Between Illusionism and Anti-Illusionism

The study *Between Illusionism and Anti-Illusionism: Self-Reflexivity in the Novels of J. M. Coetzee* is based on the author's doctoral thesis, which was reviewed by dr hab. Anna Walczuk (Jagiellonian University) and Prof. dr hab. Ewa Borkowska (University of Silesia).

Between Illusionism and Anti-Illusionism:
Self-Reflexivity in the Chosen Novels
of J. M. Coetzee

By

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SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

For my Mother

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

The following editions and abbreviations of J. M. Coetzee's
works have been used:
(The dates of the first editions are given in Works Cited)

D *Dusklands*. London: Vintage, 2004.
IHC *In the Heart of the Country*. London: Vintage, 2004.
LTMK *Life and Times of Michael K*. London: Vintage, 2004.
F *Foe*. London and New York: Penguin Books, 1987.
WW *White Writing: on the Culture of Letters in South Africa*.
Braamfontein: Pentz, 2007.
AI *Age of Iron*. London and New York: Penguin Books, 1998.
DP *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. Cambridge: Harvard
Univ. Press, 1992.
MP *The Master of Petersburg*. London: Vintage, 2004.
GO *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*. – Chicago: Univ. of
Chicago Press, 1996.
Ds *Disgrace*. London and New York: Penguin Books, 2000.
SS *Stranger Shores: Essays, 1986–1999*. London and New York:
Penguin Books, 2002.
Y *Youth*. London: Vintage, 2003.
EC *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*. London: Vintage, 2004.
SM *Slow Man*. London: Vintage, 2006.
DBY *Diary of a Bad Year*. London: Vintage, 2008.
S *Summertime*: *Scenes from a Provincial Life*. London: Harvill
Secker, 2009.
HN *Here and Now: Letters (2008-2011)*. Correspondence with Paul
Auster. London: Faber and Faber, 2013.

INTRODUCTION

The Game of Language

J. M. Coetzee's most recent novel, *The Childhood of Jesus*, describes the education and adventures of an outstanding young boy called David. In chapter eighteen David's guardian, Simón, decides to teach the boy how to read, and to this end he borrows from the library a novel entitled *An Illustrated Children's Don Quixote*. David takes an interest in the book, and spends his days poring over the pages, looking at the pictures and familiarising himself with the shapes of the words. He creates his own version of Don Quixote's adventures, which is only distantly related to the plot of the novel. Simón tries to challenge the boy's fantasies by arguing that reading is not free speculation, but rather accepting the vision of the storyteller. David, however, will not be persuaded that his own version of *Don Quixote* should be exclusively dictated by the words of the narrator. On the contrary, he jealously defends his own version of the novel, and argues that the book is his own, and that he is free to make of it whatever he chooses.

Soon it becomes clear that David's rebellious and self-reliant stance is not confined to his practice of reading, but includes also the domain of language. After several reading lessons, David asks Simón why he has to learn Spanish if he hates the language. Simón responds:

> 'You don't hate Spanish. You speak very good Spanish. Your Spanish is better than mine. You are just being contrary. What language do you want to speak?'
> 'I want to speak my own language.'
> 'There is no such thing as one's own language.'
> 'There is! *La la fa fa yam ying tu tu.*'
> 'That's just gibberish. It doesn't mean anything.'
> 'It does mean something. It means something to me.'
> 'That may be so, but it doesn't mean anything to me. Language has to mean something to me as well as to you, otherwise it doesn't count as language' (*CJ*, 186).

David's dream of speaking a unique language meets with the opposition of his rational guardian, who argues that private language, however desirable it may seem, does not exist; language exists only when it is shared. An extreme attempt to produce idiosyncratic and thus unreservedly original language ("*La la fa fa yam ying tu tu*") would result in incomprehension. To make oneself understandable–Simón explains to David–one has to enter the domain of shared language, and consequently give up one's arrogant claims to absolute uniqueness. Simón's assertion that "there is no such thing as one's own language" may seem an obvious truth, but the implications of that truth are far-reaching. The meaning of an utterance is constituted partly by the speaker/writer, and partly by those who lived before and contributed to the development of language.

