

The ‘hermeneutics of equivocation’: Reading the Postscript in J. M. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*

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Presences of the infinite he calls us, and says we make him shudder.¹

Much has been made of the purported insignificance of the Postscript that appends JM Coetzee’s eleventh novel, *Elizabeth Costello*. In *J.M. Coetzee’s Austerities*, Graham Bradshaw writes that ‘Apart from some searching pages in an essay by Lucy Graham,² Coetzee’s “Letter” has barely been discussed, and when it became the ‘Postscript’ to *Elizabeth Costello* one reviewer complained that it had no connection with that work’ (8). In *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Derek Attridge, a long-time reader of Coetzee, calls the novel ‘anti-climactic’. It redeems itself, he writes, by reminding us that ‘what has mattered, for Elizabeth Costello and for the reader, is the event—literary and ethical at the same time—of storytelling, of testing, of self-questioning, and not the outcome’ (205).

The Postscript takes the form of a letter from Lady Elizabeth Chandos and is addressed to the philosopher, essayist and politician, Francis Bacon. ‘You will have received from my husband Philip a letter,’ she writes, ‘and now I add my voice to his’ (*Costello* 227). An epigraph precedes the Postscript, a fragment of Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s ‘Letter of Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon’, dated 1603 but written and published as a piece of fiction in 1902. ‘My situation,’ writes Chandos in von Hofmannsthal’s letter, ‘is this. I have utterly lost my ability to think or speak coherently about anything at all. [...] Even in the most prosaic, everyday conversation, all of those opinions that one tends to produce with somnambulant assurance struck me as being so suspect that I finally had to refrain from taking part in such exchanges altogether’ (19-20).

Conducting a reading of the Postscript presents certain difficulties. The reader risks replicating the fate of Lord Chandos, falling into a sea of suffering in which ‘All is allegory’ and ‘Each creature is key to all other creatures’ (229). The solution proposed by Lady Chandos with the Francis Bacon of the letter, or some other presumed to know—‘drowning’, writing out of our ‘separate fates’, and pleading—calls for a kind of textual tampering. We are forewarned, however, that like Franz Kafka’s ‘Before the Law’, ‘This is an “original” text ... it is forbidden or illicit to change or disfigure it, or to touch its form’ (Jacques Derrida, ‘Before the Law’ 211). We recognise also that following Chandos in his intention to ‘refrain from taking part in such exchanges altogether’ is no solution either. How then to proceed? In this, I find myself at the site of an impasse, one that replicates the impasse encountered by Elizabeth Costello in “Lesson 8: At the Gate”. Here, immediately before the Postscript, ‘a uniformed man stands drowsily on guard, propped on the rifle he holds butt down before him’ (193). When Costello finds that she is unable to pass through the gate until she has presented a statement of belief to a tribunal, we are, as Attridge points out, ‘immediately reminded’ of Kafka’s fable. Costello is reminded of it, too:

'The wall, the gate, the sentry, are straight out of Kafka ... but only the superficialities of Kafka; Kafka reduced and flattened to a parody' (209).

Despite the fact that, as Stephen Mulhall suggests, the assembled elements derive from a number of Kafka's stories, 'not collectively from any single one' (*The Wounded Animal* 220), the work that Lesson 8 resembles most significantly is 'Before the Law', published as a short story during Kafka's lifetime and, posthumously, as one of the parables in *The Trial*. As Derrida argues, this parable enacts the mute forces which initiate the law and establish the limits of subversion. Literature, he writes, both subverts and substantiates the strictures which bring it into being (216). Kafka's fable, 'At once allegorical and tautological [...] does not tell or describe anything but itself as text' (210-11). As Costello discovers as she 'thrashes about in the toils of her own words' (209), presenting a statement of belief—that is, staging a subversion of the law—is impossible in a situation in which the law is initiated at the moment of subversion. As Kafka's doorkeeper says to the man who has been trying for years to gain access, and who is now about to die: 'No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it.' As Derrida has it, 'The man comes to his end without reaching his end' (210).

