

Spring 2018

# J.M. COETZEE AND LITERARY PATERNITY: THE FATHER IN THE WORK OF WRITING

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## Recommended Citation

Kesterson, Joshua, "J.M. COETZEE AND LITERARY PATERNITY: THE FATHER IN THE WORK OF WRITING" (2018).  
*Masters Essays*. 88.

<https://collected.jcu.edu/mastersessays/88>

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J.M. COETZEE AND LITERARY PATERNITY: THE FATHER IN THE WORK OF  
WRITING

An Essay Submitted to the  
Office of Graduate Studies  
College of Arts & Sciences of  
John Carroll University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

By  
Josh Kesterson  
2018

My writing was about you, indeed I was only confiding my troubles to a book because I could not confide in you. It was a deliberately extended farewell to you; but although you impelled me to write, my writing took the course I set for it.  
—Franz Kafka, *Letter to My Father*

*For Jeff Kesterson, 1955-2015*

In a 1991 lecture given at the University of California at Berkeley, J.M. Coetzee gives “Homage” to “some of the writers without whom [he] would, in a certain sense, not exist”—Flaubert, Joyce, Beckett, Faulkner, Eliot, Rilke, and Pound, to name a few—acknowledging a “literary paternity” from which he descends (“Homage” 5).

This homage, which titularly and stylistically suggests some reverence for the father figure(s) mentioned, is slightly at odds when set against the often less than flattering depictions of fathers across Coetzee’s works: in *Dusklands*, a father attempts infanticide; *In the Heart of the Country*’s Magda fantasizes about killing, or actually kills (it is uncertain), her authoritative, oppressive father with an axe; *Disgrace*’s David Lurie is disconnected from his daughter, and fails to protect her from home invasion and rape; *Diary of a Bad Year*’s “JC” is an aging man who wishes another man, Johann Sebastian Bach, were his father.

And then there is the father in *Summertime* and its related textual predecessors, genealogically relative-texts described as fictional memoirs or fictional autobiographies: *Boyhood* is the first of these, *Youth* the second. The final words of *Summertime*, identified as words gathered from the deceased John Coetzee’s notebooks, titled “Undated Fragments,” present an ultimatum.<sup>1</sup> John’s aging, ailing father requires more intimate care, care that John does not necessarily wish to provide:

It used to be that he, John, had too little employment. Now that is about to change. Now he will have as much employment as he can handle, as much and more. He is going to have to abandon some of his personal projects and be a nurse. Alternatively, if he will not be a nurse, he must announce to his father: *I cannot face the prospect of ministering to you day and night. I am going to abandon you. Goodbye.* One or the other: there is no third way. (265-6)

This culminative point constructs a binary opposition, explicitly declaring no alternative possibilities: abandon the father to pursue a life of writing, or abandon writing to nurse the dying father. This is the point that, for David Attwell, signals the “end of John’s being the child” (153). For Attwell, this moment, heralding the coming death of John’s father, is not so crucial to the story as John’s maturation, which Attwell insists is a theme eminently central to the ficto-auto-biographical triptych, a trilogy that concerns itself with “the emergence of the writer” (154).

And yet, while a writer’s emergence is no doubt present in the works, the father is absolutely crucial to the work, like fathers always are to their sons: the father is instrumental—not secondary—to the process whereby a writer might come to find his (own) feet. Thus, the opposition central to *Summertime*, a central opposition flirting along the text’s edges (to abandon or to nurse the father[s]), is neither a simple nor a straightforward matter of genealogy. *Summertime*, and perhaps Coetzee’s writings at large, perform a desire to turn toward and away from one’s own lineage—a kind of simultaneously centripetal and centrifugal movement, a literary performance versed in vicissitudes of truth and fiction inherent to autobiography. This somersault is a playful

search for, and perhaps discovery of, a third position, a search common to Coetzee's texts. In this case the search is for a position that neither abandons nor nurses a father, lineage, paternity, or history, but that rather pursues another point both interior and exterior to the others, a point or state that is at once an abandonment of, and a kind of nursing of, a point that speaks to the heart of the work of writing itself.