Language as a historical phenomenon is, among other issues, the subject of David Attwell's interview with J. M. Coetzee.[1] In an important passage Attwell raises the topic of self-reflexivity: the literature's tendency to display its own conventions. The critic asks whether the self-reflexivity of Coetzee's novels is culturally conditioned; that is, whether it is a reaction to the social and cultural changes of the 20th century. Coetzee, at least in part, endorses this observation. The writer admits that the self-reflexive turn of his novels can be attributed to the "awareness, as you put pen to paper, that you are setting in train a certain play of signifiers with their own ghostly history of past interplay" (*DP*, 63). The realization that language is shared, and that meaning in language is historically constituted, gives rise to the need to examine language: its linguistic rules and narrative conventions. Perhaps, Coetzee adds, this need was not so keenly felt in the past–for example in the times of Defoe or Hardy–when realism seemed a natural mode for the novel. Whether the self-reflexive turn in the novel is a transitory cultural change or a sign of something more profound is a question which Coetzee leaves open to debate. What is beyond doubt, however, is that the self-reflexivity of his novels is an important tendency, which results, to a great extent, from his heightened consciousness of the processes that shaped language.

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[1] The volume *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* includes Coetzee's literary essays and a series of interviews conducted by David Attwell, who is also the editor of this work. Whenever quoted here Coetzee's essays will be accompanied by their titles. The series of interviews with Coetzee will be referred to in the singular as "the interview with Attwell," or "the Attwell interview." The accompanying footnotes will specify the exact pages on which the quoted excerpts can be found.

Two Functions of the Novel as a Genre

The novel's capacity to reflect upon its own formal rules and conventions is a tendency which has been present in the novel since the very beginning, but it has developed considerably over the past four centuries. What will here be called the "self-reflexivity" of the novel–its ability to comment on its own linguistic and narrative nature–is closely related to parody. *Don Quixote*, the first and the greatest modern novel, is a parody of the Renaissance chivalric romance. Cervantes's work represents fiction about fiction; it tells of the adventures of a reckless knight from La Mancha, who takes a fictional story for truth, and consequently dons his armour, mounts his horse, and rides out to meet his adventures. Don Quixote remains the most famous of readers who fail to see the boundary between literature and reality and shape their lives to make them resemble a work of fiction. Cervantes is the most famous writer to reflect upon the nature of fiction and fictionalizing from *within* narrative discourse. As Robert Alter observes (3-4), Cervantes is the originator of two traditions of the novel: the realistic one, whose main objective is a realistic presentation of the world, and the self-conscious one, which examines the construction and functioning of the textual world in a given literary work

The distinction between the realist and the self-conscious (or "anti-realist," as it is sometimes called) traditions in the novel may be useful in typological studies, but it is nevertheless an artificial one. To draw a boundary between the two traditions is to suggest that they are separate and self-contained. In fact, they have exerted a degree of influence on each other. It is more fruitful to talk about two tendencies of the novel, or two directions within the genre: the representational and the self-interrogatory. Those tendencies are not mutually exclusive, but may occur with various intensity within a single work.

The Aim and Structure of the Book

The two above-mentioned features of fiction–its origins in parody and the (not always peaceful) coexistence of the realist and the self-reflexive functions in some literary works–will be important in the analysis of J. M. Coetzee's *oeuvre*. In the chapters that follow I will discuss Coetzee's tendency to foreground the linguistic, figurative and narrative conventions in his novels. As I will argue, those formal conventions are exposed not merely for the sake of textual play, but in order to examine their significance in the building of the narrated world. Those examinations are

often conducted in an overt way by the narrators and protagonists of Coetzee's novels. Their narrators' or protagonists' comments, which are sometimes addressed to the other characters and sometimes to the reader, have a self-reflexive role, i.e., they provide the reader with suggestions as to how a given text can be interpreted.

This study is divided into eight chapters. Chapter One provides a critical overview of self-reflexivity. Its aim is to show the evolving understanding of this notion in Anglo-American literary criticism in the 20th century and arrive at a terminology which will be helpful in the discussion of Coetzee's *oeuvre*. Chapters Two to Eight analyse the self-reflexive novels that have been written by J. M. Coetzee to date: from his 1972 novel *Dusklands* to *The Childhood of Jesus*, published in 2013. To aid the coherence of the discussion, the chronological order is not strictly followed.

The main topic of Chapters Two to Four is confessional discourse in *Dusklands*, *In the Heart of the Country* and *Age of Iron*. The novels feature confessional narrators, whose main aim is (or seems to be) to write the truth about themselves. Their self-reflexive comments address the problem of truth in confessional narrative and the problems that the narrators encounter in the process of writing.

