

Saggi

Modernist Realism and its Enemies: John Coetzee and Philosophy

ANA FALCATO*

* New University of Lisbon/IFILNOVA
e-mail: aniusca@hotmail.com

Abstract

Dispassionate and sober, J. M. Coetzee's prose is a space in which literary identities are continually unsettled, methodological subtleties both revealed and explored. Given these features, philosophers have described Coetzee's style as "modernist realist". In this paper, I discuss the relevance of Coetzee's use of the split page in *Diary of a Bad Year*, focusing on its role in undermining "ersatz ethical thought". In the second part of the paper, I develop a model for explaining Coetzee's modernist realism. This model is situated within a broader, self-critical project that traces the significance of my analysis for the form of philosophical discourse.

Desapasionada y sobria, la prosa de J. M. Coetzee es un espacio en que las identidades literarias se muestran constantemente inestables y las sutilezas metodológicas se revelan y exploran. Partiendo de estas características, los filósofos han descrito el estilo de Coetzee como "realista modernista". En este artículo discuto la relevancia del uso que hace Coetzee de la página dividida en *Diary of a Bad Year*, prestando especial atención a cómo sirve para debilitar el "ersatz ethical thought". En la segunda parte del artículo desarrollo un modelo para explicar el realismo modernista de Coetzee. Este modelo se emplaza en mi amplio proyecto crítico de análisis del significado de la forma en el discurso filosófico.

Keywords

Realist Modernism - John Coetzee - Diary of a Bad Year - Substitution Ethical thought - The Ancient Quarrel

It's fairly clear that all these fine tragedians trace their lineage back to Homer: they're Homer's students and disciples, ultimately. And this makes it difficult for me to say what I have to say, because I've had a kind of fascinated admiration for Homer ever since I was young. Still, we should value truth more than we value any person, so I'd better speak out.

Plato, *Republic*, 595b

1. From philosophy to literature – and back

It is widely known that moral philosophers and philosophers of aesthetics have long relied on examples from literature. Indeed, an ongoing conversation between a cluster of contemporary philosophers and writers seems to indicate a modern lifting of the millennia-old ban, sanctioned by Plato, on the inclusion of literary writers in the philosophical republic. Relatively recent endeavours in philosophy and literature alike would seem to suggest that the two traditions have finally initiated a process of reconciliation¹. As philosophers, though, we call for further sup-

¹ Here I have in mind the following works in particular: C. DIAMOND, *Realism and the Realistic Spirit*, in *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy and the Mind*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA 1991; ID., *The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Literature*, in A. CRARY - S. SHIEH (eds.), *Reading Cavell*. Routledge, London 2006; ID., *Having a Rough Story About What Moral Philosophy Is*, in J. Gibson - W. Huemer (eds.), *The Literary Wittgenstein*, Routledge, London 2004; S. MULHALL, *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton/Oxford 2009; ID., *The Self and Its Shadows: A Book of Essays on Individuality as Negation in Philosophy and the Arts*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013; M. NUSSBAUM, *Love's Knowledge*, OUP, Oxford 1990; J. LEAR, *A Case for Irony. The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass./London 2011; ID., *Ethical*

port for this claim, as well as further clarification on *how* this reconciliation might be achieved. Thus the importance of a new gathering of writers and philosophers, who transition between the two strands of this dialogue: from philosophy to literature, and then back again. Recent work in both fields illustrates this point: Stephen Mulhall's *The Wounded Animal* (2009) discusses both J. M. Coetzee's and (the fictional) Elizabeth Costello's projects, describing them as manifestations of a long-standing modernistic reflection on the conditions of literary formal realism; Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013)² neatly returns to the ancient philosophical dispute over the existence of universals. What motivates this conversation, if indeed it is a conversation?

Having selected one thread from each direction of this dialogue, I aim in this paper both to uncover the rationale behind Coetzee's use of the split page in *Diary of a Bad Year*³ and to consider the implications of my own analysis for the practice of philosophical writing more generally, and so for my own contribution to the discussion. In this way, the following does not merely identify significant points of intersection between phi-

Thought and the Problem of Communication: A Strategy for Reading Diary of a Bad Year, in A. LEIST - P. SINGER (eds.), *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics*, Columbia University Press, New York 2010; A. CRARY, *J. M. Coetzee, Moral Thinker*, in *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics*; P. SINGER - A. LEIST, *Introduction to J. M. Coetzee and Ethics*; J. M. COETZEE, *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*, Secker and Warburg, London 2003; ID., *Inner Workings*, Vintage, London 2008; S. CAVELL, *Companionable Thinking*, in A. CRARY (ed.), *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond*, MIT Press, Boston 2007.

² J. M. COETZEE, *The Childhood of Jesus*, Harvill Secker, London 2013, 159-160.

³ In the following, all references to this work are to the Penguin Books edition: J. M. COETZEE, *Diary of a Bad Year*, Penguin Books, London 2008.

losophy and literature. More than this, it *performs* the transformative shift in self-understanding, made possible by this very intersection that lies at the heart of Coetzee's novel.

The first part of this paper discusses the philosophical relevance of a notion that will play a central role in my interpretation of *Diary*: the concept of "substitution ethical thought". The second part further explores Coetzee's modernist realism and attempts, in a self-critical shift of perspective, to apply these insights to questions about the form of philosophical discourse.

2. Diary of a soul's journey

Despite the vastness of the South African author's corpus, I have chosen to focus on *Diary of a Bad Year* because of the distinctiveness – relative both to Coetzee's other works and to the genre as a whole – of the novel's unique formal composition. Here, Coetzee employs an unusual formal technique: each page is divided into two or three separate sections, each representing a different character's perspective – a device that has an initially destabilizing effect on the reader. Thus the top section of the page consists of a series of "opinion chronicles" (a collection originally entitled *Strong Opinions*) by an experienced South African author, JC. The middle layer of the page corresponds to JC's private voice and offers a raw account of his daily encounters with his Filipino typist, the young and beautiful Anya, who is assisting him in the composition of his collection (commissioned by a German publisher). The lower layer of the page

corresponds to the private voices of both Anya and Alan (the latter is Anya's misogynistic partner). In the two lower layers of the text, Coetzee reveals the extent to which JC is both haunted by his impending death and somehow comforted by daily contact with a beautiful woman. A first encounter with this text thus brings the reader into contact with three private narrative voices (corresponding to JC, Anya and Alan), along with what might initially seem to be a fourth public, "quasi-technical" narrative voice, represented by JC's political opinions. This multiple structure provides a modernistic framing for *Strong Opinions* (we shall return to this idea in what follows).

