

## The (Wo)-Man of Revolt: J.M. Coetzee and Elizabeth Costello

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### Abstract

This paper elaborates those unconventional textual and narrative strategies applied by J.M. Coetzee in his *Elizabeth Costello*, in order to illustrate the spirit of revolt that is one of Coetzee's core poetic features. On the textual level, strategies such as authorial interferences, change of tense, and the play with the term *realism* are implemented to create the effect of revolt against the writing convention of realism and the complacency of the reader. On the narrative level, the split of the author identity and the ensuing interplaying among the three alter-egos not only challenge the conventional practice of self-examination in writing, but also generate a multidimensional meta-cognitive space in which the self-criticism of the author lends clues to the various mysterious details that baffle critics and the reading public.

**Key words:** Revolt; Alter Ego; Realism; Identity

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### INTRODUCTION

Though according to its etymological origin, "woman" comes from *wifman*, meaning wife + man, namely the wife of a man, it can also be parsed, with illogical wild imagination, as wo + man, with "wo" meaning "where" in the German language; thus, it can be said that "woman" means the origin of man, from where man comes from.

This understanding is so self-evident on one hand and so unscientific on the other, that the mere mentioning of it might be the evidence of mental mediocrity and linguistic foolhardiness. Accordingly, the denial of this man-from-woman formula is even more absurd. However, where the absurdity abides, there generally promises a profound source of unexpected revelations; such as in the last scene of the First Lesson of J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*:

She lies slumped deep in her seat. Her head is sideways, her mouth open. She is snoring faintly. Light flashes from the windows as they bank, the sun setting brilliantly over southern California. He can see up her nostrils, into her mouth, down the back of her throat. And what he cannot see he can imagine: the gullet, pink and ugly, contracting as it swallows, like a python, drawing things down to the pear-shaped belly-sac. He draws away, tightens his own belt, sits up, facing forward. No, he tells himself, that is not where I come from, that is not it. (Coetzee, 2003, p.34)

This scene, seldom expounded by Coetzeeian scholars, in which John, the son of Mrs. Costello, on imagining the serpent-like physiology of his mother, the very physical aspect of being, refuses to be dragged down to the mere physical of existence, epitomizes the very spirit of this novel: the revolt of the author and his main character(s). This rejection of the fact of being born from a female body per se is not ethically reproachable in the sense that one finds his/her mother's body disgusting as it appears so in the scene cited above, but is, on the contrary, an act of asserting one's stand in the physical-spiritual strife. In this sense, his rejection of the sheer physicality of the mother is in essence his recognition of the true value and spirit of the mother.

As is well-known to scholars and readers, Coetzee is a typical "Aussenseiter", not only in his life but also in his career as a writer. First of all, his origin promises a constant struggle with the issue of identity in his life and writing. In the autobiographical trilogy of *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*, the revolt against his given identity is all

over the pages. His invented faith in the Roman Catholic Church, his compassion with the Soviet Union, his double identity as a programmer with IBM and a literary scholar on Ford Marx Ford, his listening to classical music when having intercourse with a single mother; all indicate his awareness and wish to be different, to escape from the given and reach for something up there yet unspecified, to explore what he himself is. In his writing life the will to be different is all the more apparent. Each of his published work, fiction, nonfiction, or works whose genre is reluctant to be determined, is “a new territory,” an eye-catching phrase used in the beginning of the novel (or the book with categorization difficulty) *Elizabeth Costello*. He seems to be constantly running from tradition and settledness; from the grooves of his previous works, much twisted as they already are; from any expectedness and prediction of the reading public; into an unexplored wilderness, a brand-new maze without any literary referential framework as a guiding map, such as exemplified by his two latest books: *The Childhood of Jesus and The Schooldays of Jesus*. Besides, his active involvement in the Anti-Vietnam-War protest, which led directly to the rejection of his application for citizenship of the USA; his reserved attitude in the matter of literary representation of the cruelty and injustice of the Apartheid years; and his emigration to Australia in his early 60’s, also epitomize the revolting self. From these general aspects, it is sure to see that the spirit of revolt plays a key role in the understanding of the person and the writer with the name J. M. Coetzee. This paper intends to show how this spirit is woven into his novel *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*, with a focus on the first lesson “Realism”.

## 1. TEXTUAL REVOLT

There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge. People solve such problems every day. They solve them, and having solved them to push on.