The metaphor of the father as an author and the text as the author's child is inescapable, echoed here by Edward Said:

The ground of literature is the text, just as its father—the mixed metaphor is inescapable, and encouraged by every writer who ever wrote—is the author. This is the very citadel of literary orthodoxy. Only a great writer will challenge that fortress of certainty. He will see that a father is himself a son; he will also see that his own work must be protected not only from writers who will come after it, but also from the powerful authors that precede him, who remind him by the strength of their prior authority and his filial secondariness. (“The Poet as Oedipus”)

The father is first a figure that represents and possesses authority, and commonly, historically, one that represents and possesses an ultimate or omnipotent authority (theological allusions abound). The father is the head of the household, the breadwinner, the leader; the father is the founder, the first. The father is the one to whom his descendants look up (for better or worse) and is the one from whom the children take their surnames.

The authoritative father has typically been the force against which the son resists, the rule that the son defies. A child might wish to abandon his father to escape the power

and reach of paternal authority, simultaneously a source of limitation and a source of denial—potentially a denial of life, or of independent life. Eugene Dawn from *Dusklands*, working under the authority of the US government and, more immediately, his boss named Coetzee, is tasked to revise his essay detailing the procedures and effects of certain psychological warfare operations performed on the Việt Cộng during the Vietnam War. In his report, Dawn describes the “voice of the father” as one that “utters itself appropriately out of the sky,” first in the form of bombs from B-52s, whose devastating effects can easily translate, he suggests, to the vocal medium of “radio waves” (*Dusklands* 21). He concludes, or perhaps justifies the use of this voice, by stating bluntly that the father is itself “authority, infallibility, ubiquity. He does not persuade, he commands” (21). Magda also confirms the oppressive, suffocating, limiting power of the father’s voice, for it is the father’s mouth that “echoes and echoes” an “eternal NO” (*Heart* 16).

John’s father, at the end of *Summertime*, seems to say to John this “eternal NO” by way of the burden he has been, and has—at the end—become to John. In his ailment, and through his need for a nurse, he says “NO” to John’s writerly ambitions, at least at first glance; he says “NO” to a son who wants to at last break away from the father’s weighted presence, which John tries to escape at least once by looking into purchasing a house for his father to live, alone, in Merweville—a house which John perhaps attempts to convince himself will be “better than an old-age home” even though it is located in a town where, according to Margot (through Vincent) “no one wants to live,” perhaps making the house quite like living in an old-age home after all (107).

Although John's relationship with his father appears to lie on the edges of *Summertime* (in large part because of the textual positioning of some of the more intimate engagements between the two as outer framing edges to the core interviews conducted by biographer Mr Vincent) this filial relationship nevertheless becomes a central thread in the text, and is instrumental—not secondary—to the emergence of John as a writer. Already this is established via the burden expressed by the text's final words, words I have already quoted: the "pivotal" moment of the text, perhaps. It follows then that if one wanted to understand, or at least see a way in which a writer emerges, specifically here Coetzee via John, one should further consider what it is about this relationship that affects the subject: what might impel him—the writer—to write (after all, such considerations—of the origins of the artist, of his inspiration, of his motives, and so on, are so often goals of critics, if not at least for how such consideration might lead to some kind of new "revelation" of the text the critic examines).

This consideration must be of Coetzee via John and must thus be an examination of both John and Coetzee: due in no small part to the autobiographical-function of Coetzee's texts, but also of all writing in general. This is despite a call for departure from critical focus on a text's author espoused by Roland Barthes in "The Death of the Author," wherein an author is detached from his or her text. Barthes says that "Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing"; he adds that the moment when "this disconnection occurs" and "the voice loses its origin" is the moment that "the author enters into his own death" and "writing begins" (142). Mikhail Bakhtin is also in pursuit of the author, suggesting that "The author (as creator of the novelistic

whole) cannot be found at any of the novel's language levels: he is to be found at the center of organization where all levels intersect,” or, one might say, the author is found at the center of the text (48-9). Such a location certainly conflicts with the disappearance of the author described by Barthes. In response, Jacques Derrida undoes this logic in showing how, notably, “The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center,” (*Writing and Difference* 279). This response, a kind of third position to Barthes and Bakhtin, suggests that, paradoxically, the author is and is not found at the center of converging voices present in a text.

*Summertime* very clearly presents its audience with an analogously paradoxical situation. Its fictional author, John Coetzee, is, in the present time of the work, ostensibly dead, biologically dead for the purposes of the fiction, and whose voice is heard speaking from journal scraps framing the spatially central matter of interviews. These interviews, which make up the bulk of *Summertime*, are conducted and collected by biographer Vincent—who is also one of the “*internal* author-authorit[ies]” of *Summertime*, to borrow Brian Macaskill’s words (21). Vincent’s stated goal in conducting and collecting these interviews is to craft a biography of the presently-dead John, with specific focus on the years in which he was “*still finding his feet as a writer*” (225). He thus speaks with five individuals—Julia, Margot, Adriana, Martin, and Sophie—all who, unlike himself, have known John “*in the flesh*” (34); despite his presence and status as an internal author-authority in *Summertime*, Vincent depends upon the authenticity of the words of others: he places a kind of trust in the authority of his sources—like a son might relate to a father.

