

## From Fiction to Ethical Encounter:

## Problematization as Method in J.M. Coetzee's Narratives

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**Abstract**

This article examines J.M. Coetzee's literary practice as a philosophical methodology rooted in the Foucauldian notion of "problematization." This paper contends that Coetzee's work should not be confined to the realm of traditional philosophical fiction; instead, it operates as an ethically charged interrogation of alterity, freedom, and justice, thereby transforming literature into a platform for critical epistemological engagement. By engaging with the ideas of Michel Foucault, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida, this study situates Coetzee at a critical juncture where literary aesthetics converge with ethical critique. Problematization works not solely as a rhetorical strategy but as a critical tool for unveiling the contingencies and power dynamics inherent in historical and narrative constructions. This article posits that Coetzee's fiction is intricately connected to ethical performance and epistemic responsibility, asserting that his body of literature embodies a form of writing-as-resistance that deliberately eschews resolution in favour of continuous ethical exploration. The argument reaches its apex with the assertion that Coetzee's fiction exemplifies an ethics-first philosophy, emphasising the significance of engaging with the Other and the unsettling openness inherent in narrative. In this endeavour, Coetzee fundamentally reinterprets the function of literature within the frameworks of postmodernism and postcolonialism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The literary works of J.M. Coetzee demonstrate a profound engagement with the methodology of problematization, intricately weaving together aesthetic strategies and philosophical inquiry. This article contends that Coetzee's body of work should not be pigeonholed as philosophical fiction within conventional frameworks; instead, it merits acknowledgement as a nuanced literary pursuit that intricately reinterprets philosophical concepts—particularly those anchored in ethics and the idea of otherness—into engaging narrative forms. At the heart of this transformation lies Coetzee's unique application of problematization, a method rooted in Foucauldian philosophy that intentionally avoids the suggestion of solutions. Rather, it seeks to illuminate the foundational assumptions, inherent contradictions, and ethical dilemmas that pervade social, historical, and narrative structures.

Rather than limiting themselves to philosophical quandaries, Coetzee's fiction necessitates an ethical investigation and thorough evaluation. This methodology aligns with Michel Foucault's concept of problematization, which involves not only the identification of problems but also the examination of the historical and discursive systems that render specific problems intelligible. This study adopts an interdisciplinary methodology, drawing upon the

theoretical foundations of Foucault, Levinas, Derrida, and contemporary literary theorists, to demonstrate how Coetzee's texts orchestrate ethical encounters that require active engagement from readers and resist definitive conclusions.

The overall structure of the article is broken down into two principal sections. At the outset, it articulates problematization as a core methodological principle in Coetzee's body of work, illustrating how his narratives avoid resolution and provoke critical self-reflection. Moreover, it explores how Coetzee's engagement with alterity, especially through the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, positions ethics as the fundamental basis of his literary pursuits.

## 2. PROBLEMATIZATION AS METHODOLOGY

J.M. Coetzee constructs a complex and unique identity within his body of work. This singularity is fundamentally rooted in his exercise of freedom and his capacity to infuse his novels and interviews with methodologies that foster critical thinking. The Coetzeean text represents the quintessential practice of problematization, characterised by a sophisticated integration of literary and philosophical elements. For several compelling reasons, I assert that we should not classify Coetzee's work as philosophical fiction. To begin with, the act of writing philosophy parallels the endeavour of writing science's fundamental objective of elucidation. In contrast, literature adheres to a distinct set of principles and techniques, frequently engaging in mystification alongside its primary function of entertainment. Furthermore, philosophical writing is characterised by its commitment to articulating a singular, coherent idea within each sentence, striving to eliminate any ambiguity in meaning. Third, philosophy exhibits a tendency towards repetition and operates in a manner that is fundamentally counter to natural instincts, as it engages with conceptual frameworks and profound structures that critically reflect upon our comprehension of the world.

