

# I3

ANDREW DEAN

## Lives and Archives

Since the opening in 2013 of the J. M. Coetzee Papers at the Harry Ransom Center (HRC), scholars have been coming to Austin, Texas, from far and wide, and critical engagements with Coetzee's archive have proliferated. The newly available materials at the HRC dramatically expand on the thirty-two containers that had been on deposit at the Houghton Library at Harvard since 1995. Those materials, scarcely known about even among Coetzee scholars, were available only under relatively tight restrictions. Kai Easton, who heard about the papers through an 'offhand remark at a seminar', writes that in her 1998 trip to the Houghton there were no online records of the papers, and that even gaining access to them required 'some detective work'.<sup>1</sup> Today the papers are fully catalogued and very much available to researchers, comprising 153 containers and one gallery file, along with material restricted until after the deaths of both Coetzee and his partner, Dorothy Driver. The holdings are comprehensive, including manuscripts for the majority of the novels, business correspondence, scrapbooks, and research and teaching notes of all kinds.

Of special interest are the writing notebooks, which Coetzee used to record his doubts, hesitations, and insights throughout the composition of his novels. David Attwell puts these notebooks at the centre of his story of Coetzee's creative process. He shows, for example, how *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) was profoundly affected by Steve Biko's death at the hands of the South African security services, since it was this event that allowed Coetzee to transform early sketches into the novel that he wanted them to become. 'The novel's emergence', Attwell writes, 'took the form of a simultaneous, seemingly contradictory, two-way process: both a distancing . . . and a homecoming into the violence of apartheid.' Here we see how the novel, which readers have long connected with apartheid, was the result of a conscience that was stricken by what white was doing to black in South Africa, albeit treated through Coetzee's 'psychological drama of displacement'.<sup>2</sup>

As this new archivally focused critical work aims to transform our understanding of Coetzee's writing, the provenance and nature of the papers upon which such scholarship is based have become a central concern. In this chapter I situate the archive in relation to Coetzee's published autobiographical texts, critical work, and writings on the themes of secrets and lies. I argue that the nature of Coetzee's long-standing explorations of archival themes in his fiction, placed alongside particular passages I draw from material that is now at the HRC, encourage critics to confront methodological questions about their own practices. Rather than presuming that the materials have arrived to us in some unmediated and unselfconscious way, we are encouraged to develop approaches that are commensurate with the challenges presented both by this author and the literary situation in which he writes. I ask, how may the Coetzee archive be read? What kind of truth are we seeking when we read his work (both published and archival)? What ends do archives achieve for writers themselves?

Coetzee has drawn from auto/biographical resources throughout his career. On 1 January 1970, he wrote in his clear longhand the first lines of what became his debut novel, *Dusklands* (1974): 'Among ~~those~~<sup>the</sup> heroes who first ventured into the interior of Southern Africa and brought us back ~~the~~ news of what we had inherited ~~won~~, Jacobus Janszoon Coetzee has hitherto occupied an honorable but <sup>if</sup> minor place.'<sup>3</sup> Writing here in a name that both is and is not his own – these lines turn out in *Dusklands* to be authored by one 'S. J. Coetzee' and translated by 'J. M. Coetzee' – his composition, for the first time, could proceed. In later fictions, such as *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), figures of the author ('Elizabeth Costello' and 'JC' respectively) seem to be responding to the demand that the public makes upon Coetzee that he enter into political discourse as a political voice. Looking back across his career, David Attwell in *Life of Writing* suggests that 'Coetzee's writing is a huge existential enterprise, grounded in fictionalized autobiography. In this enterprise the texts marked as autobiography are continuous with those marked as fiction – only the degree of fictionalization varies.'<sup>4</sup>