Questions about the relationship between stylistic devices – such as the split page – and the ethical ideas conveyed by a given novel can, of course, be situated within more general philosophical accounts of the impact of literary style (*how* a given position is articulated) on the statements being expressed. In this context, we encounter philosophers – many of whom mirror the history of tensions within their own discipline – who struggle theoretically with (what is apparently) the same issue. A classic example of philosophical reflection on the significance of the *style-content* dichotomy, both in literature and philosophy, is Martha Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge* (1990),⁴ the introduction to which contains the following:

The "ancient quarrel between the Poets and the Philosophers", as Plato's *Republic* [...] calls it, could be called a quarrel only because it was about a single subject.

⁴ See M. NUSSBAUM, *Love's Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1990.

The subject was human life and how to live it. And the quarrel was a quarrel about literary form, as well as about ethical content, about literary forms understood as committed to certain ethical priorities [...]. Forms of writing were not seen as vessels into which different contents could be indifferently poured; form was itself a statement, a content. (Nussbaum, 1990: 15)

On deeper analysis, Nussbaum's claim reveals itself as twofold: both in the philosophical text or essay (where literary style, the *way* content is conveyed, is often sacrificed in favour of substantial theoretical claims) and in the literary piece (where concern with form can reach such heights that content becomes impenetrable – arguably more so when one turns to modernist projects), style is an “assertion of content” in itself. But, as we shall see below, Nussbaum is far from being alone in maintaining this position in the current philosophical landscape.

Because I have chosen to begin with a literary text, I will first concentrate on the second part of the claim quoted above and say that *Diary's* prose, *and in particular its formal structure*, is a remarkable example of how the successful expression of propositional content is genuinely inseparable from matters of form. Coetzee's text reveals that “[literary] form is itself a statement, a content”, such that formal composition is really a means of asserting, of putting forward, propositional claims. But the content conveyed by the literary form of *Diary* isn't merely “rightly-shaped matter”, a casually well-accomplished combination of compositional technique and the thought expressed by that literary framing. Rather, I will claim, Coetzee manages to convey

ethical thought by staging a direct *simulation* of ethical thought, precisely because this simulation is presented in a register very close to his own. The result of the simulation is a collection of opinions (JC's *Strong Opinions*) that is aesthetically maimed, theoretically convincing, and completely *sterile, from a practical point of view* – notions that will be developed in what follows.

At this point, two questions present themselves as interrelated: (1) what does it mean to argue that the structure of *Diary* conveys ethical thought? And (2) how does the novel do this without slipping into what I will be referring to as “ersatz ethical thought”, precisely by staging a version of this kind of displacement?

Some philosophers (see Jonathan Lear, 2010)⁵ have argued that it is easier for a well-trained novelist to notice and prevent the communication of ersatz ethical thought than for a philosopher to do so – practiced as the latter is both in compressing philosophical questions into abstract, deductive systems of reasoning and in crafting the ordered, linear texts characteristic of the discipline. For the sake of better understanding the notion of ersatz ethical thought, then, consider the following thought experiment, centred on the figure of a philosopher who is trying

⁵ In his essay “Ethical Thought and the Problem of Communication”, Jonathan LEAR writes about “a fashionable substitute for ethical thought” and Coetzee’s attempt to “defeat ersatz ethical posture”. After having explored at some length the dialectic of these two ways of attempting to convey ethical thought, Lear closes by stating that: “Even at this early stage, one can see in the form of communication a strategy designed to defeat ersatz ethical thought” (LEAR, 2010: 74). I have borrowed that last phrase from him, adapting it to my own interpretation of Coetzee’s novel.

to put forth an ethical claim. (In light of what has already been said, you might further conceive of JC as just such a philosopher.)

Imagine that our philosopher wishes to communicate a certain idea: namely, that the most important truths about human psychology cannot be communicated or grasped by intellectual activity alone, since powerful emotions play an irreducible cognitive role in self-understanding. If he states this view in a written form that expresses only intellectual activity and addresses itself only to the reader's intellect – as is usually the case in most philosophical essays, and is surely the case in *Strong Opinions* – we face the following question: Does the author really believe what his words seem to state? How can he avoid the charge of inconsistency? The philosopher may believe that the psychological thesis itself is not among the truths that must be grasped through emotional activity. Or he may believe that the thesis is among those truths, but remain indifferent as to whether or not the reader grasps it. Whatever the case, our example demonstrates how easily and intuitively the paradox arises. By contrast, a writer aiming to convey the same idea can *avoid* the charge of inconsistency to the degree that he expresses its (merely) propositional content *through* the text's formal features – such that the relevant claim about self-knowledge is revealed to the reader precisely via formal devices that allow for emotional engagement (which is certainly not the case with regard to JC's work). Such a writer can even directly *display* this conflict to the reader by incorporating philosophical discussion of the relevant idea

into a broader literary work that ultimately illuminates the inconsistencies associated with its purely intellectual expression taken in isolation. We shall see that Coetzee (unlike JC) performs both moves in *Diary*.

Modern literary works like Coetzee's *Diary*, then, seem to make this complicated unfolding possible: in allowing for the combination of emotive and reflective material, they reveal the truth of claims such as that outlined above, where an appeal to intellect alone is clearly insufficient. Crucially, they are able to reveal the inconsistency of claims such as this by incorporating their philosophical formulation. (We shall see below how the very same effect can be accomplished in philosophical prose that expresses an awareness of the sorts of paradoxes associated with the psychological claim sketched above).