In stark contrast, "literature can also be condemned for having the negative elements of the fantastic, the metaphoric, the surreal, and the mimetic aspects of the real and the natural" (Leeson, 2010, p. 120). Literature possesses the remarkable ability to transmute the tangible material world into an astonishingly formless realm, driven by the forces of imagination and fantasy. Literary fiction attempts to construct intricate illusions while simultaneously nurturing a sense of ambiguity and ambivalence. In contrast to philosophy, literature stands vulnerable to critique for its incorporation of the fantastic, the metaphoric, the surreal, and the mimetic elements that reflect the real and natural world. Literature, in its vastness and complexity, unequivocally empowers the literary artist to adopt diverse roles, functioning as psychiatrist, entertainer, historian, and philosopher. This multifaceted nature of literature underscores its significance and the profound impact it has on both creators and audiences alike. The remarkable versatility of literary sentences stems from the substantial aesthetic weight they bear, frequently illustrated through the use of symbolism, allusions, metaphors, and ambiguities. Consequently, literature has emerged as a vessel for avant-garde metaphysical enquiries, to the degree that certain manifestations of philosophical fiction seem to engage with the shared foundations where these ostensibly opposing discourses converge.

Thus, an investigation commences into the convergence of philosophical and literary discourses, examining the aspirations they offer concerning the pursuit of truth and the fidelity of their representations. This raises a multitude of enquiries: Philosophy plays a crucial role in literature, serving as a foundational framework that shapes narrative structures, character development, and thematic exploration. It provides a lens through which complex human experiences and moral dilemmas can be examined, allowing authors to engage with profound

questions about existence, ethics, and the nature of reality. The interplay between philosophical inquiry and literary expression enriches the text and invites readers to reflect critically on their beliefs and assumptions. Thus, the integration of philosophical thought into literature is essential. Philosophy undeniably permeates all forms of literature, given that literature itself exists in a multitude of languages and cultures. This interconnection suggests that philosophical themes and enquiries are not merely incidental but rather foundational to the very fabric of literary expression. This paper critically examines whether philosophy constitutes an integral component of the structural framework within Coetzee's fiction. What objectives could it potentially fulfil?

J.M. Coetzee's fiction, which engages in a critical examination of complex issues, is profoundly shaped by the interplay between literary and philosophical discourse. In his thought-provoking work, Patrick Hayes challenges the established assumptions that divide the fields of philosophy and literary criticism, as well as literature and philosophy. In *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J.M. Coetzee*, Patrick Hayes asks: "[w]hat, then, are the intellectual commitments that create disciplinary boundaries between literature and philosophy, or between philosophy and literary criticism?" (Hayes, 2017, p. 3) What is the "value of a body of writing such as J.M. Coetzee's that invites us to question the boundaries" of such disciplines (fiction and philosophy)? (Hayes, 2017, p. 3) One plausible explanation resides in Coetzee's capacity to transcend the confines of philosophy and literature, thereby enriching these discussions with a broader intellectual framework. He actively participates in each discourse within a comprehensive intellectual framework, using "problematization" to establish a shared foundation that enhances our comprehension of both historical and contemporary contexts.

This observation necessitates a thorough examination of problematization as the central theme of this article. It commences with a detailed clarification of the concept of problematization, exploring its complexities, intricacies, and textual ramifications. The "theoretical coherence" of Foucault's own work, as he claimed, is found "in the definition of the historically unique forms in which the generalities of our relations to things, to others, to ourselves, have been problematized" (Foucault, 1997). This notion is "problematization", as initially articulated by Michel Foucault, which emerged as the central theme of his seminal works, delineating the path of his profound philosophical enquiries.

Colin Gordon aptly describes this endeavour as "setting up a battery of new tools and frameworks for analysis" (Gordon, 2014). In his seminal work, *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner identified the significance of Foucault's own understanding of problematization when he pinpoints two succinct itineraries for comprehending Foucault's concept. Firstly, the term "'problematization,' awkward enough under the best of circumstances, has become rather confused by its use among post-Foucauldian academics, for whom it often means nothing more than taking something to be problematic" (Warner, 2002, p. 154). To problematize, in this usage, means "to complicate". Secondly, Warner provides a deeper interpretation of Foucault's work, arguing that problematization goes beyond simple intellectual complexity; it represents the practical framework that gives significance to problems, thus encouraging a critical examination of the very conditions of thought itself. Problematization functions as a pragmatic framework for intellectual engagement that surpasses simplistic conscious strategy. Warner clarifies that problematization, for Foucault,

has a much richer meaning, connected with the argument in volumes 2 and 3 of *History of Sexuality*. There, he treats a problematic not just as an intellectual tangle, but also as the practical horizon of intelligibility within which problems come to matter for people. It stands for both the conditions that make thinking

possible and for the way thinking, under certain circumstances, can reflect back on its own conditions. Problematization is more than arguing; it is a practical context for thinking. As such, it lies largely beyond conscious strategy. (Foucault, 1984a)