The topic of writing about the self is continued in Chapter Five, which is a discussion of one part of Coetzee's autobiographical trilogy, *Summertime*. In *Summertime* Coetzee directs the reader's attention to various manipulations to which the genres of autobiography and biography are subject. It will be shown that the work places itself on the frontier between autobiography and fiction, and takes this border as the main subject of its self-reflexive analysis.

The main topic of Chapter Six (*Foe* and *Slow Man*) and Chapter Seven (*The Master of Petersburg*) is the intriguing relation between the main protagonists. As will be argued, the self-reflexivity of those three novels is mostly contained in the comments that the writers-protagonists (i.e. protagonists who are writers) address to the other characters. The topic of those comments is the novel as a genre, and the creative process in general. The act of writing and the nature of the writer's inspiration will be important in a short discussion of *Disgrace*, which concludes Chapter Seven.

Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year* are analyzed in the final chapter of this book. The main protagonist of *Elizabeth Costello* is an Australian writer, Elizabeth Costello, who, during various conferences and award ceremonies, voices her opinion about social and academic issues. Literary topics will, naturally, be of central interest in this

chapter. Among these are literary realism, the depiction of violence in literature, and, connected with the latter, the writer's moral responsibility for his or her novels. It will be shown in this chapter that *Elizabeth Costello* is a self-reflexive novel because it includes critical insight into itself.

CHAPTER ONE

DEFINING SELF-REFLEXIVITY

Fiction and Reality

"Now, for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth" (947), wrote Sir Philip Sidney in *The Defense of Poesy*, published in 1595. The poet, unlike the historian, does not "labor . . . to tell you what is or is not, but what should or should not be" (948). Due to the fact that he does not make statements about the immediate reality, but about the imaginary world, his works cannot be considered to be lies. The argument for the divorce between history and poetry, raised by Sidney, has its roots in antiquity. In Book Nine of the *Poetics* Aristotle writes about the difference between the historian and the poet. As he observes, "it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen,—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity" (*Poetics*, Book Nine). The poet's imagination is, therefore, not constrained by historical events. Contrary to the historian, the poet can construct his own fictional universe insofar as his relation is credible (i.e., it does not violate the law of probability and necessity).

Aristotle's well-known argument, reiterated by Sidney, was further developed in the 20th century. In 1937, Roman Ingarden published a study entitled *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*. Taking Aristotle's dictum that a work of fiction and a historical work are distinct, Ingarden argues that if one reads a given literary work only as a record of a certain reality, the essence of the work is lost. In order to appreciate the value of a literary work, the reader should keep in mind the fact that it enacts a world which is essentially different from the "extraliterary reality." Reading experience, notes Ingarden, entails extricating oneself from the familiar surroundings and submerging oneself in the self-sufficient fictional world (which he calls a "microcosm"): "the reader's task is to apprehend the meaning of the words and sentences in the work of art faithfully, and as completely as possible, exclusively on the basis of their own content" (163). The reader always has some prior knowledge of the world described in the novel, poem, or play. What is important is not to allow this knowledge to take precedence over the work itself. Ingarden is rightly

convinced that a work of literature, as opposed to a historical record, or a scientific study, attracts the reader's attention firstly to its own microcosm, and only after that to a given extraliterary reality (such as a historical event, or a scientific phenomenon).

The awareness that any novel constitutes a self-contained microcosm is shared by J. M. Coetzee. Coetzee argues that "making sense of life inside a book is different from making sense of real life–not more difficult or less difficult, just different" (Attwell 1993, 11). This important observation should not be understood as a call for a total detachment of the writer and his work from the world. The conviction that the novel is distinct from reality and therefore should be understood differently is rather a warning not to treat it as a platform for the author's views about the political and social realities of his times. The difference between making sense of spoken and written messages in real life and making sense of a literary text is that in the former case, the process entails constantly relating the words of the utterance to the world in which the speaker and the listener live, whereas in the latter, the reader's task is first of all to attend to a given fictional microcosm, and only then to its possible similarities to the outside world.