Each interviewee—supposedly an author of her or his (mostly her) own story—details select events from her time with John, and as a result, each voice sounds a distinct and unique representation of John. *Summertime's* polyphonic structure further bifurcates when Vincent's voice mingles with, and in some cases affects or edits, others' voices. A reading of Julia's portion of the novel reveals at the first a formatting strategy to distinguish Julia's voice from Vincent's, as here the interviewee's voice is left untouched while the interviewer's voice is italicized. In the following section, Margot's, the format switches and, notably, the politics of the interview itself shift. Where the prior conversation between Julia and Vincent is an interview occurring or in process, Vincent follows up with Margot concerning an interview that has already occurred: the audience is not shown the initial interview. Vincent opens their discussion by telling Margot how he “did something fairly radical. [He] cut out [his] prompts and questions and fixed up the prose to read as an uninterrupted narrative spoken in [Margot's] voice,” to which Margot expresses qualms, saying—in italics—“*When I spoke to you, I was under the impression you were simply going to transcribe our interview and leave it at that. I had no idea you were going to rewrite it completely*”; Vincent retorts by saying “That's not entirely fair. I have not rewritten it, I have simply recast it as a narrative” (87, 91). On one level, an authorial tension between interviewer, who has edited a supposedly true story, and interviewee, who told this story, emerges. One questions who owns the original spoken words, and thus who speaks the truth of events discussed. In “[fixing] up [Margot's] prose,” Vincent adds his own voice and language to Margot's, and Vincent's voice and language are never identical in meaning or intention to Margot's. The result of this polyphonic interpretation of another voice is an obfuscation: whatever intentions

Margot might have had in saying what she said in the particular way with the particular language she used blurs and gets lost when Vincent merges his voice with hers, when he “recast[s] it as a narrative.”

Proposing for a moment that John is at the center of *Summertime*—as Attwell suggests (see above)—or that every voice in some way revolves around or attempts to tell his story—the story of his shape or character, and the story of how he emerges as a writer—the described bifurcation of voices uncovers a tremendous distancing from that center: a polyphonic narrative strategy that moves centripetally. If John is at the center, an interesting possibility emerges: John is both related and unrelated to Coetzee, the novel's author, and as such reveals the potentiality for the novel to be an autobiography; yet, if the polyphonic play works to distance the text from John, the autobiographical aims of the novel succumb to failure. A parallel that confirms or contributes to this failure is the confused labelling of *Summertime*: US editions subtitle it as “fiction,” while UK and commonwealth editions opt not to include a subtitle at all or use the subtitle “Scenes from Provincial Life,” a nod to the title of Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary: Mœurs de province*.

In *Doubling the Point*, a collection of essays composed by Coetzee and interviews conducted by Attwell, Attwell emphasizes that “autobiography is secondary to fiction” (3). Attwell insists that this is the case despite Coetzee’s repeated insistence that “all writing is autobiographical” (17, 391).<sup>2</sup> Coetzee continues to describe “autobiography as a biographical activity” where “Biography is a kind of storytelling in which you select material from a lived past and fashion it into a narrative that leads into a living present in a more or less seamless way. The premise of biography is continuity between past and

present” (391). If Coetzee's definition of biography is to be trusted—alongside his declaration of the nature of autobiography with regard to biographical activity—there evolves a difficulty in distinguishing between biographical modes: autobiography is itself a form of storytelling; the only difference between autobiography and biography, at first, is that the potential subject of an autobiographical story is the self-writing, rather than the other under examination, as is the case in biography. Coetzee explains in greater detail how these modes differ, saying that:

What sets autobiography apart from other biography is, on the one hand, that the writer has privileged access to information and, on the other, that because tracing the line from past to present is such a self-interested enterprise (self-interested in every sense), selective vision, even a degree of blindness, becomes inevitable—blindness to what may be obvious to any passing observer. (*DP* 391)

Autobiography differs from biography precisely in how it is a genre that is granted access to more intimate knowledge of its subject, by virtue of its subject also being its author. Consequently, in accessing this knowledge, one inevitably finds oneself solipsistically involved in a centrifugal operation functioning in seclusion from that which lies outside the borders of the self, and therein Coetzee's blindness reveals itself. On the other hand, it appears impossible for a biographer to uncover true knowledge of the biographical subject, the kind of knowledge truly available to the autobiographical subject, as biography as a genre possesses a trait that disconnects the author from the subject of the writing. And yet, autobiography is not afforded the same kind of distance present in biographical writing. Because both genres have unique boundaries preventing a

reader or writer from arriving at absolute truth of the writing subject, some medium between the two modes of discourse would be necessary to counteract those troublesome traits of distance and closeness, if the most authentic, true image of the subject is sought.