Carol Bacchi sees that Foucault employs the term 'problematization' in two distinct yet interconnected ways: as a verb, it characterises his analytical approach of engaging in a problematic mode of thought; as a noun, it denotes the subjects of contemplation that arise from historical practices of problematization, particularly within the realm of governance, encapsulating "the forms of problematization themselves" (Bacchi, 2015). In this context, it is imperative to recognise that problematisations should not be perceived solely as reflections of pre-existing conditions; conversely, they are not merely constructs of discourse devoid of any external reference. (Foucault, 1984a)

Clive Barnett contends that problematization, as articulated by the later Foucault, transcends traditional critique, emerging instead as an ethical and epistemological endeavour that scrutinises the circumstances under which specific phenomena are rendered intelligible as problems. Instead of providing definitive answers, it reveals the contingent frameworks that shape our understanding, illuminating the power dynamics inherent in the construction of knowledge. For Barnett, this stance transcends mere scepticism; it embodies a profound ethical responsibility—an intentional rejection of normative closure in favour of ongoing critical engagement with the mechanisms through which the world is made intelligible. (Barnett, 2015)

Coetzee mirrors Foucault in his objective, "to analyse problems while carefully avoiding prescribing political positions or visions". Consequently, he has faced accusations of apoliticism, ahistoricism, and evasiveness. Coetzee might concern himself the way Foucault did when he declared that "I concern myself with determining problems, unleashing them, revealing them within the framework of such complexity as to shut the mouths of prophets and legislators: all those who speak *for* others and *above* others" (Foucault, 1991, p. 159). Coetzee explores the domain of "unexamined ways of thinking". He urges readers to critically examine the foundational conceptual premises that underpin various problematizations, thereby shedding light on the practices and processes through which specific representations of the 'problem' acquire authenticity and authority.

Coetzee unequivocally asserts his position as a master of problematization, demonstrating profound expertise in this domain. His narratives illustrate the intricate interplay between diverse perspectives on problematization and Derrida's re/de-constructive concept of *différance*. Coetzee's focus on rivalry rather than supplementarity necessitates rigorous examination, not simply as an act of deconstruction but as a profound reimagining of the prerequisites for conceptualising and actualising freedom. Situated at the intersection of philosophy and literature, his body of work necessitates a genealogical analysis that meticulously delineates the dimensions of existence, cognition, and agency, eschewing evaluative judgements and simplistic binaries. His aesthetically and ethically established responsibility is intrinsically linked to the "problems" articulated in his fiction, thereby rendering them as complex problematics that demand rigorous examination. In a seminal examination of Coetzee's body of work, the editors of *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*, Huggan and Watson, assert that his fiction encapsulates a multitude of traits associated with modernist literature: the ineffectiveness of meaningful communication, the malleability of reality, the arbitrary and nonsensical nature of existence, the inescapable anguish of history, and the ever-present atmosphere of confusion, anxiety, and discomfort. The amalgamation of these elements culminates in what Coetzee refers to as a "disquieting vision", marked by

apocalyptic and nihilistic nuances that intricately connect his body of work to the broader aesthetics of international modernism. (Huggan, 1996, p. 5)

The reception of Coetzee's *Disgrace*, especially the controversies it incited, illustrates the myriad interpretations arising from the novel's convoluted complexities. Coetzee's responses prominently feature the "problematization" of pressing contemporary issues, including race, gender, violence, power dynamics, justice, law, and human/animal relations. The various registers of problematization reveal ideological fault lines and create narrative spaces for David Lurie to confront pain, exhibit ethical responsibility towards others (both human and non-human), and creatively exercise freedom, particularly through the composition of his chamber opera on Lord Byron. Problematization functions as a structuring force that makes *Disgrace* elusive, allowing it to avoid the simplistic demands of oppositional literary movements and the potential criticism from South African moral authorities. *Disgrace* effectively engages the reader in extensive ethical reflection, as the novel embodies an ethical inquiry within the narrative itself. Coetzee's ability to integrate both "the logos and the téchné" allows him to "achieve a complete practical knowledge of literature in order to practice it as a synthesis of rhetoric, narrative models, and a mosaic of styles", thus providing readers with a "reflexive and a problematized thinking of literature and as an aesthetic praxis of literary discourse" (Gracia, 2002, p. 198).