David Attwell observes that the decision to keep fiction and real life separated had dire consequences for Coetzee as a writer who was born in South Africa and lived in the country during the increasing struggle against apartheid. Attwell adds: "in South Africa, life under apartheid seem[ed] to demand a realistic documentation of oppression" (11). The division between literature and reality was then viewed as passivity and reluctance to take a decisive stand against the system. Coetzee was aware of the demands that the writers of those times were facing. In an address given to *The Weekly Mail* in 1987, he writes about the conflict between literature and history, which he compares to two cows on one pasture:

> In times of intense ideological crisis like the present, when in the space in which the novel and history normally coexist like two cows on the same pasture, each minding its own business, is squeezed to almost nothing, the novel, it seems to me, has only two options: supplementarity or rivalry (Coetzee, qtd. in Attwell 1993, 15).

According to Coetzee, a writer living in South Africa in the 1980s could either create works which were a commentary on the current social and political realities (and were, in this sense, "a supplement" to them), or challenge the widely-held notion about the role of fiction in society. It seems that the novelists at the time mostly accepted the role of fiction as "supplementarity." Realistic depictions of oppression engaged both black

African writers (the best known being Sipho Sepamla, Mongane Serote and Alex La Guma), and white authors living in South Africa, the most famous of whom is Nadine Gordimer. Gordimer writes that the main role of fiction is to be "an enactment of life" (1996, 18). The purpose of fiction is "the discovery and registration of the human world" (Gordimer 1996, 19) in its historical and psychological complexity. She observes that the novelist should strive both for the factual and experiential truth. The aim of the novel, as Gordimer defines it, is not only to depict the historical events, but also the feelings and thoughts of people who lived at the time. Both the factual and the experiential veracity of the novel can be put to test by consulting the people who witnessed the events described in it. The evaluation of a given literary work as one that has achieved this verisimilitude is a sign of its value.

In his essay about the novels of Nadine Gordimer, Coetzee notes that her *oeuvre* "constitutes a major piece of theoretical witness" (*DP*, 387), which will be read long after people have forgotten about the times it describes. At the same time, it is clear that Gordimer's idea of the realist novel is far from Coetzee's stance as a novelist. While Gordimer writes books which are a supplement to history because they provide the reader "with vicarious firsthand experience of living in a certain historical time" (Attwell 1993, 16), Coetzee elaborates on the possibility of writing novels that rival history. As Coetzee notes, rivalry with historical discourse leads to the creation of

> a novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history (as a child's schoolwork is checked by a schoolmistress). In particular I mean a novel that evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process . . . perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history–in other words, demythologizing history (Attwell 1993, 16).

It is important to highlight the fact that Coetzee is not arguing here for literature's detachment from history. He does, however, challenge the conception that literature's role is only to bear witness to a given social and political reality. Coetzee is advocating here a novel that builds up its critical apparatus ("paradigms and myths"). Such a novel demands to be viewed first of all in its own light, and only then against the backdrop of historical events.

Term and Definition

Fiction which incorporates critical insight upon itself: this is the first, working definition of a self-reflexive novel. Such literary works are also known in literary criticism as "self-reflective," "self-informing," and "auto-referential." All those terms reflect not only the critics' ingenuity in inventing new terms, but primarily a different understanding of that feature of the novel which, as Robert Alter notes, has existed from its very beginning (1975, 3). Before presenting an overview of the critics' understanding of the notion, I will examine the term "self-reflexivity" in more detail.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "reflexivity" according to its use in a variety of disciplines: physics, chemistry, linguistics and mathematics. When used in social sciences, the term is

> applied to that which turns back upon, or takes account of, itself or a person's self, esp. methods that take into consideration the effect of the personality or presence of the researcher on the investigation (*OED* vol. 13, 476).

What is important here is the idea that reflexivity applies to that method which "turns back upon, or takes account of, itself." The main property of a self-reflexive text is that it takes account of its own nature, and highlights the presence of the author therein. To the term "reflexive," the word "self" will be added to highlight the inward turn of this type of writing.[1]

The author who is widely considered to be the father of the self-reflexive novel in England is Laurence Sterne. In an essay on Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* Viktor Shklovsky, a representative of the Russian Formalist school of literary criticism, argues that Sterne's formal innovation consisted in his tendency to "'lay bare' his technique" (27). This "technique" consists in disrupting the readers' expectations as to the form of the novel. "By violating the form," writes Shklovsky, "[the narrator] forces us to attend to it; and, for him, this awareness of the form through its violation constitutes the content of the novel" (30-1). The readers are forced to pay attention to the technique of the novel by which the story (the temporal and causal sequence of events) is transformed into plot (the artist's formulation of the events). They are not only interested in

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[1] The term "self-reflexive" also appears in the *OED* and is defined as: "characterized by reflexive action on itself; containing a reflection or image of itself" (*OED* vol. 14, 928).

what happens, but also in how it is related by the narrator, or the implied author.