The difficulty inherent in 'passing through' is the subject of 'The Formulas of L'etourdit', Badiou's essay on Lacan's mathematical formalizations. Despite the fact that Badiou is critical of Lacan at a number of key points (most notably in 'The Subject and Infinity', his critique of Lacan's misunderstanding and consequent dismissal of Cantorian set theory), as A. J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens write, 'Lacan's influence on Badiou's philosophy has been ongoing, marked and decisive' ('The Greatest of our Dead').³ Badiou writes that 'psychoanalysis in general, and Lacan in particular, play on equivocations in the signifier' (80). The question for Badiou is how one might traverse 'the realm of equivocation' in order to 'heed a commandment to symbolize or, as he [Lacan] put it, to fashion an "exact formalization," without a trace of equivocation' (81). While Badiou wants to situate himself 'within this question of the hole that formulaic univocality bores into the hermeneutics of equivocation' (81), we might also think of Elizabeth Costello as having to decide on an "exact formalization" of her belief, 'without a trace of equivocation'.

What I want to do here is propose a reading of Coetzee's Postscript that attempts to move beyond 'the hermeneutics of equivocation'.⁴ As such, what follows will necessarily take into account Badiou's very specific position on hermeneutics. In 'Philosophy and Desire' he observes three contemporary 'currents' in philosophy: the hermeneutic, the analytic and the post-modern. Broadly speaking, the 'central concept' of the hermeneutic 'is that of interpretation. There are utterances, acts, writings, configurations whose meaning is obscure, latent, hidden or forgotten. [...] In what is given, in the immediate word, there is something dissimulated and closed. Interpretation is intended to unfold this closure and open it to meaning.' The hermeneutic endeavor, then, relies on the excavation of 'some secret entity buried, so to speak, in the deep exteriority of the situation' (*Theoretical Writings* 121-22). However, for Badiou, always rigorously secular, 'there is no depth, and depth is just another name—treasured by the hermeneutists—for transcendence' (122). For Badiou, the emphasis on language as 'the crucial site of thought' means that 'The question of meaning replaces the classical question of truth.'

My reading, therefore, will figure the allegorical as a type of transcendent interpretation which I attempt to resist. As Attridge writes, 'Allegory ... deals with the *already-known* ... [it] announces a moral code, literature invites an ethical response' (*Ethics* 64). Allegorical readings, while often valid and illuminating, 'transport attention away from the novel to 'world events' and risk 'treating it not as an inventive literary work drawing us into unfamiliar emotional and cognitive territory but as a reminder of what we already know only too well' (*Ethics* 43). Although Attridge is not entirely opposed to allegorical interpretation, he does want to propose an alternative way of reading which he terms *literal*. Such a strategy, however, 'does not map directly onto the opposition realist/antirealist or mimetic/non-mimetic' (*Ethics* 39). That is, a literal reading is not one that apprehends the text as pre-formulated object. For Attridge, 'a literal reading is one that is grounded [in] the experience of reading as an *event*' (*Ethics* 39). Thus

in literary reading (which I perform at the same time as I perform many other kinds of reading) I do not treat the text as an object whose significance has to be divined; I treat it as something that comes into being only in the process of understanding and responding that I, as an individual reader in a specific time and place, conditioned by a specific history, go through. And this is to say that I do not treat it as 'something' at all; rather, I have an experience that I call *Waiting for the Barbarians* or *Life & Times of Michael K*. It is an experience I can repeat, though each repetition turns out to be a different experience and therefore a non-repetition, a new singularity, as well (39-40).