Let us assume that, however it may have been done, it is done. Let us take it that the bridge is built and crossed, that we can put it out of our mind. We have left behind the territory in which we were. We are in the far territory, where we want to be (Coetzee, 2003, p.1).

This is the opening of the First Lesson of the novel. It seems to be a postmodern confession of the fictiveness of his work, just like the beginning of Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*:

You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away, “No, I don’t want to watch TV!” Raise your voice—they

won’t hear you otherwise—“I’m reading! I don’t want to be disturbed!” Maybe they haven’t heard you, with all that racket; speak louder, yell: “I’m beginning to read Italo Calvino’s new novel!” Or if you prefer, don’t say anything; just hope they’ll leave you alone. (Calvino, 1998, p.3)

Yet, while in general postmodern writers tend to assure the reader of the fictive nature with frankness and clarity, just like what Calvino does above, Coetzee has achieved the postmodern confession in general and semantic mysteriousness (which is vintage Coetzee) at the same time with his textual magic. With the title “Realism” in mind, the reader of the first sentence will not fail to connect the “problem of the opening” with literary creation, especially the creation of the illusion of reality. Yet, Coetzee undermines this certainty with “how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank”, in which the “nowhere” shakes the very foundation of realism—the mirroring of the concrete reality with the unarguable and guaranteed existence as its defining characteristic. Philosophical realism, according to *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Blackburn, 1996, p.320), affirms “the real existence of some kind of thing, or some kind of fact or state of affairs”, while literary realism refers to “a mode of writing that gives the impression of recording or ‘reflecting’ faithfully an actual way of life.” (Baldick, 2001, p.212) The simple bridge which links the far bank, a relatively specific place compared with the nowhere-ness of this bank, has also been mysteriously built and crossed, leaving the question of where is the basis of realism if we start from nowhere, namely no certainty of anything visible, discernible, and legible. In this way, Coetzee plays with us by planting the doubt on the essence of his “realism” in our mind, the very source of our bewilderment which grows alongside the progress of the story.

The second part of the first paragraph — “*It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge. People solve such problems every day. They solve them, and having solved them push on.*” — metaphorizes the function of narrative that endows the chaos of life with frameworks within which the cognition of reality becomes possible. By doing this, Coetzee intends to break up the illusion that reality or the real is self-evident, that the life unfolding and whirling around us is the life per se; on the contrary, every day we unconsciously build bridges with unspoken choices to reach the sense of realness, in order to find meaning and establish the illusory sense and certainty of existence. What Coetzee strives to illustrate is the homogeneity of fictive narration and reality, both, using the words of the character named Gordon Wheatley, being “construct, ...human construct” (Coetzee, 2003, p.8).

This revolt to the expectation and complacency of the reader at the meaning of realism is further strengthened when the narrator from time to time interrupts the flow of the text, in such phrases or sentences as “We skip”, “There

is a scene in the restaurant, mainly dialogue, which we skip”, and even in a paragraph as follows:

The presentation scene itself we skip. It is not a good idea to interrupt the narrative too often, since storytelling works by lulling the reader or listener into a dreamlike state in which the time and space of the real world fade away, superseded by the time and space of the fiction. Breaking into the dream draws attention to the constructedness of the story, and plays havoc with the realist illusion. However, unless certain scenes are skipped over we will be here all afternoon. The skips are not part of the text, they are part of the performance. (Coetzee, 2003, p.16)

In all three instances, the “we” is adroitly applied in deconstructing the omnipresence of the traditional realist narrator by dragging the reader into a narrative partnership with the narrator him-/herself. What Coetzee intends to do is not as simple as laying bare the fictiveness of storytelling, for it is as clear as daylight for an experienced contemporary reader, or the implied reader of his highly demanding works. The most interesting and sharp point of this seemingly insipid confession or preaching is the penultimate sentence: *However, unless certain scenes are skipped over we will be here all afternoon*. The narrator seems to be explaining something which if he/she had not mentioned, the reader would naturally have missed, for in a realist novel, the skipping happens all the time and no reader would think it could be an issue. This seemingly cumbersome and unnecessary explication is in essence a magic stroke, for it draws attention to the constructedness of the real, and mildly pokes at the inertness of the take-it-for-granted complacency of the reader. In this sense, the choice of “Lesson” over “Chapter” begins to reveal the intention of Coetzee: To revolt against the conventional ways of seeing and thinking. The last sentence is even more meaningful in its obscurity: *The skips are not part of the text, they are part of the performance*. The negation of the textual status of all those skips is designed again to goad the reader to think hard: if refused to be part of the text, then what are they? Does “text” mean the undisturbed and uncommented realist-like story telling? If so, the “notion” of text is certainly outdated when put against the postmodernist scenario. But, is it not true that for most readers those postmodernist textual self-exhibitions are only trivial and uninteresting tricks and fripperies, which are generally skipped for the sake of the enjoyment of the flow of the story? If this argument misses the point, then it would be impossible to explain the last word “performance”. The skips, looked at ironically in this place, are in the opinion of Coetzee merely postmodernist show, whose value is highly questionable.