It is probable that the notion of "laying bare the device" (Tomashevsky 1965, 94)–revealing the rules according to which a text functions–influenced later writers and critics who did not associate themselves with Formalist criticism. In the introduction to a collection of articles published over fifty years after Shklovsky's essay on Sterne, Raymond Federman outlines the future for the contemporary novel: its task, according to him, is precisely to lay bare the device, "unmask its own fictionality, . . . to expose the metaphor of its own fraudulence." Federman contrasts this self-exposing tendency of the future novel with its mimetic role. In his understanding, "fiction should no longer be regarded as a mirror of life" (8), but as an enactment of a wholly different, textual reality, which is governed by the writer's imagination rather than the rules operating in the real world.[2] Federman's most important propositions are the freeing of the writer's imagination and the self-consciousness of the characters: he wants to create characters who will be aware that they are inhabitants of a fictional world (this notion of self-conscious protagonists will be especially important to Chapter Three).

A sense of the contrived nature of the fictional world is what Federman shares with another American critic, Robert Alter, who wrote the first full-length study of the self-reflexive novel, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre*. In this book Alter defines the self-conscious novel as "a novel that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and by so doing probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality" (10). According to Alter, it is in the nature of the novel that it gives the writer the freedom to explore the mechanisms by which it constructs its illusion of reality.

Alter criticises Barth's famous article "The Literature of Exhaustion," which figures as the first contribution to Federman's collection of essays. Barth's main argument is that it is difficult or even impossible for the writer to create original works. What he can do is revisit the fictional worlds of other authors and incorporate them into his works. This gives

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[2] Federman's arguments are reminiscent of Alain Robbe-Grillet's conception of fiction presented in *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, published eighteen years before Federman's study. Like Federman, Robbe-Grillet, the representative of the *noveau roman*, contests the notion of the novel as a faithful image of reality, in which the omniscient author reveals to the reader his inexhaustible knowledge about the narrated world in a coherent and gradually unfolding plot. A similar argument is raised in Jerome Klinkowitz's study *The Self-Apparent Word: Fiction as Language/ Language as Fiction.*

him a chance to confront and overcome the exhausted state of the novel as a genre.[3] Alter, on the other hand, argues that the novel is an "inexhaustible genre." Every fictional text, argues the critic, introduces something new into the tradition and consequently enriches it: "The more books that are written, the more complicated with meaning are the books that exist before them, and the more possibilities there are for creating new works out of old books and new experience" (228). This idea, which Alter adopts from Borges's works, is persuasive: every novel creates a new fictional microcosm, to which other works can refer. The capacity of novels to engage in a dialogue with other works and a to-and-fro movement between different fictional microcosms is attractive to the reader, as is well demonstrated by the novels of such contemporary authors as J. M. Coetzee, A. S. Byatt, and Umberto Eco.

J. M. Coetzee and the Notion of Self-Reflexivity

The conflict between two views on self-reflexivity–one arguing that it is a sign of degeneration, and the other that it is an enrichment of the novelistic tradition–can be traced in Coetzee's understanding of this notion. While Coetzee has shown interest in self-reflexivity as a critic (for example in the interesting essay "The Comedy of Point of View in Beckett's *Murphy*" reprinted in *Doubling the Point*), as a novelist, he approaches it with scepticism. In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee refers to self-reflexivity (which he calls "anti-illusionism") negatively, as an "impasse" (*DP*, 27):

> Illusionism is, of course, a word I use for what is usually called realism. The most accomplished illusionism yields the most convincing realist effects. Anti-illusionism–displaying the tricks you are using instead of hiding them–is a common ploy of postmodernism. But in the end there is only so much mileage to be got out of the ploy. Anti-illusionism is, I suspect, only a marking of time, a phase of recuperation, in the history of the novel. The question is, what next? (*DP*, 27)

The question that immediately comes to mind after reading Coetzee's comment is whether what he calls "anti-illusionism" is really a temporary "phase of recuperation" in the history of the novel. As Robert Alter argues