Thus attention to the specific kind of storytelling at work in a text like *Diary* both helps us to overcome the difficulties affecting these sorts of claims and reveals a strategy for answering questions (1) and (2). If conveying ethical thought via writing involves providing some kind of practical guidance as to how one should live, as well as guidance on how to read the text in question and appreciate its message, then we can say that *Diary* does both by incorporating a vision of how one can fail in both regards, i.e. by calling the reader's attention to how the expression of genuine ethical thought in such a text can slip easily into the communication of *ersatz* ethical thought, and by isolating and thus revealing a layer of interpretation – a way of reading the text – that is both tempting and inadequate. Ersatz ethical

thought is the mere simulation of ethical thought – a substitution for genuine ethical thought, which, although intellectually graspable, does not actually make a *practical* difference in terms of how we shape the world and behave. As Coetzee seems to imply, this is the form of thought expressed in *Strong Opinions* and in JC's stance towards his book and its readership.

With this brief sketch of the problem at hand, we can now begin to turn to another question raised by Coetzee's method in *Diary*: how can a text convey genuine ethical thought as opposed to mere ersatz ethical thought? Is this at all possible? We shall see more clearly how, in *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee's answer to this question hinges on the triadic structure of the page and our confrontation with the book within the book, i.e. *Strong Opinions*, situated as it is within *Diary*.

3. The writer's writer and substitution ethical thought

It may be tempting to identify the author of *Strong Opinions* with the author of *Diary of a Bad Year*. The ostensibly straightforward identification of JC with John Coetzee is only partially accurate, however, and more must be said on this point. In truth, the connection between JC and John Coetzee has highly elusive – and not merely stylistic – implications; it is no mere curiosity, reducible to self-indulgent vanity on Coetzee's part. Indeed, the temptation to merge their identities is a result of our having succumbed, in part, to ersatz ethical thought.

JC is an elderly South African writer, who has recently re-

located to Australia. When asked by a German publisher, he agrees to record his opinions on some of the most pressing issues of global society (terrorism, ethnic conflicts, global warming, animal rights, genetic experiments) in a collection of essays. As JC confesses, the prospect is a welcome one: “An opportunity to grumble in public, an opportunity to take magic revenge on the world for declining to conform to my fantasies: how could I refuse?” (Coetzee, 2008: 33).

Although it is tempting for readers to conflate JC and John Coetzee, there is something that sets the two apart unmistakably. JC is willing to publish his strong opinions on contemporary social issues just as they stand (parched theoretical fruits from a stage of life of decreasing vitality). John Coetzee is not willing to do so. The latter published his strong opinions alongside “soft opinions”: a “Second Diary” of intimate notes on the everyday life of a man sinking steadily toward decrepitude – some erotic, but most representing an almost always dull routine involving a series of nuisances. This “Second Diary” is the text that occupies the lower layers of *Diary*’s pages. John Coetzee tells us about JC, and it is only in doing so that he gives us access to his opinion essays.

The formal technique employed by Coetzee in *Diary of a Bad Year* can be interpreted as a rhetorical manoeuvre that confronts the reader with a challenge (*a difficulty*, one might say) and thereby manages to convey disparate contents, graspable only by “different parts of the soul”⁶. The book *Strong Opinions* is

⁶ See LEAR, 2010: 70.

embedded in *Diary of a Bad Year*; were it published in isolation, it would require a different kind of focus from that which the reader brings to the latter.

The disparity between the type of content articulated at the top of the page in *Strong Opinions*, on the one hand, and JC's, Anya's and Alan's notes on daily life, on the other, is sufficiently striking to induce a conflict for the reader, particularly when it comes to how she ought to assimilate what she reads. The following passages, for instance, reveal how and to what extent this is so:

[*Strong Opinions*] One would like to retain some respect for any person who chooses death over dishonour, but in the case of Islamist suicide bombers respect does not come easily when one sees how many of them there are, and therefore (by a logical step that may be *badly* flawed, that may simply express the old Western prejudice against the mass mentality of the Other) how cheaply they must value life. In such a quandary, it may help to think of suicide bombings as a response, of a somehow despairing nature, against American (and Israeli) achievements in guiding technology far beyond the capacities of their opponents.

[*Private dialogue between Anya and JC*] Nothing like the feel of words coming into the world, he says, it is enough to make you shiver. I draw myself up, make a prune mouth. You shouldn't say things like that to a nice girl, Señor, I say. And I turn my back and off I go with a waggle of the bum, his eyes avid upon me. I picked it up from the ducks, I think: a shake of the tail so

quick it is almost a shiver. Quick-quack. (Coetzee, 2008: 39-40) Were we to read JC's *Strong Opinions* on its own, approaching the broader work in which it is situated only horizontally, as it were, we would encounter a space of argumentation. JC's book, which John Coetzee refuses to present to us separately, addresses the rational part of the soul almost exclusively. This approach relies on an *affinity* between sender and receiver, insofar as the rational part of JC's soul addresses the rational part of the reader's soul. (Obviously, this is an oversimplification; it is useful, however, when it comes to the issue of methodology in interpreting *Diary* and Coetzee's therapeutic role as writer and creator of JC.)

If we instead adopt a vertical reading of the pages of *Diary of a Bad Year*, we come across what Jonathan Lear calls "a spectacle of embedding".⁷ Relying on the plasticity of this expression, Lear describes the heart of the connection between the book's page structure and Coetzee's handling of the stories of his main characters: if we read the book vertically, we see how the compilation of JC's "strong opinions" is embedded in the presentation of the fantasies and daily lives of the three main characters. As we read down the page, we also move further into the lower part of the soul (and even to the presentation of lower parts of the body: Anya's body, JC's body and Alan's body). This "inferior" display of aspects of daily life is the separable (because useless) part of a book of "strong opinions" on contemporary social and political issues from an ethical perspective. But it is not separable from the *modernist realist* book that John Coetzee

⁷ See LEAR, 2010: 70.

offers us. *Strong Opinions* is thus a realistic (pseudo) book written in the form and under the influence of argument, but this form is only one aspect of the organic unity of form and matter embodied by JC's collection, embedded as it is in the episodes that make up his daily life. JC's authority as a character influences the fundamental structure of *Diary*; Coetzee has us actually read *Strong Opinions* and does not merely tell us about the process of its composition (which, were it so, would detract considerably from the novel's effectiveness).