Despite the efficacy of Attridge's conception of 'literal reading', it is not one that I will be employing here. Rather, I will be drawing on his understanding of reading as an event, as a pathway to what I think of not so much as a Badiouian *reading* of the Postscript but as the positing of a way of *thinking* about it. As Attridge himself has pointed out, although there are similarities between his own position and Badiou's, he finds that 'our differences are finally greater than our agreements' (*Singularity* 142).⁵ For Badiou, as Justin Clemens writes,

'there is always something illegal in naming the event. Nevertheless, a subject must *intervene*, in a fashion that is at once "illegal" and disruptive ... and which, despite its very illegality, ultimately ensures the restitution of order. [...] If it decides affirmatively, the event is determined as an uncanalisable excess and indexed to a supplementary, arbitrary signifier (the "name" of the event); if negatively, there has been no event and nothing has taken place.' ("Platonic Meditations" 220-21)

There is a certain kind of fortitude that is required in order for the subject to name the event—whether it be Coetzee's illegal intervention into Kafka's "Before the Law" or our own interventional reading of Coetzee's Postscript. In a sense, what we want to do is to pass through Coetzee as Badiou passes through Lacan and as Coetzee passes through Kafka. As Badiou has it, 'All courage amounts to passing through where previously it was not evident that anyone could find a passage' (*Logics of Worlds* 143).

I will now provide a brief description of the novel and outline some existing responses to the Postscript. Following this, I will examine 'Lesson 8: At the Gate' in which Costello is called upon to present a statement of belief, in an attempt to 'pass through' the torsions of the Kafkaesque. Finally, I will provide some remarks on a few issues I think are at stake with regard to the formal innovation of the Postscript and conduct a short reading of its significance with regard to Badiou's 'The Subject and Infinity', his unequivocal secularization of the Lacanian feminine.

J.M. Coetzee's eleventh novel is set in 1994 when Elizabeth Costello, the Australian female novelist, is sixty-six years old. Costello 'made her name' with *The House on Eccles Street*, a novel about Leopold Bloom's affirmative wife Marion, in much the same way, Derek Attridge suggests, that Coetzee 'piggy-backed on Defoe and Dostoevsky' (201). The novel is chaptered into 'Eight Lessons', of which only 'Lesson 7: Eros' and 'Lesson 8: At the Gate' had not been previously published, and it tracks Costello's attendance at a series of prize givings, lectures and conferences. The lessons have titles such as 'Realism', 'The Novel in Africa', 'The Philosophers and the Animals', 'The Poets and the Animals', 'The Humanities in Africa', 'The Problem of Evil', etc.

In *After the Celebration*, Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman write that *Elizabeth Costello* is 'a novel that wonders about how a writer can inhabit Otherness, how one gets into the mind of someone or something radically different: how a male writer, like Coetzee, inhabits a female character like Elizabeth, for example' (7). Lucy Graham finds a number of reviewers perplexed by Coetzee's authorial 'elusiveness' and argues for an understanding of *Elizabeth Costello* as the continuation of 'a tradition of female articulation in Coetzee's oeuvre.' (218-19) Stephen Mulhall, writing on the generic nonsequitur of the postscript appended to the novel—'Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos'—argues that 'we could hardly have expected a book that problematises its own beginning (along with the very idea of literary beginnings) to treat its own ending as unproblematic. We should therefore take seriously,' he writes, 'the possibility that this apparently supplementary text could also be the heart of the matter' (*The Wounded Animal* 231).⁶

The Postscript addresses itself to Francis Bacon—'you who are known above all men to select your words and set them in place and build your judgements as a mason builds a wall with bricks' (230) —and laments the seemingly arbitrary and inexorable movements of language. 'It is like a contagion, saying one thing always for another', she writes, and 'All is allegory, says my Philip. Each creature is key to all other creatures' (229). An epigraph precedes the postscript, a fragment of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's 'Letter of Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon'. As Chandos writes,

As once, through a magnifying glass, I had seen a piece of skin on my little finger look like a field full of holes and furrows, so I now perceived human beings and their actions. I no longer succeeded in comprehending them with the simplifying eye of habit. For me everything disintegrated into parts, those parts again into parts; no longer would anything let itself be encompassed by one idea. Single words floated round me; they congealed into eyes which stared at me and into which I was forced to stare back-whirlpools which gave me vertigo and, reeling incessantly, led into the void. (219)