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[3] Barth comments: "Literary forms certainly have histories and historical contingencies, and it may well be that the novel's time as a major art form is up . . . . No necessary cause for alarm in this at all . . . , and one way to handle such a feeling might be to write a novel about it" (28).

convincingly, fiction's tendency to display its conventions has been present since its very beginning, i.e. the appearance of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Writers have always reflected upon fiction's formal conventions: Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, whose first instalment was published as early as 1759, is probably the most famous example of such self-directed explorations in English literature. Neither Sterne nor the writers who attempted to redefine the role of fiction in society in the 1960s and 1970s considered anti-illusionism as an impasse. Conversely, the laying bare of the conventions governing fiction was viewed as a source of new energy because it allowed the writer to create and constantly redefine his relation to the readers, and reflect upon their roles in the creation of a literary work.[4]

Another contentious issue raised in Coetzee's remark is the opposition between "illusionism" and "anti-illusionism." Is it possible to draw a strict boundary between the two? The terms themselves imply not only an opposition but also a conflict, as if anti-realism took an active stance against realism and the effect of verisimilitude. Perhaps it is this strand of "militant" "anti-illusionism" that Coetzee had in mind when answering Attwell's question. It should be added, nevertheless, that there are novels– A. S. Byatt's *Possession* being a notable example–which comment on the process of creation but do not aim at destroying verisimilitude. Coetzee's novels perform a similar operation: they provide a commentary (which will also be called "metacommentary" (Jameson 1971)) on the processes of creation and aesthetic reception, which is, in different degrees, visible to the eyes of the reader,[5] but does not necessarily undermine the illusion of reality created by a given literary work.

One more important observation needs to be made at this point. Patricia Waugh in her important study *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* observes that "metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in *all* novels" (5). This work distances itself from Waugh's bold but problematic assertion. Metafiction is, no doubt, an

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[4] One well-known example can be found in Book Two, chapter 11 of *Tristram Shandy*, in which the author writes about the role of imagination in the perception of the literary work. According to this conception, the author should not attempt to create the world in all possible detail, but should leave some freedom for the reader's imagination. As he writes, "the truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself" (75)

[5] See the notions of "overt" and "covert" self-reflexivity below.

important characteristic[6] of contemporary fiction, but it is hardly the case that all novels comment on themselves, the act of writing, or the process of reading. Mark Currie's observation that metafiction is "less a property of the primary text than a function of reading" (1998, 5) is more acceptable, but needs further commentary. While self-reflexivity is, no doubt, a function of reading (as is the case with every property of the text, for example, its intertextuality), it owes its existence not only to the reader, who actualizes the text, but primarily to the writer, who created it. In other words, self-reflexivity should not be treated as exclusively a mode of interpretation, but as an inherent property of a narrative text, which is either present (with various degrees of intensity) or not. In short, self-reflexivity is a function of the literary text which may, but need not, be actualized in the process of reading. Even when self-reflexivity is present in narratorial comments (perhaps the most clear manifestation of metafiction), its impact on the reception of the novel is still determined by the reader, who decides what function of the text is important for his or her interpretation.

    This argument can be traced back to Roman Jakobson's poetics. In his 1960 essay "Closing Statement," Jakobson introduces and discusses six functions of the act of communication, three of which are especially important to the present study: the *referential*, the *poetic* and the *metalingual*. Those functions correspond to the outside world, the message and the language system, respectively. *Metalingual* function is used when speech is focused on the code; this is most often the case when the speakers encounter grammatical or lexical problems, and need to solve them in a communication situation. In the *poetic* function, by contrast, "the focus is on the message for its own sake" (Jakobson 1960, 356). As Jakobson adds, the *poetic* is the determining, but not the only function in verbal art. The three functions can be found in poetry, prose or any act of communication. It is the analyst who decides which function(s) to emphasize in his study. Currie adds that the "foregrounding is not something determined only by the nature of the language under analysis: it is also an active process on the part of the analysis, the critic or the reader" (1998, 38). This study of self-reflexivity will give prominence to these

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[6] To define metafiction as a characteristic of a literary work seems counterintuitive. After all, the term "metafiction" implies a particular kind of fiction, i.e. fiction about fiction. It is more accurate, in this sense, to use the term metafictional novels. In this work the term "metafiction" will refer either to a function of a narrative text, or to "self-reflexive utterances and elements of a fictional narrative" (Hühn et al. 2009, 205). In the latter sense, metafiction will be identical with self-reflexivity.

three language functions, especially the *poetic* and the *metalingual*. I hope to show their significance in Coetzee's novels without overemphasizing their importance. A typology of self-reflexive works will be helpful in this task.