One claim is worth dispensing with immediately: Coetzee's auto/biographical practices are not atypical in this period. On the contrary, the dispersal of the subject in post-war writing, linked to 'postmodern' understandings of identity and the self, did not put an end to life-writing, but saw it transformed and even expanded in its creative possibilities. It is telling that Attwell refers to the influence of Roland Barthes's autobiographical writing on Coetzee. As Paul Eakin has argued, Barthes's work, often taken to be the paradigmatic instance of postmodern autobiography, in fact undertakes a process of 'concealment and display', simultaneously affirming and denying a relationship

with the ‘world of reference’.<sup>5</sup> Max Saunders argues that interactions of forms of ‘auto/biography’ and forms of fiction are central to modern literature in general, including what has become known as postmodernism. Specifically, he suggests that auto/biographical work in the period in which Coetzee was writing developed a ‘meta’ relationship with itself. This is ‘meta-auto/biografiction’: writing that relies on identifications between fiction and the self’s *auto/biography* (as opposed simply to the self), and which, in so doing, both lays claim to a particular genre and calls attention to its constructedness.<sup>6</sup>

What is distinctive about Coetzee’s auto/biographical practice, though, is the extent to which it is preoccupied with the archive itself. As Jan Wilm writes, Coetzee’s work was from the outset impelled by ‘archival dynamics’. Eugene Dawn, in ‘The Vietnam Project’, works in a library, and the text is structured such that it ‘mimics an archiving of another text’. ‘The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee’ parodies the treatment of archival documents, and is itself an archive, one in which historical manuscripts have been tampered with. Indeed, once one begins to look, archives are everywhere in Coetzee’s writing: Wilm points out more or less direct examples, such as William Burchell’s volume in the British Museum in *Youth* (2002) and the author’s notebooks in *Summertime* (2009).<sup>7</sup> Coetzee has written in an autobiographical mode about his own encounter with an archive too. While a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin in the late 1960s, he consulted manuscripts of Samuel Beckett’s *Watt* (1953). He has recalled the weeks he spent ‘perusing’ the manuscripts, ‘pondering the sketches and numbers and doodles in the margins’. He became ‘disconcerted’, he writes, ‘to find that the well-attested agony of composing a masterpiece had left no other traces than these flippancies’ (*DP*, 51).

Like many of Coetzee’s characters, and indeed like Coetzee himself, critics are finding that their encounters with archival materials carry an affective charge. Martin Woessner writes of discovering an author suddenly personalized. There is ‘a magic’ that ‘still seemed to cling to the various notebooks, drafts, and clippings I felt and held’, he explains.<sup>8</sup> Attwell recalls that the materials cast a ‘spell’ over him; the archive shows ‘the remarkable ways’ in which Coetzee has transformed ‘quite ordinary materials into unforgettable fiction’.<sup>9</sup> It is perhaps no surprise that the author himself has a sense of all of this. In one notebook fragment in *Summertime*, the John character compares his work with that of the labour of building ‘roads, walls, pylons’. The ‘secret authors’ of our built world achieve ‘[i]mmortality of a kind, a limited immortality’. This leads him to wonder why ‘he persist[s] in inscribing marks on paper’ – is it ‘in the faint hope that people not yet born will take the trouble to decipher them?’ The archive in Texas makes this ‘faint hope’ much more

distinct: it too is a ‘well-laid slab whose well-laidness is plain for all to see’ (*Sum*, 7).

Part of what is so extraordinary about the materials stored at the HRC is the order and neatness of what is available for researchers, especially in comparison with other author archives. Professional cataloguing alone does not account for this – it is rather a consequence of the fact that Coetzee was his own first archivist, cataloguer, printer, and binder. There may indeed be some truth in the memory of John offered by one of the characters in *Summertime*, that ‘he had missed his calling, that he should have been a librarian’ (*Sum*, 212). Coetzee, for example, bound the nine drafts of *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) by hand, transforming them into five covered volumes;<sup>10</sup> he also bound many other manuscripts with string, including the first draft of ‘The Vietnam Project’ from *Dusklands*. Coetzee’s self-archiving in fact pre-dates his first novel. He kept scrapbooks of cuttings of articles or items of interest, including a number from the 1950s, and six volumes of clippings from the *Times Literary Supplement* spanning 1969–77. Carefully recorded research notes, records of reading, and so on, speak of a mind dedicated to this kind of industry.