If we look at this from a different perspective, this kind of skip as postmodernist textual strategy has long become a norm of postmodernist writing that it seems unwise of Coetzee to resort to it, even if Coetzee has long been deemed as a typical postmodern writer, though unwillingly so labeled on his part. Therefore, the only

answer to his constant uses of “skip” is that he wants to illustrate the absurdity and triteness of this practice.

Another interference with the narration is the change of tense. After a detailed introduction to his female protagonist Elizabeth Costello, which pretty much creates the illusion of realism, he begins to shake the very basis of realistic narrative tradition by shifting the standard past tense to the present one, as if uprooting something settled and throwing it into the live flux of uncertainty that is life going on. *In the spring of 1995 Elizabeth Costello travelled, or travels (present tense henceforth), to...* (Coetzee, 2003, p.2) This technique of using the present tense in telling a story from the past is certainly not novel, either. What is unique is the narrator’s shifting of the tense from past to present within the split of a second, as if it is a decision made on the spot; as well as the parenthesized declaration of the decided tense of the text thereafter. By doing so he repeats his vintage game with the curiosity of an inquiring reader. He simply denies the reader of smooth textual experience like a typical realist novelist would do; what he has created is not the kind of plot-related mysteries but textual uneasiness which proves to incessant source of inquiries on the part of an active reader. This challenge to the intellectual alertness and sharpness of the reader is undoubtedly Coetzee’s type of modernist writing, for “modo”, the origin of “modern”,

finds its meaning as a temporal adverb, telling the time of an action occurring not simply “today” or even “now” but “just now.”...So, modo enters into late antiquity as a most timely register of a temporality pressured by an immense sense of eventful change: a special present, a brink of time, a precipitous instant, all in all, a crisis time. These several associations move to the acutest register in the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the addition of the suffix “ism,” which adds a self-conscious awareness to this special experience of the ‘modern’ moment, turning the uncertainty of instantaneous time into not just a feeling but an idea, maybe even a faith or belief in this condition of constantly disruptive change. (Sherry, 2016, p.3)

The sudden shift of tense noted above denotes exactly this *disruptive change*, after which the reader falls into instantaneity and uncertainty. This textual strategy has achieved a sense of revolt against the textual comforts of the traditional reader by bringing in more elements of textual fragmentation and transgression into the narrative, to provoke the reader into deeper thoughts and profounder contemplation.

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## 2. NARRATIVE REVOLT

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Aarhi Vadde once noted that

...Elizabeth Costello is a novel that speaks of restlessness and institutionalization in the same breath. By evoking the tension between institutions and art, metropolitan power and subversive politics, it fruitfully explores aporias relevant to postcolonial studies’ own within the academy including the discomforting paradox of benefiting from authorization and prestige while striving to give offense. (Vadde, 2011, p.232)

She intends to argue that Coetzee with his Costello novel infuses new theoretical blood, namely “*subversive politics*,” into the ossifying artery of the postcolonial theoretical scenario. Indeed, a careful and thoughtful reader will not fail to notice the undercurrent of various forms of revolts in the narrative.