Typology of Self-Reflexive Texts

The most comprehensive typology of metafiction has been proposed by Linda Hutcheon in her study *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. Hutcheon divides metafiction into four basic categories: "overt" and "covert," on the one hand, and on the other, "linguistic" and "diegetic." "Overt" metafiction is defined as that which is "clearly evident" to the reader: "in its most overt form the self-consciousness of a text often takes the shape of an explicit thematization–through plot allegory, narrative metaphor, or even narratorial commentary" (Hutcheon 1984, 23). In the case of "covert" metafiction, by contrast, the process of self-reflection is "implicit," i.e. "it is structuralized, internalized within the text" (31). Hutcheon in her study focuses on certain subgenres, or "structural models," as she calls them, which are especially favoured by writers of metafiction (31-5). I will, however, omit this classification and concentrate on her assertion that in "covert" self-reflexivity the reader is not addressed directly (31). Instead, the reader is made witness to the protagonists' reflections on the creative process.

It is significant that the narrators or protagonists of almost half of Coetzee's novels make a considerable investment of time and effort in the process of writing. The presence of a protagonist who is also a writer (I will use the term "writer-protagonist") does not automatically make a novel metafictional, but it is often the case that his or her comments about the creative process or the act of aesthetic reception refer indirectly to the work itself, and in this case they are self-reflexive.[7] The fact that some writer-protagonists (like Señor C in *Diary of a Bad Year* or Elizabeth Costello in *Elizabeth Costello*) in some respect resemble the author of those works makes the claim even stronger. With the use of self-conscious narrators and writer-protagonists, Coetzee comments upon his own works,

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[7] Although the name "indirect" is intuitively more correct, for the sake of consistency with Hutcheon's well-known study I will use the name "covert." A similar distinction can also be found in the typology of Werner Wolf. One of Wolf's distinctions is that between self-reflexive commentary which pertains directly to the text, and that which refers to literature in general (Hühn et al. 2009, 207)).

the role of the reader in the narrative text, and, more generally, the challenges, frustrations and rewards of the creative process.

As I have observed, the most frequent type of self-reflexivity, which is clearly evident to the reader, is a specific mode of narratorial commentary which breaks the verisimilar illusion of the text and, by doing so, attracts the reader's attention to the narrator's presence and/or to the artificiality of the narrated world. It is often the case that such overtly self-reflexive comments express the narrator's dissatisfaction with the existing literary conventions. The narrator in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* interferes in the narrative because he feels that the realist novel as a genre has become restrictive not only to himself and his protagonists, but also to his readers. In chapter thirteen he explains that his omniscience is only an illusion which he has inherited from his Victorian predecessors. The main task of a novelist, he argues, is not to judge the protagonists (as was done by 19th century authors), but to respect their autonomy. Of himself and other writers, he observes: "we are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority" (86).

The narrator of Fowles's novel is clearly working towards a redefinition of the function put upon him by the tradition of literary realism.[8] He is unwilling to play the game of the realist novel by the rules, which he considers petrified and artificial. His aim is not to reject those rules, but to reinvent them in the course of narration and, in this way, to liberate both himself and his protagonists from the roles that were imposed upon them by the tradition of the Victorian realist novel. Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a good example of what David Lodge called the "problematic novel,"[9] in which "the normal conventions of narrative fiction are exposed and undermined by the narrator," and the reader is invited to "*participate* in the aesthetic and philosophical problems the writing of fiction presents" (1977, 107). The narrator's dissatisfaction with the restricting nature of literary conventions, which leads to his self-conscious redefinition of the genre within which he or she

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[8] For an interesting analysis of Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* see chapter one of Lynn Wells's study, *Allegories of Telling: Self-Referential Narrative in Contemporary British Fiction*.

[9] In fact, Lodge in his 1971 essay "The Novelist at the Crossroads" does not mention Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (first published in 1969). Among the works which he refers to as "problematic novels" are: Gide's *The Counterfeiters*, Flann O'Brien's *At Swim Two-Birds*, Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and Sartre's *La Nauseé*.

labours, is also an important theme of Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* and *Foe*.