If autobiography is resigned to shadows, then Coetzee's repeated statement that "All autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography" becomes one of concern as all textual production is complicit with its author, but is also without center—that is, all writing lacks a singular, absolute truth, that can be traced back to a source, such as its author, in a reliable way. Derrida's critique of logocentrism is another way of envisioning this paradox between the autobiographical element of writing and the absence of a more grounded and absolute truth inherent to writing. Moreover, if one examines the troubled center delineated in Derrida's discourse, one finds that the center, located inside and outside the structure to which it pertains, is much like the structure of both autobiography and biography insofar as these mediums seek a center: the center, both inside and outside of the discourse, is at once always available and unavailable to the external and internal observer.

Coetzee disrupts the auto-biographical paradox with his notion of *autrebiography*, a kind of alternative auto-biographical form interested in acknowledging the complicity between autobiography and biography while remaining in touch with the differences in their traits. The word *autrebiography* is prefixed with the French word *autre*, meaning "other"; when fixed to the word biography, it represents a wordplay that points towards a mode of writing that does not so obviously and outright seek knowledge of the writer, as autobiography does. At the same time, the "other" prefixation implies a distance from the subject of writing that is *other than* that position held by the biographer, who views the

subject of writing from a kind of mock-scientific position (and it is a mock position because it announces itself as one of objectivity while nevertheless succumbing to subjective pitfalls that are understandably hard to avoid, such as possible interjections of personal perspectives). Rather, this “otherbiography” seeks knowledge of a subject that looks alongside an interior, privileged autobiographical position *and* an exterior biographical position. *Autrebiography* merges the distinct constitutive elements of autobiography and biography to overcome the previously described limitations of each discursive mode that largely prevent a writer from arriving at absolute, infallible truths of whatever subject is at hand. In this way, *autrebiography* enacts a politics of alterity, or Otherness, in writing the self; the author writes with simultaneous access to the visible and the invisible and becomes a “secretary of the invisible” as another of Coetzee’s semi-fictional authors—Elizabeth Costello—calls herself (199).

All of Coetzee’s writing is invested in the autobiographical, and his more explicitly generic ficto-auto-biographies—*Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*—embrace the *autrebiographical* mode of writing. The *autrebiographical* stylistic maneuver resembles if not enacts a third position between the death of the author and the pursuit of authorial power and intent. Following the *autrebiographical* as a third position to the oppositional stances of autobiographical and biographical—one that reimagines the authority of the author as well as reimagines who (or what) the subject of the writing is—unfolds as a third position that echoes one alongside or between those of nursing or abandoning the father figure. The father, again following rampant genealogical metaphor, is the author-authority of a text; the father is the writer, the text a kind of son. And the father as the author-authority over a text must abandon himself in writing a text, as the

work of writing demands. He must forgo *the* central position of a text. Despite that essential abandonment, the author-authority figure remains as a kind of spectral figure, instrumental in the work of writing by virtue of his author-authority.

Early in *Summertime*'s interviews, Vincent asks Julia, "*Did John love his father, do you think,*" to which she replies (nodding to Freud) that "Boys hate their fathers and want to supplant them in their mothers' affections," and that, no, John "did not love his father" and that he "was not built for love," adding, though, that John "did feel guilty about his father. He felt guilty and therefore behaved dutifully. With certain lapses," all before returning to a description of her own father (48).<sup>3</sup> Previously, in *Boyhood*, the father—the same father depicted in *Summertime*—occupies a position that is obscure to the boy:

He has never worked out the position of his father in the household. In fact, it is not obvious to him by what right his father is there at all. In a normal household, he is prepared to accept, the father stands at the head: the house belongs to him, the wife and children live under his sway. But in their own case, and in the households of his mother's two sisters as well, it is the mother and children who make up the core, while the husband is no more than an appendage, a contributor to the economy as a paying lodger might be. (12)