We must still examine in more detail and finally *move beyond* the more or less methodological and associative elements discussed until now if we want to make clear how embedding JC's strong moral opinions in descriptions of private daily life prevents the mere communication of substitute ethical thought and instead promotes authentic ethical thought through the text's destabilizing form. To do so, I will proceed as follows:

- a) I will examine how the compositional form of *Diary of a Bad Year* precludes what I have been calling ersatz ethical thought by incorporating a simulation of this type of thought; and
- b) I will analyse one of the opinions in *Strong Opinions*, as a "case study" of sorts, in order to obtain confirmation of (a).

4. The substitution of ersatz ethical thought

Let us look more closely at "ersatz ethical thought". Once again, the underlying idea can most easily be expressed via consider-

ation of a thought experiment.

Let us imagine that a respectable academic – a professor of contemporary ethics at Yale, for instance – spends one semester at Yale and another semester at a foreign university. Let us also imagine that our distinguished academic has a teaching commitment that makes it necessary for him to commute between Europe and the United States. This distinguished academic dedicates his professional life to writing technical articles, opinion columns and conference presentations on “contemporary ethical issues” (we can imagine that one of these articles even bears the title “Modernist Realism and its Enemies: John Coetzee and Philosophy”). University professors are usually well paid, both in Europe and in America, and our notable academic is no exception. Committed to writing specialized articles, opinion columns and encyclopaedia entries on subjects such as global warming, animal rights, gender-based violence, the Middle East, paedophilia, the sale of nuclear weapons to Iran, or ersatz ethical thought, our distinguished academic has grown accustomed to accepting things as they stand in a globalized world and in the social contexts in which he engages – whilst also taking advantage of his prestige and intellectual influence. The sort of work carried out by our notable academic – who is surely too realistic to have been made up – could be considered *one* instance of ersatz ethical thought, especially insofar as its (alleged) ethical content is conveyed as mere *information* (just like *Strong Opinions* and, possibly, this essay) without any need for emotional involvement.

With this example in hand, let us return to *Diary*. When narrating first-hand experiences of barbaric situations, John Coetzee's tone tends to be unsettlingly apathetic. Yet, as we shall see, it is precisely this narrative style that provides an antidote to any conceivable form of substitute ethical thought. *Diary* portrays something that is itself an ethical issue – the intrusion of forms of ersatz ethical thought into a literary work that aims to convey ethical content. Mostly by way of the inclusion of *Strong Opinions*, Coetzee's technique allows him to *show* how difficult it is for a literary text – one meant to convey ethical thought – to avoid becoming a vehicle for ersatz ethical thought (such as an opinion chronicle, for example). JC falls into this very trap, and he is “a prestigious South African writer”. What guarantee do we have that John Coetzee will not do the same?

Coetzee's body of work as a whole incorporates a heavily self-referential component, which is conspicuous in his most recent books. In addition to *Diary*, we find a remarkable self-referential strategy in *Summertime* (2009)⁸, where the author employs another technique to replace substitution ethical thought. Whereas the technique for preventing ersatz ethical thought in *Diary* is mostly based on the triadic narrative voice – with the nuances and degrees of formality I have analysed thus far – the relevant technique in *Summertime* is its post-mortem structure. The writer John Coetzee has recently died, and the whole book, whose starting point is this very fact, is a collection of personal accounts of his life, as related by different narrators (including a

⁸ See J. M. COETZEE, *Summertime*, Vintage, London 2009.

former lover, a neighbour, and the mother of a former student in Cape Town).

Insofar as the (potentially dangerous) self-referential literary techniques vastly and variously employed in his books are one of Coetzee's assets in defeating ersatz ethical thought, and insofar as defeating it matters at least as much to us as finding out *how* such a defeat might be accomplished, in both literature and philosophy, I shall concentrate on the details of these techniques in Coetzee's novels, later applying the results to my own philosophical inquiries. Having already explored one such manoeuvre – the complex overlapping of the personal identities of Coetzee and JC – we shall now turn to another: JC's commitment to specific political views that are easily attributable to John Coetzee.

5. The dialectic of responsibility

In the “spectacle of embedding” that is *Diary of a Bad Year*, a reflection entitled “On National Shame” is included as a section of JC's book, *Strong Opinions*. In this section, JC is credited with having written the following:

An article in a recent *New Yorker* makes it plain as day that the US administration, with the lead taken by Richard Cheney, not only sanctions the torture of prisoners taken in the so-called war on terror but is active in every way to subvert laws and conventions proscribing torture. [...] Their shamelessness is quite extraordinary. Their denials are less than half-hearted. The dis-

inction their hired lawyers draw between torture and coercion is patently insincere, *pro forma*. In the new dispensation we have created, they implicitly say, the old powers of shame have been abolished. Whatever abhorrence you may feel counts for nothing. You cannot touch us, we are too powerful.

Demosthenes: Whereas the slave fears only pain, what the free man fears most is shame. If we grant the truth of what the *New Yorker* claims, then the issue for individual Americans *becomes a moral one*: how, in the face of this shame to which I am subjected, do I behave? *How do I save my honour?* [...] Dishonour is no respecter of fine distinctions. Dishonour descends upon one's shoulders, and once it has descended no amount of clever pleading will dispel it. (Coetzee, 2008: 48-59)

The aim of this reflection (both JC's and my own in this paper) is to inquire into how the relevant "moral issue" can be articulated by means of what I – following Jonathan Lear – have called the "dialectic of responsibility". Within JC's *Strong Opinions* itself, there is a sort of "division of explanatory labour" at work between a broader theoretical position (a view on national shame) and the illustration of that position (examples of torture) in "On National Shame". Furthermore, to the extent that we are familiar with Coetzee's work (his fiction and his essays) and thus acquainted with some of his own public views on international politics, we could easily ascribe this stance on American governmental decrees related to the so-called post-9/11 "war on terror", here apparently held by JC, to Coetzee himself.

In the preceding section of *Strong Opinions*, JC analyses a mor-

al-political position held by Machiavelli in *The Prince*: the *Necessità*.

Necessity, *Necessità*, is Machiavelli's guiding principle. The old, pre-Machiavellian position was that the moral law was supreme. If it so happened that the moral law was sometimes broken, that was unfortunate, but rulers were merely human, after all. The new, Machiavellian position is that infringing the moral law is justified when it is necessary. Thus is inaugurated the dualism of modern political culture, which simultaneously upholds absolute and relative standards of value. The modern state appeals to morality, to religion, and to natural law as the ideological foundation of its existence. At the same time it is prepared to infringe any or all of these in the interest of self-preservation.