When the distinction between the author's intention to problematize and the reader's allegorical interpretations of that problematization collapses, we risk undermining the potential that this strategy offers. Coetzee's reconstruction of freedom and justice relies on a form of meta-thinking that avoids abstract negation while remaining connected to the normative goals of critical theory and literary tradition. This approach should be contextualised within modernist literary tropes, especially Coetzee's aspiration "to get closer to a secret, a secret of Beckett's that [he] wanted to make (Coetzee, 1992). Through the application of analytical methodologies, he seeks to illuminate thematic problematics and to interrogate the very nature of fiction writing through the lens of metafiction. In the Coetzeean context, this represents "rather a polyvalent problematization of the critical, reflexive, analytical, or playful perspective of that which is narrated reflected upon itself" (Gracia, 2002, p. 186).

Coetzee's "problematization of a present" closely parallels Foucault's notion of "problematization" as a dynamic epistemological process, wherein "several responses can be made" to "one single set of difficulties", emphasizing that "most of the time different responses actually are proposed." What is crucial, however, is to understand "what makes them simultaneously possible" (Foucault, 1984a). Foucault contends that the basis for this simultaneity lies in "the soil that can nourish them all in their diversity and sometimes in spite of their contradictions" (Foucault, 1984a). This "soil", or what he refers to as the *episteme*, surpasses its simple historical context; it operates as a generative matrix that "develops the conditions in which possible responses can be given" (Foucault, 1984a). Aligned with this theoretical perspective, Coetzee's literary approach also involves converting experienced impasses and theoretical deadlocks into areas of exploration, where "this transformation of a group of obstacles and difficulties into problems to which the diverse solutions will attempt to produce a response [. . .] constitutes the point of problematization" (Foucault, 1984a).

Coetzee provides readers with essential tools to critically engage with and reimagine possibilities, aligning with Foucault's principle of adopting a problematic approach to thought. Nonetheless, it is imperative to recognise that Foucault engages in the "historicization" of the problematizations surrounding various concepts such as madness, crime, and sexuality. Foucault is "not so much problematizing concepts by writing their histories as he is writing the histories of them having been problematized" (Foucault, 1988). Coetzee, conversely and



persistently, interrogates the discursive strategies and ideas embedded within his narratives and interviews. Coetzee presents his work as an analysis of “the problematizations through which being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought—and the practices on the basis of which these problematizations are formed” (Foucault, 1988). The subject matter covers a wide array of critical themes, including history, race, violence, politics, language, ethics, aesthetics, exile, and censorship. Coetzee’s explorations of ethics “took him into areas of knowledge beyond a purely literary sensibility .... It has become clear that Coetzee’s forays into philosophy merit the attention of philosophers, not just philosophically interested literary critics and theoreticians” (Mehigan, 2018, p. 1). It is for this compelling reason that I dare to argue that fiction for Coetzee is a sporting way to “write problematically”.

Coetzee employs problematization as a strategic device that not only broadens transformative thinking but also offers hypotheses for readers, thereby contributing to knowledge in a manner that eschews definitive assertions. Coetzee occupies a pivotal position at the intersection of philosophy and literature, resonating with Foucault’s assertion in *The Order of Things* that the two disciplines are inextricably linked, each informing and shaping the other:

[t]his book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought – *our* thought, [...] breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. (Foucault, 2005, p. xvi).

Coetzee’s fiction, shaped by the aesthetic of problematization, refuses the comfort of philosophical resolution, insisting instead on the ethical urgency of confronting alterity amid the enduring legacies of historical violence. In the Foucauldian sense, his novels do not simply represent crises—they enact the very conditions of ethical thought. Before they can be read as philosophical arguments or political critiques, they must be recognized as ethical performances. This ethical primacy is not secondary to Coetzee’s aesthetic; it is its very ground. The task, then, is no longer to interpret Coetzee through the lens of ethics but to understand ethics itself—radically—as the first philosophy animating his literary vision.