Throughout the three ficto-auto-biographical texts, the father figure is not obviously a core body, or the head, but always just an appendage—most obviously in *Summertime*, where the father, though he appears throughout, most clearly and most powerfully appears only in the framing fragments, where John's notebooks address him more closely

than the vacillating voices do in the textual body. Perhaps this is the source of Attwell's location of the father as secondary to the emergence of John (and Coetzee) as a writer. But again, in *Summertime* the father figure is precisely that which is displayed as being instrumental, and thus critical, to the maturation and, crucially, the development of John (and Coetzee) as a writer. Though the father figure might speak and reside on the outer edges of the work, framing the textual body, he is integral to that which he frames; and, as a frame, he warps and bends the subject matter—like a father shapes his son, regardless (or precisely because) of how much or how little he is present. And while this father figure as frame warps and bends the subject matter, the subject in turn erects a kind of resistance against his influence. Such a struggle to “supplant” the father (recalling Julia) repeats throughout Coetzee's works, but is described quite eloquently by the boy, or John, of *Boyhood*, who “has had a sense of himself as prince of the house” for as long as he can remember, but is nonetheless anxious because “he knows a child is not meant to rule the roost” (12). Ultimately, the boy, who explicitly describes dislike for his father, would rather not have one at all:

Even before he knew his father, that is to say, before his father returned from the war, he had decided he was not going to like him. In a sense, therefore, the dislike is an abstract one: he does not want to have a father, or at least does not want a father who stays in the same house. (43)

These feelings toward the father are similar to those in *Diary of a Bad Year*, where JC, another internal author-authority who bears initials that again resemble those of the text's outer author-authority Coetzee, wishes that he could elect his own father:

Who is Johann Sebastian Bach to me? In naming him, do I name the father I would elect if, from all the living and the dead, one were allowed to elect one's father? Do I in this sense choose him as my spiritual father? And what is it that I want to make up for by bringing at last a first, faint smile to his lips? For having been, in my time, such a bad son? (222)

All these passages, from *Dusklands* through *Summertime* and *Diary*, point toward a desire to “disown” one’s “real parents” and claim for the self “a much finer-sounding lineage,” as Coetzee discusses in his “Homage” (5). Yet still, despite so many struggles against the father in Coetzee’s texts, the father remains; though it “is sometimes possible to change one’s name” as Coetzee does so often, following that autobiographical element (the Coetzees in *Dusklands*, the John Coetzee of *Summertime*, JC in *Diary* and, in a different way, the Elizabeth Costello of *Elizabeth Costello*). It is never possible, as Macaskill writes, to “elect one’s father” (34):

Instead, one has to learn to submit or to accommodate oneself to the father one actually has; which also means, in the formulation Jacques Lacan so elegantly derives, one has to accommodate oneself to language and its silences, the Law of the Father.

Or: just to love him, it. (34)

Because, in part, and again, one depends upon the father, one would not *be* without one’s father.

Nevertheless, the struggle persists. Discord between fathers and sons is a common trope, in Coetzee’s texts (and elsewhere); to borrow Coetzee’s words, discord between fathers and sons is a “banal” idea (“Homage” 7). But it persists, and that much is evident,

and invites attention. Beyond the banality of the trope is once more a metaphorical extension of fathers and sons, here extending to a relationship between authors of texts and authors that precede them—in other words, a literary genealogy.

Recalling Said above, a literary genealogy goes hand-in-hand with the trope of a son struggling against his father's influence. This is noticed in many, by many authors; compelling evinced here by Julia Kristeva in her *Desire and Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. In a passage responding to Bakhtin, a literary father of her own, she describes and coins the term *intertextuality*:

By introducing the *status of the word* as a minimal structural unit, Bakhtin situates the text within history and society, which are then seen as texts read by the writer, and into which he inserts himself by rewriting them [...] any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*. (65-6)

Here, the writer is always found within some historical and social environment, existing as part of certain historical and social structures. As a part of these structures, the writer, having written, introduces bits and pieces of herself into those structures, both by way of her work's ideas (banal as they might be) and by way of her work's stylistic uniqueness. The writer's interaction with a history and society foregrounds the autobiographical element of writing, as it is her unique presence, mixing into those structures, that becomes a part of a large body of works (a "canon") that will be read (one hopes) by readers. These readers—all readers—are also in some ways writers themselves, during the work of reading, even if they are not literally engaging in the work or act of writing.