Coetzee revolts against the traditional way of creating alter ego. As a frequent practitioner of the art of alter-ego generation, Coetzee has introduced several indelible figures of his alter ego into contemporary literature before and after Elizabeth Costello: Mrs. Curren in *The Age of Iron*, Michael K. in *The Life and Time of Michael K.*, Lurie in *Disgrace*, the old writer in *Diary of a Bad Year*, etc. What is special about Elizabeth Costello is not that the alter ego here is of the opposite sex, but that in the First Lesson of the book, he manages to split his ego into three parts, each with its own distinct characteristics and reflecting one part of his personality, mentality and/or identity. When closely inspected and parsed, one cannot fail to recognize that the name “Elizabeth Costello” has all the letters in the name “Coetzee,” while his given name “John Maxwell” is divided into the name of Costello’s son John and that of the third protagonist in that lesson, the smart and shrewd scholar Moebius (the Anglicized form of the German spelling Möbius), a name of apparent Germanic origin and shared by the famous German mathematician August Ferdinand Möbius, a man Coetzee presumably knows well because he in his undergraduate years majored in mathematics at the University of Cape Town.

The son “John” has not been given much research attention in Coetzeeian literature, and the “Moebius woman” even less; it should not have been so if one is alert enough to the roles these two play, and the relationship between them. According to the narrator, “*John has a job teaching physics and astronomy at a college in Massachusetts, but for reasons of his own is on leave for the year.*” (Coetzee, 2003, p.2) John as a child was denied the entrance into his mother’s world as a writer, so not until the age of 33 did he begin to read her books (Coetzee, 2003, p.4). It shall not be a coincidence that Coetzee, who completed his first book *Dusklands* at the age of 33, has chosen 33 at the age of John when the ice between him and his mother’s literary creation was finally broken. What Coetzee tries to illustrate by creating the figure of John is presumably the rational part in his identity or mentality, who is standing between Costello, the writer part of Coetzee himself, and Moebius (or/ and the other female critics), the part of a literary critic, as Coetzee sees himself with those of his critical essay collections, from *Doubling the Point*, *White Writing*, *Giving Offenses*, *Stranger Shores*, *Inner Workings*, to *Late Essays* coming out summer 2017.

The delicate relationships among the three alter egos are worth close studies. First of all, Coetzee’s liking for

female figures and narrators could be traced back to his closeness to his mother Vera. Readers of *Boyhood* would undoubtedly remember the dynamic and freedom-loving Vera on the bicycle, a restless soul craving for life in a book dominated by the color of gray. In reality, Coetzee has never been intimate to his accountant and lawyer father, though his coolness and logical thinking may very well be inherited from him. The conflicting parental temperaments mixed in him make Coetzee a man under whose coldness and sharp intelligence lies a consistently simmering passion for art. Therefore, when trying to embody the purely writer part of his ego, he no doubt chooses a woman, the renowned Australian writer, and embeds his family name in hers. As can be confirmed in the text, the relationship between John and Costello is one in which the former is trying to come to terms with the latter. This struggle actually has been a constant through Coetzee’s whole life, on the one hand a mathematician, programmer, linguist, academician, while on the other poet, novelist, essayist, and translator. In David Attwell’s *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* (2015), it is revealed that Coetzee at the end of the 1990s was very much tired of his divided life as a professor with the responsibilities for students and publication of academic research papers, and as a writer:

(by) this stage, Coetzee had ceased to be an academic who was also a novelist. He had become a novelist who was a part-time academic—something of an anomaly and, in some ways, a burden. (Attwell, 2015, p.187)

He was extremely disappointed by the “professionalism” of the trade of academia, and craved to be reduced to his writer self, his only true identity. This tendency has been confirmed by the academic embarrassment of Lurie in *Disgrace* where a professor of English Romantic Literature has been relegated to a mere teacher of some gaudy course named Communication I. It is reported that it was just at that time that Coetzee began to write the Costello stories in most of which the famous woman writer is invited to give lectures at various occasions and manages to air her irritating ideas to audience contented themselves with the feeling of high culture of the academic show called lecture.

The rational son compares himself to her trainer, out of love guiding a tired her through the public show of lecture. All the way through the story, he protects her, defends her, reassures her, and, above all, tries to probe into the nature of her as a being:

A writer, not a thinker. Writers and thinkers: chalk and cheese. No, not chalk and cheese: fish and fowl. But which is she, the fish or the fowl? Which is her medium: water or air? (Coetzee, 2003, p.10)