### 3. ETHICS AS COETZEE’S FIRST PHILOSOPHY

In the mid-twentieth century, pivotal global transformations reshaped historical narratives and, in turn, fundamentally altered the interpretative frameworks through which individuals engage with human discursive products, especially literature. The two World Wars, alongside the significant colonial expansion, stand as pivotal events that have profoundly influenced world literature. These occurrences have incited critical enquiries into the nature of morality, compelling thinkers and writers to grapple with the ethical implications of their times. The dichotomy of opposing political ideologies has undeniably shaped a framework of literary criticism that is predominantly influenced by the prevailing political agendas of the era. Consequently, discourse surrounding morality and ethics frequently devolved into vacuous rhetoric, inviting derision and scepticism. People have extensively characterised prioritising politics over ethics as an ideological facade that conceals the power ambitions of dominant social factions. Giving priority to politics over ethics was “widely regarded as an ideological mask concealing the will to power of dominant groups in society, ethics ended up an object of contempt, ridicule and abuse” (Arizti, 2010).

In the aftermath of the Cold War, a period that thrust the world perilously close to an apocalyptic global conflict, it became imperative for every rational intellect to critically reassess the ethical dimensions of human existence. The twentieth century forced literature to confront its moral obligation to challenge the misguided behaviours prevalent among individuals. Literature has unequivocally established its rightful position by positioning ethics as the cornerstone of all intellectual and literary pursuits, heralding the onset of what is now recognised as "the turn to ethics". The current turn can be attributed to a confluence of critical factors: the repercussions of the two world wars, the swift progress of modern technologies that inspire persistent discussions surrounding morals, ethics, and humanism, and the fervent postmodernist spirit that has influenced human endeavours since the 1960s. Philosophy and literature have evolved into a symbiotic relationship, with each discipline significantly propelling the advancement of the other. In order for literature to more accurately reflect the complexities of human preoccupations and endeavours, it is imperative that philosophy assumes a corrective function. Philosophers such as MacIntyre, Rorty, and Nussbaum persuasively advocate for a turn to literature—particularly fiction—asserting that it is "ethics in the second degree" (Foucault, 1984a). Since that time, ethics has unequivocally reclaimed its significance and insists upon being rigorously addressed within the frameworks of literary and philosophical criticism.

The growing prominence of intellectuals like Levinas, Derrida, and Foucault in literary discourse has undeniably catalysed a significant transformation towards ethical considerations. Their ideas have profoundly influenced numerous disciplines, prompting a critical interdisciplinary reevaluation of human phenomena. The concept of interdisciplinarity significantly enriches postcolonial theory, as well as the various intersecting "isms" that include postmodernism. The domains of feminism, queer and gender studies, and multiculturalism have undergone rigorous critical re-examination, compelling a reconsideration of the pressing nature of ethics within these frameworks. The emphasis on the ethico-political dimensions of literary production has emerged as a critical issue in every postcolonial context.

The novels of J.M. Coetzee, characterised by their exploration of rivalry and the complexities of ethical dilemmas, are a compelling complement to Levinas's ethical narrative. Coetzee adeptly appropriates Levinas's concept of the Other, thereby encompassing the entirety of otherness in a comprehensive manner. The act of writing in the context of Coetzee emerges as a profound instance of alterity, firmly rooted in Levinas's ethical framework. In the process of awakening to the Other, Coetzee, as an author, transitions from a Heideggerian preoccupation with his mortality (or the "death of the author" as articulated in Barthes's thesis) to a Levinasian emphasis on the primacy of others' lives above his existence. For both Levinas and Coetzee, ethics unequivocally stands as the "first philosophy".

Coetzee recognises a significant challenge that Levinas encounters in attributing value to both the singularity of the self and the singularity of the other—a relationship that he articulates as one of separateness. Coetzee introduces a critical third dimension: the unique essence of the third subject. The self encounters multiple singularities, thereby confronting a diversity of alterities that necessitate a relationship characterised by justice. The presence of this third entity—be it a narrator, the fictional text itself, or any representation of otherness that transcends the self-other dichotomy—introduces a significant layer of complexity to Coetzee's ethical framework. The intricacy of this issue arises from the unease generated by the dualistic nature of modernist discourse, which delineates the self in opposition to the Other. In his later works, Levinas articulates that the concept of "singularity" underscores the ethical relationship inherent among all manifestations of otherness, transcending the simplistic dichotomy of subject versus Other. For Coetzee, singularity represents a profound embrace and

acknowledgement of all manifestations of alterity, intricately woven together within a dialogic yet deconstructive framework.