The reader is always, in a word, re-imagining the contents of the work, and it can be said then that the reader is writing the work, perhaps doubly, into existence—doubly because the work exists as itself, to itself, by itself, and for itself as a work, prior to and simultaneously as the reading of the work.

Intertextuality depends upon *bricolage* and the *bricoleur*, the latter who is someone that uses:

the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous. (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 285)

The *bricoleur* is a “handyman,” one who assembles his works with what is at hand, like a bricklayer might assemble a house (one notices the sonorous similarities between the French *bricoleur* and the English bricklayer). Perhaps these items are allusions or references, perhaps they are more direct bits such as quotations; perhaps the extent of assembly ends at an epigraph, or extends to a kind of rewriting, like Joyce’s *Ulysses* of *Odysseus*. All discourse is, for Derrida, *bricolage*, if its structure relies upon “the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined” (285). It seems clear that all discourse relies on some heritage, insofar as all discourse responds to something, and as all discourse depends on language, which has, or is always linked to, a heritage. From this relationship, a potential anxiety haunts a writer, as described by Harold Bloom in his volumes on the subject. This “anxiety of influence,” as he calls it, depends upon a

position that sees a literary history—a canon, or “literature” itself—as indistinguishable from artistic influence, since such a history is built by artists that “misread” each other (*The Anxiety of Influence* 5). This anxiety arises from an “indebtedness” a writer has to his lineage, one that includes a sense of “living up to” one’s name, and thereby one’s history; one is indebted to one’s father not only because the father has granted the child life, but also because the child carries some trace of his father, if it is a surname or some other trait,<sup>4</sup> and by such a connection son has some power, some authority with which to shape and direct the course of an identity attached to that name. Derrida, speaking *On the Name*, considers the name as itself not the thing that it names. It is, however, a kind of assignment, or even an alliance: one’s surname assigns him and allies him with a lineage, traditionally a paternity. With this name comes at once a history of all those who share the name, and with this history a kind of weight or perceived obligation—one must “live up to the name.” A name in this sense then is a kind of burden, insofar as one is pressured to appeal to and appease that name which looms over them (*On the Name* 84-85). A name, which so often is given by the father, is itself a kind of father; and fathers can be disappointed by their sons.

Sons are beholden to their fathers. Sons bear the mark of their fathers, by name or by a participation in a genetic scheme. The work of writing, *Summertime* or any other, bears marks not only of the more external author-authority, the one explicitly named as responsible for writing the text, but also the marks of all those in a literary paternity that author responds to. And though the author might choose, as Coetzee suggests in his “Homage,” which authors to respond to—apparently electing his own father(s)—the genealogy inherent to a word unit, the fact that a word unit is itself tied to a genealogy,

and largely literature's body itself as a kind of ancestral corpus with its own vast family tree, make it impossible even at the most microscopic level to fully break away from one's lineage. It makes it impossible to, with absolute authority, elect one's father.

So, if it is the case that sons are beholden to their fathers, and if, as Walter Benjamin (corroborating Derrida's sense that all discourse is *bricolage*) says that "storytelling is always the art of repeating stories," then again, the question surfaces: can anything new be said (91).<sup>5</sup>

This is a perspective to discourage prospective storytellers of any kind: that there can be no "new" stories, and what follows from that nihilism is that there is nothing left to be said. This seems to be the great burden of the writer, the great anxiety he faces, and it is this burden and anxiety against which *Summertime* struggles, a burden and anxiety beneath father figures, that asks: how can one write something anew, forge their own literary identity in the face of such a heavy history as a literary canon, if one is nursing one's literary fathers, reinforced by such phenomena as intertextuality and *bricolage*? How can one write something new, if one does not abandon one's history?

Total abandonment is impossible. It seems as if the heaviest anxiety rests in the looming presence of literature itself. But not everything has been said. What positions itself against existential anxieties about writing, and resists the pull of banality coupled with the work of writing, is the notion of *play*, which Derrida describes below:

Play is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the

alternative of presence of absence. Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around. (292)

Play disrupts the “presence,” the unavoidable, inescapable chain or link integral to language. If all discourse is *bricolage* and is always involved in a history, in a lineal structure, or in the presence of concepts borrowed from other texts, then play is what resists total and absolute repetition of texts and ideas. Play, in this sense, can be taken as referring less to what is said or written, and more to how it is said or written. Play is style; play is the arrangement of words, sentences, paragraphs, and so forth; play is performance.