Besides, the "overt"-"covert" opposition, Hutcheon also introduces a distinction between "diegetic" and "linguistic" metafiction. *Diegetically* self-aware texts are, as Hutcheon notes, "conscious of their own narrative processes," while *linguistically* self-conscious texts "[demonstrate] their awareness of both the limits and the powers of their language" (1984, 23).[10]

Linguistic and *diegetic* types of self-reflexivity have their "overt" and "covert" equivalents. Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* and *Foe* are examples of texts which are *overtly diegetic*. "In diegetic narcissism," writes Hutcheon, "the text displays itself as narrative, as the gradual building of a fictive universe complete with character and action" (1984, 28). The important difference is that in Coetzee's novels the self-reflexive comments often reveal the text to be a failed or incomplete narrative, with discontinuities in its temporal organization (as is the case in *In the Heart of the Country*), or various gaps and lacunae in its plot (which is the case in *Foe*).

The last distinction that will be discussed here is one between texts whose self-reflexivity is *linguistically* either **"**overt" or "covert." According to Hutcheon, in the linguistically *overt* metafiction "the text would actually show its building blocks–the very language whose referents serve to construct that imaginative world" (1984, 29). In this type of self-reflexivity the readers are made aware of the fact that the world they take for real is, in fact, contrived. This can be effected either by the narrator's comments on, or by his or her silent but clear intrusion into, the narrative. Magda, the narrator of *In the Heart of the Country*, introduces "overtly" self-reflexive comments into her diary. Her tendency to manipulate her narrative reminds the reader that the narrated world is textual, and, as such, subject to distortion. The question of manipulative narrators and their role in self-reflexive narratives will also be discussed in Chapter Two.

The category of linguistically *covert* self-reflexivity includes all those intertextual allusions that have a self-reflexive role, i.e., the ones that point to the contrived nature of a given narrative. Coetzee's novels are full of intertextual allusions not only to other writers (for example, to Beckett in *Dusklands*, or to Defoe in *Foe* and his Nobel Lecture), but also contextual

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[10] Hutcheon's *diegetic* self-reflexivity is close to Neumann's and Nünning's example of "metanarration", while Hutcheon's notion of linguistic self-reflexivity is redolent of their understanding of "metafiction." See: *Narratologia/ Contributions to Narrative Theory: Handbook of Narratology*.

ones to his own works (in *Elizabeth Costello*). These literary allusions are, however, a subject for another study. Intertextuality will be of interest in this work only insofar as it constructs the self-reflexive mechanisms of Coetzee's novels (see Chapters Six and Seven).

"A Responsible Response": On Literary Criticism

The definition of self-reflexivity formulated at the beginning of this chapter refers not only to narrative but also critical discourse. What, then, is a self-reflexive, or, better to say, self-conscious literary criticism? Roland Barthes's "Theory of the Text" may prove helpful in answering this question. One of the main ideas of the essay is that literary criticism is itself a textual practice and should be treated as such. This means that the critic should not assume a detached perspective with respect to the analysed work. For Barthes, the text is not a "finished fabric" or a "veil" behind which the critic can find the truth (and reveal it to the readers), but rather "a tissue" and a "spider's web" (1981, 39) which he cannot transcend. The critic is not a commentator, but a writer, who works not only *with* language but primarily *in* it: "The subject of analysis (the critic, the philologist, the scholar) cannot in fact, without bad faith and smugness, believe he is external to the language he is describing." Barthes's notion of "immanent criticism" (1981, 40) is based on the idea of writing *from within* the narrative text, rather than *about* it.

Barthes's conception of criticism has gained ground in contemporary studies of self-reflexivity. In his introduction to the collection of essays entitled *Metafiction,* Mark Currie writes about the impact of fiction on critical discourse. In criticism this mutual influence has led to

> an affirmation of literariness in its own language, an increased awareness of the extent to which critical insights are formulated within fiction, and a tendency towards immanence of critical approach which questions the ability of critical language to refer objectively and authoritatively to the literary text (1995, 2).

In his study *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, Currie discusses Jacques Derrida's essay on James Joyce's *Ulysses* to show the mode of literary criticism which is immanent to the work itself, and does not attempt to stand at a distance from the text in order to formulate an objective truth. As Currie argues, Derrida's interpretation imitates Joyce's fiction because it "reproduce[s] the theoretical implications of *Ulysses* without stating them" (1998, 57). Derrida's act of writing from 'within' fiction rather than about it does justice to the singularity of this literary work. Nevertheless,