Emmanuel Levinas emerges as a distinctive and penetrating philosopher, not merely by delineating a framework for ethics but by critically illuminating the evolution of Western thought and its inherent characteristics that significantly shape our understanding of ethical principles. Levinas contends that Western philosophy has attempted to generalise and totalise the complexities inherent in the "self-and-other" dilemma. Totalisation, as articulated by Levinas, represents a critical process wherein the Other is diminished and assimilated into one's own realm of existence. This act of absorbing the Other's alterity ultimately leads to a reduction to sameness, thereby obliterating its inherent uniqueness. Western philosophy positions the Western self as the foundational framework into which all non-Western Others must be integrated, a process that ultimately erases the distinctiveness of the Other.

In stark contrast to the violent totalisation that pervades contemporary discourse, Levinas persuasively advocates for a "welcoming approach" to the Other, positioning it as a necessary corrective alternative. This approach necessitates that one unreservedly accept the vulnerabilities of others, devoid of any conscious moral framework or cognitive methodology. It is imperative for the self to recognise and embrace the exteriority of the Other, a process that commences in any direct interaction, which Levinas refers to as "the ultimate situation". The "face" of the Other constitutes the fundamental aspect of exteriority, not merely in a literal physical sense, but as an irreducible ethical image that steadfastly resists any attempt at reduction. Levinas's concept of the "face" transcends mere phenomenological interpretation; it encapsulates an enigmatic exteriority that fundamentally challenges and disrupts any attempt at totalisation. The enigmatic nature of the "face" is pivotal for comprehending Levinas' perspective, as the "face" precedes language itself. Consequently, the response to the Other engenders the formation of a language, which ultimately evolves into discourse. The emergence of language constitutes a weighty manifestation of the self's response to the Other. Consequently, Levinas prioritises the Other in relation to the Self. Levinas posits that ethics are the foundational philosophical framework and the essential component underpinning all other domains of thought. Levinas' critique of Western philosophy, which is fundamentally rooted in the brutality of its totalising beliefs, positions such encounters as pivotal to his phenomenology. (Levinas, 1979, p. 194).

To circumvent the ramifications of totalisation, Levinas refrains from defining a prescriptive ethical framework. Instead, he meticulously uncovers the foundational philosophical convergences that have facilitated heinous acts, including colonialism, Nazism, apartheid, slavery, and genocide. Such aberrations emerge as a direct consequence of the overarching and violent project aimed at subjugating the Other. Levinas delineates a critical distinction between the Other (*autre*), which functions as an object of consciousness, and the absolute Other (*Autrui*), a concept that eludes accessibility and remains fundamentally exterior to the conscious faculties of the self. This asymmetrical relationship underscores the notion that ethics emerges as a fundamental responsibility that precedes cognitive engagement. Levinas asserts that the self is inextricably linked to the Other, positing that its very subjectivity is contingent upon this relationship. This interdependence challenges the notion of an autonomous self, emphasising the fundamental role of the Other in the formation of identity. The self's desire to reduce the Other to its own essence is a violent act, creating gaps that fundamentally contribute to the self's inherent incompleteness. The self engages in an incessant quest for affirmation, compelled to turn outward towards external validation. This dynamic necessitates a sacrificial negation of the subject, thereby establishing an ethical obligation that arises not from within the self but rather from the Other. Ethics, consequently, operates as an



anti-foundational construct that is inherently pre-cognitive, existing prior to the imposition of linguistic, historical, and cultural significations.

In *The Ends of Man*, Jacques Derrida articulates a profound dilemma regarding the appropriation of the subject. Jacques Derrida asserts that "the history of man is questionable, constituted as if 'man' has no historical origin, cultural, linguistic, or even metaphysical boundaries" (Derrida, 1969). This statement compels us to critically examine the very foundations upon which our understanding of humanity is built, challenging the assumptions that have long been taken for granted. The face-to-face encounter transcends mere representation and intentionality, constituting the foundational pivot for Levinas's ethical framework. The "face" constitutes an essential ethical image, and within Coetzee's oeuvre, the "face" manifests in diverse forms, with the Other potentially embodying a protagonist, an idea, or even a text, each necessitating a distinct ethical engagement. Ethics are inextricably intertwined with the creative act of reading, a point underscored by Attridge. The literary text stands as a unique and autonomous entity, akin to the Other. Engaging with a Coetzeean novel fundamentally challenges any totalising impulse, as it resolutely maintains its singularity and autonomy. Therefore, Levinas's phenomenology is indispensable to postcolonial studies and various cultural domains, particularly in the context of Coetzee's narratives.