This bewilderment as to the mother’s nature as a living being, fish or fowl, can embody Coetzee’s inner conflict in self-understanding. It is clear that the writer part of his ego, the better part in his eyes of course, is close to

impossible to define. Coetzee typically retains a trace of mysticism in his writing, such as the blind barbarian girl, the deformed Michael K, the vagrant in *The Age of Iron*, the true identity of Jesus in *The Childhood of Jesus*. All the people involved in the lecture of Realism, as John the scientist is, are deeply confused by the message, if there is any, in her adopting the Kafka story about the report of an ape to the science academy on such an occasion. Presumably, Costello is not making any sense according to the common sense; she is not making herself understood, but she is not ready to make it nice. In Costello, Coetzee seizes the rare chance to act without any restraints; he is testing how far he can go as a writer, and a revolting one at that. In doing this in a fictive text and through a fictive voice, he is setting himself free, shedding off the rationality tight jacket he has been wearing as a professional academician. Her insouciance in the whole process; her defiant posture as is seen in readiness to “face the foe” (Coetzee, 2003, p.3) who is actually the people trying to honor her; her ironic ripostes to pretentious and institutionalized questions; her evasiveness, helplessness and cold rejection in the face of any doubt or challenge; her weariness when confronting a world whose language has already lost its signified; all confirm the hardship of maintaining the pureness of writing in a world where literature is not honored by its revelation of the truths of humanities, but by the interests, be it financial or social, it brings, as is vividly shown by the gold fish and dying whale picture (Coetzee, 2003, p.6). As Dooley says: ...Attridge points out in his discussion of *Waiting for the Barbarians*,

Once we attend to the details of our encounter with the novel, these seem far in excess of the allegorization we are tempted to produce—and more explanatory of our enjoying and prizing of the novel than the political, historical, or moral truths that we can apprehend perfectly well without Coetzee’s aid. (Dooley, 2010, p.2)

Attridge has it right that those “discoveries” of historical, political, and moral revelations by Coetzeean critics are just only repetitions of what has already been institutionalized in post-colonial critical practices. What makes Coetzee distinct and hugely intriguing is his creation of webs of details full of mysteries which goad readers and original critics to probe into. This style of Coetzee can be deemed as a form of his literary revolt against any forms of critical contentedness and complacencies. The unconventionality of his writing—reflected in Costello’s defiance in the face of trite academic discourses, vain human-centralism, religious vainglory, complicities with evil—ensures that his works are refusing to be interpreted by any established ideological, political, historical, and moral discourses; this characteristic leads to a sort of semantic openness, the sources of endless interpretation, or the impossibility of a final interpretation. In this sense, Coetzee and his Costello are excellent practitioners of revolt.

Coetzee also transforms part of his ego into the literary critic Susan Moebius, a beautiful and smart woman according to the text, who, originally mistaken by John and his mother as light weight, turns out to be very much competent in her role as a critic of literature. Into her Coetzee puts the sharpness of him as a mathematician, and the desperate desire to enter the life of a writing soul when he writes essays about European modernist writers. As the critic part of the ego under the watch of the rational part John, Moebius’ intellectual performance is dancing in chains, with the chains being the awkward status as a special writer whose object is the works of original creators of fictions and poetry. As George Steiner observes in his seminal essay *Humane Literacy*:

When he looks back, the critic sees a eunuch’s shadow. Who would be a critic if he could be a writer? ... The critic lives at second hand. He writes *about*. The poem, the novel, or the play must be given to him; criticism exists by the grace of other men’s genius. By virtue of style, criticism can itself become literature. But usually this occurs only when the writer is acting as critic of his own work or as outrider to his own poetics.... Is there anyone but Sainte-Beuve who belongs to literature purely as a critic? It is not criticism that makes the language live. (Steiner, 1967, p.3)

In Susan Moebius, whose narrative irreplaceability is obviously when compared with other minor characters, Coetzee implants all the dynamics and limitedness of the profession of a literary critic: Her sharpness and her follies and ignorance (her US-centralist understanding of the writing of an Australian author, for instance). Though her fictiveness is betrayed by the deliberately designed detail of her abode on the non-existent 13<sup>th</sup> floor, or her ominous nature heralded by this number, the casual affair between her and John can only be understood as the critic’s desperation to approach his/her critical object with no efforts spared; Coetzee sees the defects of this mentality, and dramatizes his insight in the anti-climax on John’s part as he begins to realize the nature of the seduction.

