning, from similarity to similarity, from a connection to another” (*Limits* 26-27).

13. Though it seems to be of little relevance here, it is perhaps worth noting that Gayatri Spivak has usefully applied the concept of catachresis to the characteristic predicament of postcolonial discourse (see e.g. Spivak 60).

14. One catches a glimpse here of what de Man called the “inhuman” and “mechanical” nature of language (*Resistance to Theory* 96 et passim); “the madness of words” which “no degree of knowledge can ever stop” (qtd. in MacKenzie 152).

15. Elizabeth (or Coetzee) oddly appears to have conflated the epochs in Philip’s life that he is careful to distinguish in his letter (that is, before and after his loss of faith in language).

16. The first draft of this essay was produced in February 2006 while I was in Greenville, South Carolina, as a guest of Furman University. I am grateful to Furman for giving me full access to their fine library and other facilities.

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