Derrida's profound enquiries into ethics and aesthetics, alongside Levinas, are indispensable for a comprehensive understanding of Coetzee's oeuvre. The intellectual relationship between Derrida and Levinas is marked by complexity, particularly in the realm of ethics. The contributions of these thinkers, along with the profound insights of Foucault and Husserl, significantly shape Attridge's intellectual framework. Attridge critically examines the dynamic interplay between aesthetics and ethics in his seminal texts, *The Singularity of Literature and J.M. Coetzee* and *The Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. This relationship is "often attributed to the radicalism and excessive moral relativism brought about by some extreme forms of post-structuralist and postmodernist theory" (Arizti, 2010). Attridge's evaluation of Coetzee's literary works is profoundly shaped by the Derridian and Levinasian concepts of "otherness" and "alterity", which he posits are foundational to ethical considerations. The ideas presented here profoundly challenge established ethical imperatives, compelling a rigorous examination of concepts such as aestheticism, singularity, freedom, and justice to their utmost boundaries within Coetzee's oeuvre. His works exhibit notable parallels with French deconstruction and phenomenology, underscoring the complexity and depth of these philosophical enquiries. Alexandra Effe asserts that:

poststructuralist approaches, influenced by philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, locate the ethical value of fiction in its unverifiability and infinite indeterminacy, and in its consequential potential to engender new and unpredictable ways of reading and thinking. (Effe, 2017, p. 8).

In this context, Coetzee's texts warrant a rigorous examination to uncover the intersections of ethics and aesthetics and analyse how these elements fundamentally reshape our understanding of the human condition. Prior to engaging in an evaluation of Coetzee's selected works, it is imperative to delineate the contrasting perspectives regarding the tension that exists between ethics and aesthetics. When assessing a literary artefact, a critical question arises regarding the legitimacy of authority in determining the ethical embedding of the work. Two principal factions fundamentally divide the discourse: moralism and autonomism. Moralists contend that literary works ought to impart a moral message, thereby assisting readers in the formation of a worldview that possesses intellectual merit. Autonomists assert that art ought not to function as a vehicle for moral instruction. The existence of this polarity has given rise to the concept

of “ethical criticism”, which asserts that ethical considerations must fundamentally underpin any assessment of artistic merit.

Noel Carroll stands out as a significant theorist who recognises the evolutionary progression of moralism and autonomism, culminating in moderate expressions of both rather than rigid absolutist positions. Carroll articulates a clear distinction between moderate moralism and moderate autonomism. According to him, “moderate moralism maintains that in some instances a moral defect in an artwork can be an aesthetic defect, and that sometimes a moral virtue can count as an aesthetic virtue” (Carroll, 1998). This position directly challenges the assumptions of moderate autonomism, which

admits that artworks can be morally defective and morally bad for that reason, but then goes on to say that the moral badness of a work can never count as an aesthetic defect. Nor can the moral virtuousness of an artwork ever count toward anything more than the moral goodness of the work. A moral virtue in an artwork never adds to the aesthetic merit of the work. (Carroll, 1998).

Carroll's formulation thus foregrounds the entanglement of moral and aesthetic value while opposing the separationist logic of the autonomist stance. He asserts that both ethics and aesthetics hold significant importance in the realm of literary criticism; however, he contends that ethics takes precedence, as aesthetic evaluations are invariably influenced by moral considerations. He posits that the absence of ethics renders aesthetics devoid of significance, while ethics, when divorced from aesthetics, becomes utterly lifeless.