Critics have argued that the legibility and completeness of the papers ‘would have served the creative process’. Having these materials accessible and at hand, Attwell argues, allowed the author to ‘move blocks of text around and to recover discarded fragments’.<sup>11</sup> This is no doubt true. Late in the drafting of *Foe* (1986), for example, when Coetzee was at a creative impasse, he mined his notebook ideas, creating a ‘salvage’ list in which he looked for inspiration among his otherwise discarded or forgotten thoughts on the novel, dating back to 1982. In 1975, working on *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), Coetzee collected twenty-four previous notebook entries, with the comment, ‘The following notes may be useful.’<sup>12</sup> There are many other examples of similar practices.

Yet the very excessiveness of Coetzee’s self-archiving suggests that his papers are not a mere precursor to the published works. Rather, they serve some independent function for him. As in *Summertime*, it is tempting to see the bound pages of drafts, the carefully ordered notebooks, and the other material, as part of a bid for ‘[i]mmortality of a kind, a limited immortality’. Coetzee’s papers are now housed in perpetuity at the HRC, after all, alongside those of many other major writers. They can be called up after reading some of Beckett’s papers, for example, and the doodles and hesitations of the manuscripts of *Watt* compared with the moments of struggle and resolution in the manuscripts of *Foe*. Readers of the archive now inevitably participate in this bid: working through the materials, developing articles and monographs based on the archives, contemporary critics guarantee Coetzee

a certain kind of immortality (limited though it may be). As a salaried literary critic, Coetzee has long been aware both of the potential value of archival remains for scholars, and of the nature of work they would have to undertake. His career too has unfolded within one of the institutions – academia – principally responsible for preserving, sponsoring, and disseminating manuscripts and research. It is no surprise, then, that what he calls his ‘marks on paper’ have proven especially amenable to and generative of further cataloguing, preservation, and scholarly labour.

As we have already begun to observe, Coetzee is self-conscious in his published writing about the ways in which an author’s supposedly hidden ‘marks’ may serve his own emotional needs. Yet it is another example, from *Youth*, which stands out for how it connects personal papers, an author’s biographical life, and the conditions of possibility for writing itself. In one passage, John’s diary is discovered by his girlfriend of the moment, Jacqueline. Reading his hostile comments about her, she decides to end their relationship. The narrator, inhabiting John’s thoughts, wonders:

Is he sorry? Certainly he is sorry Jacqueline read what she read. But the real question is, what was his motive for writing what he wrote? Did he perhaps write it in order that she should read it? Was leaving his true thoughts lying around where she was bound to find them his way of telling her what he was too cowardly to say to her face? (Y, 9)

Here, his apparently secret papers might have been created to serve an ignoble end – the suggestion is that they might always have been intended to be made public. This leads John to reflect that the ‘question of what should be permitted to go into his diary and what kept forever shrouded goes to the heart of all his writing’ (Y, 9). These reflections are given an extra piquancy in this work of *autrebiography*, a work which establishes a distance between the protagonist (‘he’) and the autobiographer. The reflections have the feeling, that is, of a theoretical exploration of what we are reading: what ‘he’ is revealing in *Youth* is that which need *not* be forever shrouded, what is permitted to be revealed. Those looking for the private truth of an ‘I’, the suggestion goes, are going to be disappointed.