Machiavelli does not deny that the claims morality makes on us are absolute. *At the same time he asserts that in the interest of the state the ruler "is often obliged [necessitato] to act without loyalty, without mercy, without humanity, and without religion"*. (Coetzee, 2008: 26)⁹

A suitable adaptation of Machiavelli's idea, here, is the notion that there is no such thing as national shame, let alone "shame assimilated by mere citizenship" – contrary to what JC contends, though it is still *he* who includes a quotation from *The Prince* in *Strong Opinions* – because one must do whatever one must in order to protect and preserve the state. Yet an important social group, which JC calls "liberal intellectuals", rejects *both* Machiavelli's *Necessità* and the "assimilation of shame by citizenship" argued for by JC. Here, JC refers specifically to the Bush

⁹ The passage in italics is from MACHIAVELLI'S *The Prince*, Chap. XVIII.

administration and to the behaviour and political views held by liberal intellectuals in post-9/11 American society, where these intellectuals aimed to distance themselves from both positions by means of rational self-justification. This specific example represents a more generalizable ethical posture, however, in which personal responsibility is denied and blame shifted to another. The dialectic of responsibility, aimed at deconstructing this posture for the reader of both the book and the pseudo-book (*Diary* and *Strong Opinions*), will operate through my own interpretation of JC's argument for national shame in this section of *Strong Opinions*, to which we now turn. This stance is easily attributable to Coetzee himself, and the following analysis aims in part to reveal the role that JC – himself a fictional creation – plays with regard to the author of *Diary*.

JC describes the mechanism of a self-justifying denial of national shame as involving three steps: (1) the ascription of shameful guilt to the political leaders of the relevant country – i.e. US post-9/11 political leaders; (2) a massive distancing from the positions adopted and the actions carried out by these leaders; and (3) a rejection of both moral dualism *and* the divide between theory and practice inherent in Machiavelli's *Necessità*.

Liberal intellectuals actively want to distance themselves from both the central idea of *Necessità* and the attribution of national shame, precisely because such positions implicate *them*. However, there is something the liberal intellectual doesn't see – mostly because he cannot see it – and this is the fact that shameful guilt descends like a curse and cannot be removed by argument.

Liberal intellectuals cannot recognize this phenomenon because they want to deny their involvement in national shame by way of logical justification.

At this point in JC's strong opinion on national shame, the astute reader of *Diary* gradually realizes that JC is talking about and to the reader *herself* whenever he writes about "liberal intellectuals", describing their behaviour and the structure of their stance in view of this specific moral and political issue. And, at the same time that this manoeuvre is acknowledged, the reader is further reminded that JC is no more than a product of Coetzee's literary imagination. Although Coetzee gives us *more* than *Strong Opinions*, he offers it to us nonetheless, and so must be held accountable for whatever positions are defended therein – even if he sometimes feels tempted to decry JC's decrepitude and misogyny and never completely identifies himself with his alter-ego (thus making things easier for him and harder for us). In spite of the likely frustration caused by this device, the dialectic of responsibility extends to the reader herself, who, after all, chose to take up the novel in the first place.

The dialectic of responsibility can therefore be said to act upon the reader of *Diary of a Bad Year* via a mechanism of identification. At the moment in *Diary* where the above quotation occurs, it is again Coetzee who wants to make us understand that there is something extremely inconsistent about the stance of these "liberal intellectuals". More specifically: how can "they" be opposed to both Machiavelli's *Necessità*, as a positive stance, and the assimilation of shame by citizenship, when both

positions represent contradictory yet complementary ideas that “exhaustively cover a domain of intelligible positions”? The problem arises precisely because one must choose between the following options:

a) Either there is no such thing as national shame, because one must do whatever is needed to protect the interests of the state (*Necessità*); or

b) National shame exists and does not pertain exclusively to political leaders, insofar as it spreads via non-rational mechanisms, its removal cannot be effected by rational justification, and these leaders were elected by the public. To accuse political leaders of “shameful behaviour” *is already to experience the curse of this shame.*

This inconsistency, however, belongs also to *me* – an astute, well-informed reader of *Diary of a Bad Year*. I am perfectly capable of understanding the structural paths of this inconsistency, and I can even detect the responsibility-divesting cynicism inherent in it, so long as I am able to rely on the scapegoat of the third person. *It is “them”, of which we speak, the so-called “liberal intellectuals”.*

Only by means of the formal use of the third person to refer to this social group does Coetzee manage to convey his intended content in an effective way, removing the veil of blindness that risks shielding the eyes of the liberal intellectual reader. The dialectic of responsibility is the reading process by which we

achieve the lifting of this veil.

It is more than plausible to suppose that, upon finishing *Diary*, one might come to view this formal strategy as a “formal subterfuge” and thus be left feeling naked and doubly deceived – for we do not like the position held by the liberal intellectuals, which isn’t actually “their” position, but rather *ours*, and we do not like the way Coetzee’s text pretends to tell us about an abstract group of people who can only stand for strong positions by being blind to their own point of view, when actually it describes us.

The dialectic of responsibility – this whole process – functions as a bridge between the *formal method of writing* and the *act of conveying ethical content* (both as a “material” posture towards human action and as a strategy for reading the book). It is by means of this dialectic that the reader manages not only to understand her place on the plane of reasons embodied by *Diary of a Bad Year* – becoming aware that she is an integral part of this space and not a mere spectator – but also to replace substitute ethical thought (the only kind available to any reader who merely occupies the position of spectator) with a straightforward but difficult ethical attitude: a commitment to decide how she should live and behave, given the shame that is hers *ab initio* – maybe because she is American, most likely because she is human.

But why did Coetzee feel compelled to use JC to morally educate *his* readers, while refusing to reveal his precise relation to this character and to his views? Isn’t this, after all, a sheer

abuse of well-known rhetorical devices? In other words, isn't he as shameless as any liberal intellectual?