Given the ongoing debate regarding the undecidability of the characteristics that ought to delineate the literariness and ethical implications of an artwork, the central issue for nearly all involved parties is the necessity for the text to avoid acting as a vehicle for particular worldviews. The individuals engaged in this discussion include artists, critics, and philosophers, each of whom endeavours to maintain the ethical importance of literature while simultaneously safeguarding its aesthetic and fictional qualities. The continuing integration of divergent methodologies seeks to interpret the literary work in a way that surpasses superficial negative nuances, thereby guaranteeing it the recognition it rightfully merits. The justice that Attridge and Coetzee endeavour to investigate is essentially anchored in the acknowledgement of totality—encompassing all facets of the written text, including its aesthetics and ethics, along with other critical elements—and the uniqueness intrinsic to a fictional work.

The captivating essence of the singularity present in a work of fiction is fundamentally influenced by the iterative and distinguishing process of reading, which is essential to its emergence. This inquiry seeks to expand on the ethical implications of reading with the intention of grappling with the intricate matters of freedom and justice as articulated in Coetzee's literary contributions. The inherent “writerly” nature of literary works, defined by the dynamic interaction between the reader and text, creates a framework that highlights the significance of ethical engagement in understanding the artistic endeavour. The active engagement with the text transpires at every inventive “event” of reading, thereby assigning the responsibility to the reader, who is fundamentally a cognitive and knowledgeable being.

At this juncture, it is essential to acknowledge that ethics represents a practice of problematization, requiring a thorough examination of the most enduring challenges that call for our engagement, rather than an unproductive attempt to resolve them conclusively. To put it differently, ethics fundamentally embodies a responsive engagement with contemporary issues, as articulated by Foucault and his contemporaries, alongside certain novelists,

particularly Coetzee, who is notable for his distinctive methodologies. Consequently, it can be argued that Coetzee's diverse problematizations reflect a critical and thought-provoking perspective that seeks "to find a way of speaking to fellow human beings that will be cool rather than heated, philosophical rather than polemical" (Coetzee, 2003, p. 66). composed demeanour instead of fervent disputes, and a philosophical methodology rather than a confrontational one (Coetzee, 2003, p. 66). Interacting with Coetzee's novels in a problematic way "will bring enlightenment rather than seeking to divide us into the righteous and the sinners, the saved and the damned, the sheep and the goats" (Coetzee, 2003, p. 66).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

When it comes to J.M. Coetzee's literature, no amount of logical, ethical, or aesthetic closure can satisfy the imagination. Refusing to accept the simplistic dichotomies of good and evil, self and other, logic and emotion, his fiction lives in the space between clarity and opacity. If anything, Coetzee's narrative technique relentlessly problematises in the Foucauldian sense, rather than offering a moral navigation map. Rather than seeking to address moral issues, it ruptures the epistemic premises upon which they are produced. Meaning is not recovered in his universe, but rather dismantled, relocated, and re-encountered in the face of ethical imperative.

According to this article, Coetzee demonstrates a strong disapproval of literature as a tool for moral instruction. His art adds darkness to the road to justice by way of ambiguity, stillness, and irreducible otherness rather than light. Instead of being a script for moralising, what emerges is a poetics of interruption in which fiction is seen as an ethical provocation and a thought event. Characters in Coetzee's work who find themselves at crossroads in history and existential crises are shown not as role models of ethics but as individuals caught up in the breakdown of passed-down ethical codes. Not because they fail, bewilder, or remain silent, but precisely because they refuse to give in to the temptation of resolution—that is the power of the text.

Coetzee's narratives accentuate a responsibility that predates knowledge and surpasses justice as calculation, drawing on the ethical philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. In Coetzee's work, the ideas of Derrida about justice as an unfathomable singularity and Levinas about relating to the Other are not only mentioned; they are dramatised, faced, and endured. Aesthetics and ethics, rather than converging in harmony, come into conflict in his story. Reading becomes an event in and of itself, a scene of ethical exposure in which the reader plays the role of witness rather than judge or translator.

Reading Coetzee is like stepping into a world where literature dodges consolation and stays away from jargon. The inevitability of uncertainty, the brutality of reductionism, and the confines of one's own thinking must be faced. As a counter-force to the ideological polarisation and algorithmic certainty of our day, Coetzee's literary ethic disturbs, breaks apart, and introduces us to the profoundly Other. His work is more questioning than informative, and its ethical content is secondary to its style. Instead of narrating ethical stories, he writes ethically, leaving room for readers to dwell in the spaces, think differently, and stay in the unfinished business.

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