This episode in *Youth* further parallels an early draft of ‘The Vietnam Project’, dating from the beginning of Coetzee’s writing career. The composition and use of this work show that the questions ‘he’ asks in the later *autrebiography* had emerged in Coetzee’s own writing and life. Labelled on the front of the manuscript as ‘Discarded First sketch for The Vietnam Project’, this early draft was composed between 11 and 25 May 1972. It comprises a dialogue in seven parts between a ‘Mrs C.’ and a counsellor. The dialogue centres on Mrs C.’s unhappy marriage to Mr C., who has recently told his

wife of an extra-marital affair. At first, Mrs C. explains, her husband ‘wanted us to be friends . . . , this other woman and me’:

He was always pushing for that. I was terribly jealous, I was quite sick with jealousy, I can see that now. I used to follow him when he went to see her, I wouldn’t let him out of my sight. Then he stopped trying to shake me off and took me with him. So we all sat around in his girl-friend’s apartment, all being very polite. Then he wanted to go to bed with us, both of us.<sup>13</sup>

In the final section of the draft, Mrs C. brings her husband’s diary to her session with the counsellor. The counsellor asks whether he has Mr C.’s ‘authorization to read this’, to which she responds, ‘[n]ot officially’. This begins a conversation between them about privacy and reading diaries: the counsellor tells Mrs C. that what happens between her and her husband is her ‘own affair’, and that he does not wish to ‘interfere in domestic affairs’. Mrs C. responds that the counsellor is already involved in such matters – ‘you are a presence in the home and we’re both very much aware of you all the time’ – before asserting that she did not take the diary ‘without his knowledge’. She explains:

He knows that I read it. That is one of his ways of keeping control of me. The big lie is that his diary is private. But I read it and he knows that I read it. So if he wants to tell me a lie, all he does is to write it in his diary. Or if he wants to hurt me. For instance, there are all kinds of things there about him and his girlfriend. Officially I don’t read it, so officially I don’t know about it, so he needn’t accept responsibility for hurting me.

Mrs C. compares reading the diary to ‘reading pornography’ – ‘suddenly you’re at the dirty bit, at the secret of the diary’ – and she and the counsellor further discuss the ethics of reading such materials.<sup>14</sup> As in *Youth*, supposedly personal papers are used here both to tell and not to tell intimate partners hurtful things; in both the draft and the published *autrebiography* the diary form itself provides an alibi. And, reading now in the terms of what is housed at the HRC, insofar as it reveals the potentially hurtful elements of Coetzee’s own writing, the archive too contains its own alibi: it is both what should not be seen and what inevitably will be seen, hidden from critics and readers, but also in plain sight.

For critics, the draft returns us to the status of the archive itself, and particularly to the nature of Coetzee’s understandings and anticipations of its likely readers. This sense is developed by the draft’s own transmission history. It was held back from the Houghton, where the material for *Dusklands* had otherwise been put on deposit; the bound manuscript is now located in container thirty-three, the first of the container series that is

new to scholars at the HRC. One possible explanation for this delay is that Coetzee was using elements of it for the passage in *Youth* in which Jacqueline finds the diary. Another is that he was protecting reputations. Whatever the case, when reading it we are confronted with our situation as readers. What Mr C. has decided to hide and display will achieve particular ends. Wilm suggests that since ‘the archive as a trope, as a figure, as a phenomenon, both narrated and reflected, is part of Coetzee’s fictional world, readers and scholars working with the Coetzee Papers are asked to reflect on the status of his archive’.<sup>15</sup> This first sketch of ‘The Vietnam Project’ and its history of preservation and transmission certainly corroborate the need for this kind of reflection, but also suggest that it must involve at least some degree of wariness. The archival materials are always in some sense self-conscious, and there is no simple way for us to get past Coetzee to the truth of the archive. Ours is not a task of opening tombs and finding the bodies within (and even if it were, what kind of truth is a corpse?), but rather one of reading the signs of history and composition.