Mulhall thinks of the Postscript as ‘something at once supplementary to the primary text, and yet deemed sufficiently important or relevant ... to be included, even at the cost of violating certain ... formal requirements’. Lucy Graham wonders if Coetzee’s use of the female voice suggests that Elizabeth Chandos’ letter is ‘merely a supplement to the Chandos letter’ (‘and now I add my voice to his’) and argues for the possibility that Lady Chandos’ letter ‘draws attention to the slippage of figurative language in particular ... [highlighting] ... not only the shortfall of rationalizing language but also the limits of “likeness”’ (228).

In his introduction to *JM Coetzee's Austerities*, Graham Bradshaw wants to consider ‘how the Chandos Letter matters in *Elizabeth Costello*’ (3). Bradshaw links Elizabeth Chandos to Elizabeth Costello and to Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron*, arguing that ‘the three Elizabeth Cs all express strong beliefs, that are being given a “voice” (a crucial notion for Coetzee) but are also framed and questioned within the fictions they inhabit’ (2). Derek Attridge’s contribution to the collection, “Coetzee’s Artists; Coetzee’s Art”, sees *Disgrace* as the harbinger of the later ‘semi-fictions’ that concern themselves with the representation of ‘the practice of art, in terms both of its coming-into-being and of its role in the world once it is produced’ (3). To this end, Attridge finds a number of instances in Coetzee’s post-apartheid writings that question ‘the writer’s authority and function at a time when most other novelists in the country were concerned with questions of political and military power and resistance to it’ (27). This questioning, Attridge finds, occurs most explicitly in *Elizabeth Costello*, especially in the final lesson, the Kafkaesque ‘At the Gate’. Here, ‘One thing that emerges strongly from Coetzee’s exploration of art is that we cannot expect artists to be able to justify what they do’ (33). Indeed, as he writes, ‘There is little sense that Costello believes literature to be a powerful instrument in advancing the cause she is espousing’. This observation harks back to Costello’s observation in ‘Lesson 1: Realism’ when, having reported to her academic audience on Kafka’s ‘A Report to An Academy’, the writer remarks to her son that ‘she should not have relied on Kafka for her illustrations. There are better texts. [...] This is America, the 1990s. People don’t want to hear the Kafka thing yet again’ (25).

Fittingly, then, in ‘Lesson 8: At the Gate’, Costello finds herself in the midst of what she later, perhaps in desperation, comes to think of as a beautiful simulacrum (‘How beautiful it is, this world, even if it is only a simulacrum!’) but what initially strikes her as ‘Kafka reduced and flattened to a parody’ (209). The gatekeeper informs her that she will not be allowed to pass through the locked door until she produces a statement of belief. In his brilliant study of *Elizabeth Costello*, Stephen Mulhall writes of ‘Lesson 8’ that it ‘bears a real but idiosyncratic relation to the embodied proceedings and performances of academic life’ (*The Wounded Animal* 220). Costello’s insistence on apprehending the scene as parodic, her inability or refusal to take seriously the requirement to provide a statement of belief to the committee, her understanding of belief as ‘an indulgence, a luxury’ that ‘gets in the way’ (213), are the provocations for a series of flailing attempts to ‘pass through’ that, as Attridge points out, let us know ‘that it is as a novelist that she is in this place’ (204). As such, Costello is subject to the peculiar equivocations (or ‘profuse chicanery’, as Clemens might have it) of the signifier (‘The Conditions’ 28), to the extent that, as Mulhall points out,

in comparison to Kafka, Coetzee might seem to be giving up on realism altogether, in favour of a purely postmodernist sense of ourselves as doomed to reproduce worn-out rhetorical tropes rather than penetrating to reality, or more precisely as awakening the realization that our very idea of a reality to which our words and thoughts might aspire is itself merely one more trope (the word-mirror that is not so much shattered as revealed to be an illusion). (220)