When we follow the course of their affair, it is interesting to note that it all starts with the conversation circling around the how a writer entering the lives of others, especially how a male writer assumes the authority of a woman, and vice versa. Coetzee as a male writer often writes out of the mouth of a female narrator, as what he does in *Elizabeth Costello*. However, Moebius does not share the view, believing that “*it is just mimicry*” (Coetzee, 2003, p.23) if a woman writer’s male characters are believable. She poses the question: “*if there were no difference (between man and women), what would become of desire?*” (Ibid.) This remark begins to shatter his certainty as a sympathizer of his mother’s revolt against fake peace of the whole ceremoniousness of the event; he promptly plunges into the comfort of desire to ease his loneliness as a rationalist. “*They are alone in the elevator. Not the elevator he and his mother used: a different shaft.*” (Ibid.) The deliberate emphasis of the

different elevator betrays Coetzee's intention of showing the betrayal of the son of his mother's cause and stance, a betrayal Coetzee himself afflicts on his own writer ego when he moves around in the world as a public figure, rational and compromised. Even though John realizes that Moebius' seduction is a form of research, he does not refrain from the kiss, "*kissing flesh of the flesh*" (Ibid., p.24). The double use of "flesh" stresses the surrender of his support of his mother's value to physicality, or what is represented by physicality; that is, the refusal to performance, the revolting stance.

The vulgarity of Moebius' opinion on his mother's speech, especially on her choice of Kafka in a lecture on realism, not only revives John's judgment, but also serves as a sort of self-ironization on Coetzee himself as a literary critic. Moebius believes that "...audiences no longer react well to heavy historical self-ironization" and "a woman doesn't need to wear all that armour" (Ibid., p.25), which blatantly comprises to the vulgar taste of the flat culture landscape, as well as to the seemingly true, yet discriminative man-woman difference. Coetzee does not hesitate to criticize himself as a public figure who does not always hold back from catering for the comforts of the public. Yet, John swiftly recovers from his temporary slip into the trap of Moebius; he begins to regain his mother's view of the "bigger game", the pursuit after something transcendent, "*the powers that animate her*" (Ibid., p.26), "*the mystery of the divine in the human.*" (Ibid., 2003, p.28) Furthermore, as he again touches the body of Moebius in the dark, he begins to realize that the professional sheen of literary critics is nothing but alien to the raw force of literary creation, which he likens to the formation of a fetus, the miracle of life (Ibid., 2003, p.27).

The most striking and mysterious scene of this night is his

"vision of his mother in her big double bed, crouched, her knees drawn up, her back bared. Out of her back, out of the waxy, old person's flesh, protrude three needles: not the tiny needles of the acupunctures or the voodoo doctor but thick, grey needles, steel or plastic: knitting needles. The needles have not killed her, there is no need to worry about that, she breathes regularly in her sleep. Nevertheless, she lies impaled." (Ibid., p.26)

John's bewilderment concerning the perpetrator of the impaling reveals his lack of crucial cognitive ability; the three needles, described as not harmful to Costello's life, are knitting needles whose color resembles that of the cerebral cortex, and they are knitting things together, things not visible to the eyes but emerging in a unity as the old person at the other embedded ends of the needles. The number of the needles is also full of implication: as Coetzee splits his ego into three parts, namely the writer Costello, the son and scientist John, and the professional critic Susan Moebius; he also connects the three parts

into the single body that breathes regularly. By having devised this uncanny game of identities, Coetzee has in a bizarre way staged a show of self examination, so vivid and implicit that the reader, when finally realizing his scheme, would go through a moment of sheer shock and revelation.

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## CONCLUSION

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As Coetzee's works typically stay open when approaching the end, this conclusion would similarly pose some open questions, for, as one can see, there are loads of meaningful and mysterious details in this First Lesson that are not explored sufficiently by Coetzeeian scholars. What is the connotation of Moebius' knee poking under John's armpit? Is Moebius really a literary spy as John thinks of her? Is the mentioning of a writer touched by the god something Coetzee or Costello believes? How to explain his wincing at the vivid image of his mother's interior, even though a tentative explanation is given at the beginning of this paper? What does John have to say about Costello's transformation ability? What is the truth of his mother, as John asks toward the end of the Lesson? All in all, as John puts it, "*this is the secret world of the oracles. How can you hope to understand her before you know what she is really like?*" (Ibid., p.31) But, what is she really like? What is Coetzee himself really like? This kind of identity question will persist, protruding like the three knitting needles out of our physical existence, directed at something that is up there, not ready yet to reveal itself to the mind in an uncertain and fluxing world.

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