This example represents, albeit at a high pressure, the more general difficulty for critics handling the archives of living authors. In an era when the university is playing an ever-greater role in literary reception (not to mention production), we must now confront how academic critical labours participate in the literary field. John Bolin, in his review of *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, finds that Attwell ‘never truly confronts the methodological questions that are only becoming more pressing for archival scholars in an age when (famous) writers, at some stage, begin to consider that their papers will be read’. Bolin suggests that readers will eventually be ‘forced to extend and invert the kinds of questions Attwell poses’ if they are to come to grips with Coetzee’s ‘grey canon’ (works that do not belong to the published oeuvre, but which are now becoming part of the recognized corpus of writing). Beginning this project would involve asking not how Coetzee’s published writing is autobiographical, as Attwell does in *Life of Writing*, but rather, according to Bolin, ‘how closely related are the voices in his notebooks to the selves who emerge from and disappear in the pages of his books’.<sup>16</sup>

Coetzee’s own writings on secrets and lies in autobiographical discourse allow us to further develop Bolin’s sense that Coetzee’s archive challenges the usual methodologies, derived from biographical and genetic traditions, which critics use to approach such materials. In *Youth*, Coetzee makes two suggestions about the relationship between writing and life: the first is that what appears to be personal may have been created for other peoples’ eyes, to achieve particular ends. The second is that there may be no such thing as truly personal or at least private writing anyway. Instead, writing is always in

some way public. This second point is certainly true of the period in which Coetzee has been working: there are any number of institutions which will make ‘private’ writing public, including the research university with its staff of literary critics, the endowed archive, and publishers. Nevertheless, he suggests that there will always be secrets that such institutions cannot contain or transmit.

There are reflections on the nature of the *true* secret throughout Coetzee’s published writing – beyond the episode of the diary, the topic of what is not being said or cannot be said emerges with notable frequency. In *Boyhood* (1997) ‘he’ holds his school life as a ‘tight secret’ from his mother (*B*, 5). His preference for the Russians over the Americans in the Cold War ‘is a secret so dark that he can reveal it to no one’; he soon reflects that ‘[w]hatever he wants, whatever he likes, has sooner or later to be turned into a secret’ (*B*, 26, 28). Even cricket is part of his hidden world, as ‘the secret that he manages to cover up elsewhere is relentlessly probed and exposed’ while he is batting (*B*, 54). In *Youth*, the young John tells bafflingly inconsequential lies. At the Poetry Society, he is asked his age: “‘Twenty-one,” he says. It is a lie: he is twenty-two.’ His many difficult sexual liaisons cause him to wish that he could ‘put the whole shameful business behind him, close the book on it’ (*Y*, 73, 130). In *Summertime*, the right of John to be protected from ‘academic newshound[s]’ seeking to ‘get some dirt on him’ is a recurring concern, while Vincent’s various interlocutors also have their own secrets to hide (*Sum*, 35). In the volume of exchanges with psychologist Arabella Kurtz, *The Good Story* (2015), Coetzee wonders whether the return of the repressed predisposes us to presume that secrets always come back. It may be, he says, that the ‘true secret, the inadmissible secret, the secret about secrets, is that secrets can indeed be buried and we can indeed live happily ever after’ (*GS*, 34). Of course, these suggestions about secrets are at odds with his practice of self-archiving: they imply that there is another order of secrets, one which can never be displayed.

Coetzee explores secrets more fully in his literary criticism, arguing that some may be impossible to tell in autobiography. In his inaugural professorial lecture at the University of Cape Town in 1984, published as *Truth in Autobiography*, he focuses on secrets and desire in Rousseau’s *Confessions* (1782–9).<sup>17</sup> Shameful desires are valuable for Rousseau in the ‘economy of confession’, Coetzee argues, as ‘every secret or shameful appetite’ becomes ‘confessable currency’. There is ultimately a convention of blindness in autobiography: by storing up shameful desires – the apparent truth of oneself – as assets in the economy of confession, Rousseau ensures that desires cannot be told (or ‘spent’). This is not because these desires ‘lie too close to the autobiographer’s heart but because they lie too close to his art’. Holding onto his ‘mysterious contradictions’, Rousseau is free to write – but ‘take away the last

veil' and 'no further confession is necessary.' *Truth in Autobiography* suggests that truth for the autobiographer primarily serves a narrative function, helping him to 'get from point A to point B in the text'; the absolute truth, whatever that may be, cannot enter into the discourse, as it is not commensurate with writing.<sup>18</sup>