6. Unveiled methodology

Admittedly, we may not ultimately settle on the interpretation of *Diary* I have been offering here; it is, after all, just one of many possible approaches to Coetzee's work, with its own potential shortcomings (for which I alone am responsible). With this said, however, two points in particular have thus far become apparent: both in the sections that Coetzee wants to attribute to JC and in the lower sections of the page that he doesn't mind presenting as his own, Coetzee's writing style is extremely clear, descriptive and neat. Indeed, he must avoid obscurity and linguistic excess if he wants the narrative to progress through the different sections of the book's pages, to preserve the important connections between them, and to hold the reader's attention. On the other hand, the narrative device of a split in the author's voice instantiates a gap with regard to the identity of the novel's author at the very outset. The graphic structure of the book's page is of course highly unconventional, and both it and the related identity split between JC and John Coetzee are features that the reader confronts from the moment she takes up the novel. Philosophers are drawn to Coetzee's texts in part because of their complexity and the stylistic puzzles they contain. My own reading of *Diary*, whether or not it is ultimately helpful, can be viewed as a response to its ostensibly puzzling rhetorical fea-

tures. The complexity of this interpretation directly reflects the complexity of the book's structure – an enticement with which Coetzee subtly provokes philosophical engagement.

Contemporary philosophers describe John Coetzee's work as "modernist realist" (see Mulhall, 2009), both because of its systematic formal features and because of the careful meta-reflection on the historical evolution of literary realism and modernism that some of his works explicitly contain.¹⁰ Such philosophers go even further when they argue that a parallel struggle between realism and modernism, in terms of both technique and the corresponding impact on thematic issues, is intrinsic *both* to the realist design of the novel since its inception (citing either Cervantes or the pioneering English realism of Daniel Defoe) and to the realist efforts of modern philosophy. Mulhall has the following to say about this dialectic in relation to the genre of the novel:

The history of the novel since Defoe, Richardson and Sterne might therefore be written entirely in terms of the ways in which novelists repeatedly subject their inheritance of realistic conventions to critical questioning in order to recreate the impression of reality in their readers (in large part by encouraging those readers to see prior uses of convention to represent the real as merely conventional in contrast with their own, far more convincing ones). [...] [I]t is not simply that the novel has a

¹⁰ See, for instance, J. M. COETZEE's modernist reflection on main features of formal realism in *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*, Secker and Warburg, London 2003, 4.

cannibalistic relation to other literary genres; from the outset, its practitioners had a similarly Oedipal relation to prior examples within the genre of the novel, and so to the prior conventions within which they necessarily operated (Mulhall, 2009: 145).

In *The Wounded Animal*,¹¹ Mulhall elaborates on the same kind of Oedipal struggle we encounter in the founding projects of modern philosophy – including those undertaken by Descartes, Locke and Berkeley – and their spectacular fight against arguments of authority, from both philosophy and religion.

Following this thread, and having presented the dialectic of responsibility in *Diary of a Bad Year* (along with one possible explanation for the tripartite structure of the book's pages), I must now apply the results of my own inquiry to philosophy – so that my own effort doesn't merely collapse into yet another case of the imposition of a dry philosophical framework on a remarkable piece of contemporary literature, and thus the destruction of the latter's original vitality. The crucial issue at this point can be put thus: recent philosophical projects have turned to specific literary achievements – like Coetzee's – and found that they have such-and-such to say about them. But who, then, in turn examines these philosophical commentaries on works of literature? Writers like Coetzee tend to be extremely critical when they do so (as our consideration of *Strong Opinions* shows). Is there, perhaps, a more genial approach available to us?

¹¹ S. MULHALL, *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton/Oxford 2009, Print (esp. chap. Nine).

7. A third contributor

A further important source for this resumed conversation between (contemporary) literature and (contemporary) philosophy – neglected thus far – is literary criticism¹². In his 2005 study, *The English Novel: An Introduction*,¹³ Terry Eagleton (whose critical standpoint is distinctly Marxist) insists that it was the extraordinary rise of the middle class throughout eighteenth-century Europe that, via a narrative mirroring of its social struggles and aspirations, paved the way for the realist novel. Eagleton grounds his critical reading of canonical English-language novels, reaching from the work of Daniel Defoe to that of Virginia Woolf (the book not only argues for an historical model for interpreting the evolution of the genre, but also follows the historical evolution of the canon), on an essentially sociological model, arguing that the ascending middle class can be characterized as the great protagonist of the liberal values of individual self-determination and prosperity, unwilling to stand for romantic myths and general abstractions, and that its most representative writers projected the main values defended by the class to which they belong. For Eagleton, then, the realistic prose of most eighteenth-century literature both mirrors and embodies the pragmatic values of a new social order. If we accept that

¹² Coetzee himself is an outstanding and well-known literary critic, of course (see, e.g. his *Inner Workings*, Vintage, London 2008). We have been focusing here only in his literary works.

¹³ T. EAGLETON, *The English Novel: An Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford 2005, Print.

the purpose of the realistic novel is to do justice to the facts, to life as it stands in this new social configuration, we must also assume that this social mirroring, arguably accomplished through an inevitably conventional medium – a natural language – is the true purpose of realistic prose. The linguistic convention that makes narrative possible is thus an essentially phenomenal device, in the sense that it allows for the linguistic manifestation of the (socially relevant) facts as they stand.

Both in the introduction to his study “What is a Novel” and in his critical discussion of the canon, Eagleton relies on a socio-dialectical model to explain literary formal realism. According to this stance, the realistic, self-effacing style of the eighteenth-century English novel is as much a product of the contemporary liberal social order as the modernistic turn of the early twentieth century is a product of the social and political disasters that resulted in the Holocaust. To Eagleton, if the novel does indeed have representative potential, so does the social order whose essentially evolutionary dialectic can also be depicted by conventional linguistic means.

By contrast, Stephen Mulhall (in two chapters in *The Wounded Animal*¹⁴ and two essays in *The Self and its Shadows*¹⁵) considers the tension between realism and modernism in the work of John Coetzee, detecting in the latter’s working out of the mod-

¹⁴ MULHALL, 2009: Chapters Nine and Ten.

¹⁵ S. Mulhall, *The Self and Its Shadows: A Book of Essays on Individuality as Negation in Philosophy and the Arts*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, Print (“The Melodramatic Reality of Film and Literature” and “Countering the Ballad of Co-Dependency”).

ernistic-realist tension we've analysed above what I will term a "conventionalist" pattern of self-overcoming with regard to inherited literary styles.