Famously, on style and what he saw as the “future of Art,” Flaubert, who wanted to write “a book about nothing” that would be “dependent on nothing external” and that “would be held together by the internal strength of its style, just as the earth, suspended in the void, depends on nothing external for its support,” a book “which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible,” writes:

Form, in becoming more skillful, becomes attenuated; it leaves behind all liturgy, rule, measure; the epic is discarded in favor of the novel, verse in favor of prose; there is no longer any orthodoxy, and form is as free as the will of its creator. This progressive shedding of the burden of tradition can be observed everywhere: governments have gone through similar evolution, from oriental despotisms to the socialisms of the future. It is for this reason that there are no noble subjects or ignoble subjects; from the standpoint of pure Art one might almost establish the axiom that there is

no such thing as subject—style in itself being an absolute manner of seeing things. (154)

This “progressive shedding of the burden of tradition” that is visible everywhere for Flaubert might first seem to match up with the note on which *Summertime* ends, that progress (of the writer, of writing) must involve an abandonment of tradition, a turning away from one’s history, one’s lineage, must involve disowning one’s father(s). At turns, Coetzee’s works, their ideas, resemble such a shedding. There is *Duskland*’s fictional account of Jacobus Coetzee’s expedition, which nods to Flaubert as a literary father via an epigraph saying: “What is important is the philosophy of history,” and which by fictional nature turns away from the “truth” to forge ahead with its own narrative. Then there is *Summertime*’s various maneuvers with truths, that often amount to anachronisms, including the date of John’s first journal scrap (which constitutes the beginning proper of *Summertime*): a date of “22 August 1972.” This date is immediately followed by the sentence “IN YESTERDAY’S *Sunday Times*, a report from Francistown in Botswana” (3). The twenty-second of August 1972 announced by the journal entry was a Tuesday, and not a Monday—making the “YESTERDAY” announced here a Monday, a day in which the “*Sunday Times*” was not and could not have been published. Another of the text’s many anachronisms is how John lives on Tokai Road, just as his real-life counterpart Coetzee, only the latter lives with his wife and two children, while the account of *Summertime* places the former there alone with his father (Kannemeyer 607). Both of those anachronistic stylistic moves subvert biographical traditions, but they also point once more to a turning away from history—a turning away from the authority of the calendar, as evinced by the erroneous dating on the work’s first page, and a turning away

from one's own lived past, as evinced by the alteration (or revision) of Coetzee's and his father's early 1970s living arrangements. Responding to Flaubert, Coetzee's works fulfill not only the "shedding of the burden of tradition" at large, but also a breaking of orthodoxy and form.

Nearing the end of his "Homage," Coetzee echoes Flaubert's words, again like a son might echo a father, suggesting that what one learns from a literary paternity is "not a body of ideas but a certain style, hard durable: a style that is also an approach to the world and to experience, political experience included" ("Homage" 7). And while these ideas are "certainly important," as Coetzee acknowledges, "the fact is, the ideas that operate in novels and poems, once they are unpicked from their context and laid out on the laboratory table"—such as they so often are in critical essays—"usually turn out to be uncomplicated, even banal" ("Homage" 7). On the other hand, a work's style has the potential to be stronger, and has the potential to be more compelling than the banal ideas that operate in and populate texts. Style:

as it soaks in, becomes part of the personality, part of the self. To put it another way: in the process of responding to the writers one intuitively chooses to respond to, one makes oneself into the person whom in the most intractable but also perhaps the most deeply ethical sense one wants to be. ("Homage" 7)

Thus, to circle back once more to the metaphor at the heart of this essay, the son, in his being as a kind of response to his father, takes some bit of his father's identity—some bit of his style—consciously or unconsciously, and incorporates it into the construction of his own self, just like the *bricoleur*. This way of self-creation is not oppressed by the

over-bearing father, and the son's identity does not become entirely that of his fathers'. Rather, it is alongside the father that the son moves on. Though the father impels the son, as Kafka—a father to this essay—describes in a letter to his father, the son still takes a course of his own (130). The son nurses the father and abandons the father, yet neither of these courses of action are final, and each will repeat, and each can occur simultaneously, in centripetal and centrifugal motion: a turning toward and away from one's own history.