As truth becomes something *of* the narrative, rather than something existing prior to it, the task of the critic working with the materials of Coetzee's life is unsettled. It is not merely that questions of fidelity – 'is this true of the author's life?' – become irrelevant, pitched as they are at an order of truth that cannot enter writing, but also that criticism faces its own otherwise unacknowledged conditions of truth-making. In the conclusion of *Truth in Autobiography*, Coetzee asks: 'have I not, in unveiling what I seem to be claiming to be the secret of the economy of Rousseau's *Confessions*, broken the very pact I have been talking about?' In short, as the critic, Coetzee has been claiming to be able to see what Rousseau cannot, and he has been doing so under the aegis of the distinct enterprise, with its own registers and protocols, known as literary criticism. But does that not mean that criticism is 'the only mode in which final truths can be told'? Just as with Rousseau the autobiographer, Coetzee the critic decides that if he is to continue he must keep his answer in reserve. To 'tell the truth of literature' that literature does not know, he concludes, would be to 'tell a truth that criticism cannot afford to tell', namely 'why it needs literature'. Instead of speaking this impossible truth, he simply calls the whole enterprise to a halt. 'The present discourse has gone on', he says, 'now it stops'.<sup>19</sup>

In his various accounts of his own writing practice, Coetzee reflects that he is motivated by a *narrative* understanding of truth. This is the case not just of autobiographical writing, he proposes, but also of all writing properly considered – including all that is now contained in the archive. In *Doubling the Point* (1992), Coetzee argues that truth is discovered in the act of composition itself:

This massive autobiographical writing-enterprise that fills a life, this enterprise of self-construction ... – does it yield only fictions? Or rather, among the fictions of the self, the versions of the self, that it yields, are there any that are truer than others? How do I know when I have the truth about myself? ...

As you write – I am speaking of any kind of writing – you have a feel of whether you are getting close to 'it' or not. You have a sensing mechanism, a feedback loop of some kind; without that mechanism you could not write ... Writing reveals to you what you wanted to say in the first place ...

I don't see that 'straight' autobiographical writing is any different *in kind* from what I have been describing. Truth is something that comes in the process of writing, or comes from the process of writing.

(*DP*, 17–18. Italics in the original)

The central question of all writing, in this view, is one of truth. Specifically, it is the question of the particular truth of the writing's self, a truth that has been created in the gambit that is writing, the getting from A to B. Feeling one's way toward this truth is what makes enterprises of self-construction in writing something other than a series of groundless fictions. In this process of writing, he continues, the self is written – 'writing writes us' (*DP*, 18).

In these reflections on what kind of truth motivates and is produced by writing, and what kind of truth criticism can access, Coetzee is thinking about the very questions of critical method that are now emerging in the treatment of his archival materials. Yet he is also rendering strange such terms as 'personal' and 'impersonal', which become mere secondary functions of writing. Refusing both Attwell's and Bolin's approaches – ones centred on the composition and development of works, or on reading the notebooks against the novels and *autre*biographies – he focuses on the experiences and subjects that are created in the texts themselves.