At the risk of oversimplifying Mulhall's dense account of modernist realism in the contemporary novel (which will serve my own purposes below), I want to describe his proposal as follows. He insists on the existence of an inner and inevitably doomed struggle within literary prose itself, present since the very inception of the novel, arguing that the novel has been struggling against its own conventional status as a genre in the name of fidelity to the facts. However, since these supposed facts are themselves a product of the literary imagination (and since, as linguistic creations, they are particularly "conventional"), the realistic novel is logically doomed to inflict on its descendants the same Oedipal tension it inherited from its ancestors (this is the material point of his quotation above).

Now, this dialectic of self-overcoming is made all the more acute by a progressive awareness within the modernist tradition of the fact that the methodological design of formal realism can only be accomplished through a means of expression that is highly conventional or non-natural – a means *that must be acknowledged as such*. (According to this proposal, Coetzee's literary project, not least because he is also an outstanding critic, inherits this self-conscious historical design.)

The potential for reflection afforded by the insurmountable barrier separating the realistic writer from the factual world that his prose intends to represent provides a path for awareness of the

facticity of the prose itself and for reflection, through that very prose, on both its representative potential and its representative limits. This in turn calls for a reflective fold within the prose itself in what concerns the conditions of its own possibility as a (conventional) representative device – something we’ve seen exemplified in Coetzee’s modernistic approach to his own literary project, e.g. by reflecting on the conditions of the composition of *Strong Opinions* as an element within *Diary*.

By the time this turning-in-upon-itself on the part of literary prose is finally explored systematically from within the bounds of literature, we encounter modernism scholars arguing that: Typical aspects [...] of “modernist” writing are radical aesthetics, technical experimentation, spatial or rhythmic rather than chronological form, self-conscious reflexiveness, skepticism towards the idea of a centered human subject and a sustained inquiry into the uncertainty of reality. [...] Modernism [was thus] concerned with self-referentiality, producing art that was about itself and texts that were self-contained rather than representational. (Childs, 2008: 19)¹⁶

We also encounter (historically minded) modernist realist writers like Coetzee, reflecting on the tradition he inherited within a novel of his own:

The blue costume, the greasy hair, are details, signs of moderate realism. Supply the particulars, allow the significations to emerge of themselves. A procedure pioneered by Daniel Defoe. Robinson Crusoe, cast up on the beach, looks around for his

¹⁶ P. CHILDS, *Modernism*, Routledge, London/New York 2008², Print.

shipmates. But there are none. “I never saw them afterwards, or any sign of them”, says he, “except three of their hats, one cap, and two shoes that were not fellows”. Two shoes, not fellows: by not being fellows, the shoes have ceased to be footwear and become proofs of death, torn by the foaming seas off the feet of drowning men and tossed ashore. No large words, no despair, just hats and caps and shoes. (*Elizabeth Costello*, 2003: 4)

At this point, we *should* already also know what philosophers themselves have to say about these historical tensions, both in the (finally) fellow subject of literature and within philosophy itself. But do we really?

8. Self-subverting models: are we left without a theory?

What have we accomplished thus far? We began by mentioning an ongoing conversation between philosophers and writers (especially novelists) that seems to rescue the latter from Plato’s exile (it is also important to stress here that this is mainly a philosophical worry, since the poets were never greatly concerned about their ostracism from philosophy). We then analysed an extremely concrete contemporary discussion of two issues that were raised by Plato as (philosophical) obstacles against the poets: namely, the worry that poetry, due to its idolatrous character, leads us away from virtue, and that an excessive focus on images addresses only the appetitive part of the soul, leaving our rational faculty hungry for argument. As it happens, John Coetzee seems to turn these worries upside-down (in *Diary of a*

Bad Year and elsewhere), putting both (platonic) charges to the philosopher himself and *working his way out of a rationalistic trap by paying close attention to the work's form, in addition to both creating an alter-ego who plays along with it and imposing himself as the author of a larger book, which finally frees him from the bonds of mere argument by incorporating argument and presenting it as essentially defective.* But then, one question still remains: *who* reads John Coetzee and tackles his therapeutic aims, in part by showing that she has been cured of the argumentative blindness he diagnoses? In other words, is it possible for Coetzee's charges against philosophy to be not only answered but even incorporated into a new way of doing philosophy? I have implied that the answer is yes, but I haven't yet said *how* this might be so.

One of the things that ought to be highlighted once again is that Coetzee himself writes his novels (and voices its charges) *in a specific way*: his style is sober, compact and self-conscious, all at once. Furthermore, he reflects on the peculiarities of (his own and others') literary styles, and, partly because of this incorporated self-reflection, his novels belong to what philosophers like Mulhall have termed "modernist realism". How can we account for *that* – that is, for our claim, as philosophers, that Coetzee is a modernist realist writer?

In the preceding section, I presented a two-pronged reading of the evolution of realism and modernism in the history of the novel, thereby generating a fiction of my own about the sort of literary prose that aims to represent invented stories about made up characters whilst doing justice to social and psycho-

logical reality. I gave names to the two explanatory models that account for the realism/modernism dialectic in the history of the novel, arguing that, whereas Eagleton's model is essentially socio-dialectical, Mulhall's account emphasizes a conscious self-overcoming of the constraints provided by literary conventions. And now I want to say that, in truth, neither of the two models functions exclusively of the other as a means of capturing the true nature of the development of literary realism and the turn to modernism – nor, for that matter, can either of them account for the sort of modernistic critical framing of an internal realistic project that we encounter in *Diary*.

Even if, with Eagleton, we accept as our starting point the historical emergence of the European middle class from the eighteenth century onwards, the shattering events of the twentieth century (not least South African Apartheid) are such that the historical developments emphasized in the socio-economic model come to be reflected in precisely the struggle against inherited conventions emphasized by the “conventionalist” approach outlined above. Given the unique and devastating nature of the historical realities in question, reflection on one element cannot be undertaken in isolation of careful reflection on the other.

And thus no sociological model that can account for the modernistic turn in the European novel in the last decade of the nineteenth century can dispense with Oedipal struggles within and against literary conventions that have become either incomplete or totally obsolete as a means of representing reality as it truly stands. As the relevant social developments themselves

come to be characterized by a breakdown in structure, unity and value, their representation becomes inseparable from a struggle against increasingly inadequate conventions – the odd structure of the page in Coetzee’s *Diary* bearing witness to this inadequacy.