At one point John, who resolved “for ever [to] hate and despise Italian opera,” because that is what his father loved, “despise[d] it simply because his father loved it” and would not admit outside of his journals that there was the possibility that he would further resolve to “hate and despise anything in the world that his father loved,” scours a deep score into one of his father's Tebaldi records, so that his own music—Bach—can reign supreme (248-9). Despite the callousness of *Summertime's* conclusion, there remains—in italics, and thus partially in emphasis alongside the stylistic effect of indicating a voice change—a feeling of remorse, a grasping towards the father, which follows a replacement of the Tebaldi record, to which his father does not respond:

He wanted his father's breast to swell with that old joy; if only for an hour, he wanted him to relive that lost youth, forget his present crushed and humiliated existence. Above all he wanted his father to forgive him. *Forgive me!* he wanted to say to his father. *Forgive you? Heavens, what is there to forgive?* he wanted to hear his father reply. Upon which, if he could summon up the courage, he would at last make full confession: *Forgive me for deliberately and with malice aforethought scratching your Tebaldi record. And for more besides, so much more that the recital would*

*take all day. For countless acts of meanness. For the meanness of heart in which those acts originated. In sum, for all I have done since the day I was born, and with such success, to make your life a misery. (250)*

The gap between father and son, the fact that John “finds it hard to detect what his father cares about,” a gap that if bridged, or overcome, could “solve the mystery of what in the world his father,” any father, “wants,” so that one could “perhaps be a better son,” all coupled with a simultaneous turning away from and towards history, at large and of one’s self, further drives a desire not to abandon the father (247). Instead of absolute abandonment in favor of nursing the idea of the father figure—one’s literary or biological paternity—one can opt for a third position, as *Summertime* and largely Coetzee’s works suggest. A third position: to realize that the father is in the son, the son is in the father, and that the progression of great writing, and of a great writer, involves an observation of how nursing and abandoning—turning towards and away from—creates writing.

\* \* \*

In 2015, following an exhausting struggle with the after-effects of type II diabetes, my (biological) father died. I was there (all writing is to some degree autobiographical), in hospice, holding him as he died. Looking back to that moment, I had various worries and wonders: anger at him doing this to himself, not caring for his body, letting himself deteriorate and having his body succumb to the disease at a relatively young age. I said: *Why were you not there for me? Why did you abandon me?* And beside these responses I felt a twisting sadness: he was gone—I would never hear from his mouth answers to

those questions and others that perhaps all sons ask of their fathers: *Are you disappointed in me? Proud of me? Do you love me? Are you happy to be my father?*

At the same time, I asked myself: *Why didn't you visit him more often, knowing he was going to die? Have you been a bad son? Did he know that you loved him? Did you love him? Were you happy to have been his son?*

In several ways, this essay, now nearing the end of its course, has been an exploration of an inability, an instability, to hear the authoritative voice, to not hear the answers, true answers, inherent in the work of writing—the work of writing fiction, but also biography and autobiography—my own attempt at reconciling the unreconcilable.

Hence, what I offer the reader instead of a conclusion, as a failure perhaps, the polyphonic echoes bouncing off *Summertime*, mixing there with those voices that circle around the dead John Coetzee, whose own voice circles around theirs, all to reveal no certain truth about each other or anything else. A failure to reveal—but a failure that is also a success. Such is the nature of the relationship, to extend and perhaps exhaust the dominant familial metaphor, between the writer and the reader. The reader, like a child searching for answers, from the parent (here, the father), but is left wanting.

Are we thus directionless?

Is it perhaps memory—and memories are stories—that provides some semblance of direction, some semblance of comfort?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> To avoid confusion, I will hereafter refer to the fictional author in *Summertime* as “John” or “John Coetzee,” and the actual author of the text as “Coetzee.”

<sup>2</sup> Attwell’s later work, *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, finally seems to embrace the autobiographical elements of Coetzee’s writing.

<sup>3</sup> Shortly after this passage, Julia discloses to Vincent her *raison d’être*: she has become a therapist because she wants to “save people from being treated as [her] father was treated” in a sanatorium outside of Port Elizabeth. Perhaps it is guilt that she feels, because it is her brother who supplied the sanatorium with required funds to keep their father inside, and who “religiously visited” their father “every week” (49). For Julia, it was only her brother who “had taken on the burden” of their father’s care, and, “In the sole sense that matters,” she had “abandoned him” (49). Following once more the autobiographical, we hear language that resembles John’s: the word “abandon” and a sense of the father as being a “burden.”

<sup>4</sup> Genetically, the father is responsible for the son’s biological sex.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that we can take the “storytelling” in Benjamin to be applicable to various, if not all, genres of writing, as the self-contained, self-reliant, solitary reality of any writing is that it tells a story (this of course includes the so-called literary critics’ stories).

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