Such a desire to move away from predetermined critical paradigms certainly reflects a pressurized moment in the history of Coetzee's reception. In the 1980s, alongside celebrations of his fiction, there was also some criticism of Coetzee's apparent failure to write works that were committed in the right way to the struggle against apartheid. Nadine Gordimer famously claimed in her review of *Life & Times of Michael K* that Coetzee's 'heroes are those who ignore history, not make it'; which is a 'challengingly controversial position for a writer to take up in South Africa'.<sup>20</sup> This review, in particular, stung Coetzee. (In notebook entries from immediately afterward, he wrote with distaste, 'They want my books to be-about. Specifically, to be-about South Africa, about social relations in that country.'<sup>21</sup>) His public response in 'The Novel Today', an address given at the Cape Town Book Week in 1987, was to call into question a mode of reading in which 'the novelistic text becomes a kind of historical text, an historical text with a truth-value that requires a fairly sophisticated mode of interpretation'.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, though, Coetzee's reservations also draw on his own enduring efforts to think about critical method. Simply put, he is not certain that the process by which the critic converts the author's words from one discourse into another gives access to truths intimate to the author. It is a function of rhetoric for truths to feel intimate, but there is ultimately an order of truth not containable within the discourse of criticism as it stands. In this view, criticism as the attempt to draw off the last veil is misguided: as he says in *Doubling the Point*, 'in the act of triumphantly tearing the clothes off its subject and displaying the nakedness beneath – "Behold the truth!" – [literary criticism] exposes a naïveté of its own' (*DP*, 106). The situation of biographical criticism – hunting out the diary entry, letter, or manuscript

note that will reveal it all – is merely another version of the same problem, the pursuit of an impossible and inaccessible truth.

Faced with such scepticism toward the way literary criticism *in general* handles literary texts, Coetzee has attempted to develop alternatives. In his essay on Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly*, he advocates (if it makes sense to speak in such terms) reading from a position of 'weakness', an 'evasive (non)position inside/outside the play' (GO, 103). This is the logical endpoint of Coetzee's thinking about truth in autobiography, truth in criticism, and even truth in writing: refusing to evaluate writing by standards that are determined in advance, by what he elsewhere calls the 'rather tight discourse of criticism itself', he instead imagines criticism that is simultaneous with reading, just as truth and the self are simultaneous with composition (DP, 246). The *experience* itself, the getting from A to B in a text, with all of its affective loading, is what matters for the critic. Wilm takes up such a challenge in the context of the archive. Rather than reading the published works as a 'surface that needs to be looked through so as to get a glimpse at the archival depths, the hidden truths', Wilm borrows from Hans Magnus Enzensberger to argue for the archive as a 'compost heap' – one that simultaneously contains 'decomposing rubbish' and 'productive humus'.<sup>23</sup>

Yet if we were to read both inside and outside the play would we be giving up the autonomy of the discipline – a discipline which privileges the language and tradition of reason – in which we are engaged? It is certainly the case that Coetzee limits the authority of criticism in favour of literature. The archive as it is now used by critics functions in a remarkably similar way, as a source of authority that is not determined in advance by the critical enterprise, but rather by the author himself and the institutions which he allows to mediate his work. Coetzee (again) recognizes that reading in a non-critical way may be impossible. In a comic moment, the John character in *Summertime* asks to play a Schubert cassette while he and his lover have sex. The attempt to make the meaning of the music simultaneous with its experience, to circumvent the rather tight discourse of musical appreciation, perhaps, is ultimately a failure. His lover is not moved by the history of feelings John believes contained in the music, and the two of them remain in the grips of the rather tawdrier order of truth associated with this world (*Sum*, 68–70). The suggestion is that the version of the critical enterprise that 'John' has imagined – a version grounded in aesthetic experience – cannot be converted into a methodology in any positive sense.

As Coetzee's career has developed, the extent to which his writing is invigorated by questions of life and life-writing has only become clearer.

His papers at the HRC, the 2012 Kannemeyer biography, and the autobiographical trilogy have all focused attention on these elements. Critics have further emphasized that Coetzee is always, and has always been, an archival writer. The research emerging out of encounters with the archive is no doubt producing new insights – we can now see more clearly certain of the situations out of which his writing has emerged. Yet, even as more materials become available, problems of critical method have only become more pressing. In light of Coetzee's own writing, and of what is in the archive, the traditions through which archives are generally handled, auto/biographical archives in particular, must now be brought into the debates about reading methods which have again returned to the centre of literary studies.