Following the failure of her first submission (a request for exemption), Costello asks to see 'what lies on the other side ... Just to see if it is worth all this trouble' (195). The guard offers her a glimpse through a crack in the door. The door is 'fashioned of teak and brass but also no doubt of the tissue of allegory' (196). Costello is surprised by the relatively mundane view. 'Despite her unbelief', she had expected something more, 'a light so blinding that earthly senses would be stunned by it.' What she sees, instead, is 'merely brilliant, more brilliant perhaps than the varieties of light she has known hitherto, but not of another order, not more brilliant than, say, a magnesium flash sustained endlessly' (196). In this, we are reminded of Badiou's conception of the event as 'nothing—just a sort of illumination' (*Infinite Thought* 187).

Costello's perception of the gate through which she must pass as made from 'the tissue of allegory' figures allegory as a literary device that is at once gateway and inhibition. At her second attempted submission, Costello finds her interlocutors '*Excessively literary ... A caricaturist's idea of a bench of judges*' (200). Drawing on a poem by Czeslaw Milosz, she argues for a conception of herself as 'a secretary of the invisible' (199). As such, she says, 'belief is a resistance, an obstacle. I try to empty myself of resistances' (200). As a novelist, she cannot afford to believe—'For professional reasons' (201). Costello's petition is rejected and she later supposes that the scene, with its Kafkaesque rendering, has been devised specifically for her precisely because 'it is not her kind of show. *You do not like this Kafkaesque, so let us rub your nose in it*' (209). In her insistence on reading her situation through existing literature, we might think of Costello as being caught in an allegorical snare of her own devising. As Attridge notes, 'one of the terms in the critical lexicon most frequently applied to Coetzee's novels and novellas is *allegory*' (32). Nevertheless, the function of allegory in Coetzee's novels is by no means straightforward. Indeed, for Attridge, it is positioned somewhat antithetically to literature: 'Allegory, one might say, deals with the *already-known*, whereas literature opens a space for the other. Allegory announces a moral code, literature invites an ethical response' (Attridge, 64). Despite this, certain qualities that are attributable to Coetzee's novels—ahistorical settings, elusive characterizations, diaphanous plots—seem to encourage the reader to conduct allegorical readings. These range from universal readings that figure the novels as statements on 'the human condition' to more specific treatments that transpose historical timeframes and settings onto contemporary South African geographies. Thus, *Age of Iron* comes to be read as 'an exemplification of the condition of South Africa during the township wars and States of Emergency of the mid-1980s', while *Disgrace* is allegorized as 'a schematic portrait of the country in the early years of democracy after the official end of apartheid' (33).

Attridge is 'not against the richness of allegorical readings' as such. Rather, what he wants to encourage is the possibility of '*reading as an event*' (64, my italics). If we restrict ourselves to purely allegorical readings of Coetzee's work, he argues, we risk

exposing ourselves only to that which we already know. His examination of Coetzee's second novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, illustrates his point. As he notes, the novel deals with 'an undetermined year in the life of an unnamed outpost of an unidentified Empire' (42) —the elusive configurations of scenario and timeframe mentioned above. A magistrate witnesses the capture and torture of 'the barbarians' and, in assisting them, is himself imprisoned and tortured. As Attridge shows, the non-specific elements of the novel enable a local and universal allegorical reading of the text to the extent that 'it could be read both as an indictment of the atrocities that were keeping apartheid in place at the time of its publication and as a universally relevant, time- and place-transcending narrative of human suffering and moral choice' (42). While both of these allegorical readings are valid and illuminating, they transport attention away from the novel to 'world events'; that is, they risk 'treating it not as an inventive literary work drawing us into unfamiliar emotional and cognitive territory but as a reminder of what we already know only too well' (43).