To my analysis of the split page we should also add a consideration of the remarkable methodological differences between the voices of JC and John Coetzee in *Diary of a Bad Year*, played out by the latter as part of his therapeutic induction of readers of *his* book. The passages from both *Strong Opinions* and the lower sections that Anya encourages JC to call “soft opinions” cited above attest to a genuine difference of tone with regard to each voice. JC’s writing is as informative and opinionated as a thematic essay can be, and he never allows his reasoning to deviate from a clear argumentative pattern. *Strong Opinions* is rightly described as a *realistic report* on contemporary ethical and political issues. In the lower sections of the page – where we also read how the upper sections were produced – Coetzee departs from straightforward reasoning, allowing for suspensions, onomatopoeia and markedly emotive language. It seems likely that Coetzee wants his readers to realize *that* and *how* a maximally comprehensive literary achievement cannot rely merely on the politically realistic prose characteristic of JC’s voice. The way Coetzee shows us *this*, as we’ve seen, is via a modernistic embedding of *Strong Opinions* within his own book.

But then, if that embedding is one of the key features of this modernist realist literary project at this stage of its evolution (we

know that it has evolved further in the meantime), and if one of the practical outcomes of this manoeuvre is the dialectic of responsibility and its unveiling of the truth about the status of *Diary*'s reader by refusing to feed him a straightforward argumentative treatise like *Strong Opinions* alone – precisely because, as we've seen, it cannot do the job it is intended to do – how can an explanatory essay on *Diary of a Bad Year* and its modernistic refinement possibly escape the fate of ersatz ethical thought? What I want to say is: how can a plausible theory of ersatz ethical thought avoid collapsing into mere ersatz thought itself, where such failure is attributable in part to its very plausibility and persuasiveness? After all, the discovery of a good explanatory model usually provides us with a grounded excuse to stop thinking about the topic it explains. We assume that we know, and we proceed from there. As we've seen, by Coetzee's lights, both the theory and our acceptance of it are forms of substitution ethical thought. Thus we might suspect that this paper should itself have been written in three layers, to the degree that its aim was to prevent ersatz ethical thought. But then, what would have been the point of writing it, other than to re-phrase *Diary of a Bad Year*, re-composing it in other words and perhaps damaging the original's reputation?

Is there anything left for us to do when the target of our inquiry, with which we are directly confronted, throws itself back upon us? Perhaps we should look more closely at how philosophers have dealt with the traps left by novelists they do not want to expel from their citadel again – such as Coetzee.

Mulhall is a case in point. Both in *The Wounded Animal* – especially in those chapters that most insist upon the dangerous overlapping of the literary identities of Costello and Coetzee – and in the more recent “Countering the Ballad of Co-dependency”, he explores various possibilities for *staging* or *performing* the literary encounter between realism and modernism in the story of Elizabeth Costello, displayed in the novel of the same name (it is now evident that, and how, the same can be done for *Diary*). But that staging isn’t merely theoretical, if only because Mulhall’s philosophical prose embodies what it stands for, thus constituting another plausible candidate for a defeat of ersatz ethical thought. (Because his approach doesn’t duplicate Coetzee’s ways, it can, at least on the face of it, be set free of the charge of involving an inconsistent – or desperate – appeal to the authority of the writer, which would have rendered him irresponsible in just the way that the liberal intellectual is irresponsible.)

Mulhall chose to focus on *Elizabeth Costello*. Readers of this book, Mulhall claims, are introduced to events that take place both in the protagonist’s academic life and in her everyday family life – both of which happen to be products of Coetzee’s literary imagination, as are *Diary*, *Strong Opinions* and *JC*. Reading *Elizabeth Costello*, we learn about the protagonist’s physical decay, which contrasts sharply with the prodigiousness of her literary imagination and the playful recreation of the history of the novel that she provides in *The House on Eccles Street* (a novel by Costello to which we have no access whatever), in the Gates Lecture at Appleton College, and in private conversation with John, her

son. In the course of her lecture at Appleton College, Costello even tackles the meaning of Kafka's "Report to an Academy", whose strange narrative starting point (an ape talking to a human audience) perhaps resembles her own situation in delivering the Gates Lecture.

The set of episodes in Costello's life brought together by Coetzee in a novel published several years after their individual presentation as lectures¹⁷ does not present us with a theory about the (realistic) evolution of formal realism up to the modernistic turn (just as the modernistic performance of embedding one realistic book – *Strong Opinions* – within a larger one and toying with the names of their respective authors does not constitute a theory about the evolution of these formal techniques, or even about the evolution of both books as instances of each). Rather, the book stages or performs this evolution, in part by including reports on unexpected events during Costello's visit to Appleton College and to John's family. What happens during this visit (both the lectures and the meetings they occasion), provides the raw material for a realistic novel which, in a modernistic fashion, reflects both upon its own conditions of possibility and development as a specimen of the genre and upon the historical evolution of the latter. *Elizabeth Costello* is precisely this novel, and Mulhall, in his reading of it and the modernistic turn it instantiates, chooses to bring neither its story nor the puzzle of

¹⁷ *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, delivered at Princeton University in 1997, under the title "The Lives of Animals" and published in 1999 (J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1999).

the identity of its author and narrator into a scholarly frame. Instead, and battling against the standards relied upon by his own analytic-philosophical tradition, he does justice to the literary and philosophical aspects of both (story and puzzle) by giving them a voice in his own reading – itself an example of the interdisciplinary conversation between philosophy and literature I have been tracing, which becomes possible when traditional, discipline-specific strictures are loosened. In precisely this way, and much like Coetzee's, his own work represents a critical response to traditional philosophical modes of investigation, and thus also an Oedipal overcoming of a widely accepted methodological inheritance. Contrary to what occurs with regard to Coetzee-the-writer, however, this way of doing philosophy is polemic and faces several kinds of Platonic critic. It does reply to Coetzee's challenge, though, and without replicating its form – which is crucial to its avoiding the descent into ersatz ethical thought. With this important development noted, what this open-ended inquiry would still seem to require is a similarly therapeutic critique of the literary critic – and indeed of the tentative reflections offered here.