These debates have revolved especially around the value of critique. In particular, Rita Felski and others have argued that moving beyond critique, and away from a 'hermeneutics of suspicion', might allow us to make better account of our enduring attachments to literary texts. Yet I suggest that reading which is more clearly grounded in institutions, as well as sensitive to questions of form, would allow critics to evaluate Coetzee's archive with an eye toward both the particular literary and material situations out of which they have emerged and the nature of the texts themselves. This does not mean either suspicion or enchantment, but rather a critical practice grounded in particular literary environments, including our own, as critics whose future labours are inscribed in advance in the modern literary archive. To do otherwise is to risk insularity, especially in the context of an academy very much smitten with Coetzee's interventions into everything from social politics to the relationship between humans and animals.

In making these remarks, I am suggesting that interpretation, as opposed to historical description or excavation, must remain the primary focus of studies of Coetzee. The most compelling criticisms of his writing are still those that were published before the archive became available in its present form. While some of what is housed at the HRC may call into question elements of Derek Attridge's thinking, it is in fact by demoting historical and contextualist approaches to the novels that *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004) is able to sustain its powerful and sensitive readings of Coetzee's fiction. The risk with the archive is that it will move critics away from such richly speculative responses to powerful writing, and draw scholars instead into a labyrinth of authorial motivation and biographical resonance. There may be certain intellectual satisfactions with such endeavours, but they ultimately do not respond to what has motivated the scholarship in the first place: the public and private significance of the fictions.

## Notes

1. See Kai Easton, 'Coetzee, the Cape and the Question of History', *Scrutiny* 2, 11.1 (2006), 5–21 (p. 10).
2. David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 113–15.
3. Qtd. in Attwell, *Life of Writing*, p. 51.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
5. Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 23.
6. See Max Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 484–99.
7. Jan Wilm, 'The J. M. Coetzee Archive and the Archive in J. M. Coetzee' in Jan Wilm and Patrick Hayes (eds.), *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J. M. Coetzee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 215–31, 225–7.
8. Martin Woessner, 'The Writing of Life', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 17 April 2016 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-writing-of-life/>>.
9. Attwell, *Life of Writing*, 18.
10. Molly Schwartzburg, 'A Glimpse into J. M. Coetzee's Bound Drafts: *Life & Times of Michael K*', *Cultural Compass*, 2011 <<http://blog.hrc.utexas.edu/2011/10/10/a-glimpse-into-j-m-coetzees-bound-drafts-life-times-of-michael-k/>>.
11. Attwell, *Life of Writing*, p. 20.
12. J. M. Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country*, small notebook (16 March 1974 – 9 February 1976), CP 33.3, 8 October 1975.
13. J. M. Coetzee, *Dusklands*, <sup>Discarded</sup> First sketch of Vietnam Project', handwritten draft (11–27 May 1972), CP 33.2, 11 May 1972.
14. *Ibid.*, 19 May 1972.
15. Wilm, 'The Coetzee Archive', p. 231.
16. John Bolin, Review of 'J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time', *Review of English Studies*, 67.281 (2016), 824–6 (p. 826).
17. *Truth in Autobiography* explores many of the points of the much longer essay, 'Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky' (1985).
18. J. M. Coetzee, *Truth in Autobiography* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 1984), pp. 3–5.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.
20. Nadine Gordimer, 'The Idea of Gardening', *The New York Review of Books*, 2 February 1984, 3–6, (p. 3, p. 6).
21. J. M. Coetzee, *Foe*, green casebound notebook with gilt edges (1982–5), CP 33.6, 17 March 1984. For a more detailed analysis of this period and Coetzee's responses, see my chapter, 'Double Thoughts: Coetzee and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism' in Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm (eds.), *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J. M. Coetzee* (Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 52–69.
22. J. M. Coetzee, 'The Novel Today', *Upstream*, 6.1 (1988), 2–5 (p. 2).
23. Wilm, 'The Coetzee Archive', p. 221.