What Attridge is advocating is not interpretation but rather 'the avoidance of certain *kinds* of interpretation' (36). Drawing on an essay by Coetzee, he identifies a similar impulse in the novelist's own thinking:

No matter what it may appear to be doing, the story may not really be playing the game you call Class Conflict or the game called Male Domination or any of the other games in the games handbook. While it may certainly be possible to read the book as playing one of those games, in reading it in that way you may have missed something. You may have missed not just something, you may have missed everything. Because (I parody the position somewhat) a story is not a message with a covering, a rhetorical or aesthetic covering. ('The Novel Today' 4)

Elizabeth Costello, in reading her situation as Kafkaesque, has indeed 'missed something' and returns to her dormitory to reconfigure her response. A fellow petitioner supposes that Costello's unbelief is a luxury—'entertaining all possibilities, floating between opposites ... the mark of a leisured existence' (213). 'Show them passion,' she advises, 'and they will let you through.' Costello is skeptical—'I would have thought that passion leads one away from the light, not towards it.' At her next hearing, Costello reads her revised statement. 'I speak to you of frogs,' she says, 'Because they exist. I believe in what does not bother to believe in me' (218). As Attridge notes, Costello 'resists an allegorical interpretation of these frogs' (205). The judge-in-chief is confused—'Have you changed the basis of your plea from the first hearing to the present one?' Costello's reply is equivocal: 'You might as well ask which is the true Elizabeth Costello: the one who made the first statement or the one who made the second. My answer is, both are true. Both. And neither. *I am an other*' (221).

Here, Costello's courage fails her and she falls back on a literary reading of her predicament embodied in a kind of compulsion to articulate her position in the words of her male predecessors—in this instance, Rimbaud, and elsewhere Kafka, Milosz, Keats, Hölderlin, Kant, Rilke, and so on in a ceaseless display of citational ecstasy. Her reliance on the words of others and her 'belief' that she 'cannot improve on them' reduces her judges to howling laughter. 'Yes, you are not confused. But who is it who is not confused?' (221) The Lesson ends with Costello's vision of what might lie at

the far side of the gate. Stretched out, 'blocking the way', she sees 'an old dog, his lion-coloured hide scarred from unnumerable manglings. His eyes are closed, he is resting, snoozing. Beyond him is nothing but a desert of sand and stone, to infinity' (224). Costello curses the predictably literary nature of the vision and its regulatory anagram 'GOD-DOG. *Too literary*, she thinks again. A curse on literature!' (225). In *Lacan: the silent partners*, Slavoj Žižek writes that for Alain Badiou,

a subject emerges only by opening a passage, in a truly arduous production of novelty, through the impasse—forcing the structure precisely where a lack is found—in order to make generically possible that which the state of the situation would rather confine to an absurd impossibility. [...] this means nothing if not bringing the new out of the old—forcing a new consistent truth out of the old order of things from the point where our knowledge of the latter is found wanting. (160)

By the close of what is the final Lesson of the novel, Costello has failed to open a passage through the literary impasse. The response from the guard confirms what she already suspects: 'We see people like you all the time' (225).

This final declaration could well have signaled the end of *Elizabeth Costello* but for Coetzee's inclusion of the Postscript. This arrives as a generic non-sequitur that threatens to render itself nondescript or unassimilable in relation to the preceding text. However, as Mulhall argues, 'any writer in the condition of modernism may well find that what appears to be a violation of convention is the best, even the only possible, way of being true to that which those conventions are meant to serve' (211). As Maria Takolander finds in "Coetzee's Haunting of Australian Literature", there is a sense in which formal innovation 'disrupts assumptions of transparency and referentiality' (47). Takolander draws on Attridge's view that "'the formally innovative text, the one that most estranges itself from the reader, makes the strongest ethical demand'" (Attridge 11, Takolander 47) to stress that 'the formal difficulty and the ensuing sense of unease' is one of the qualities that enables or authorizes us to distinguish Coetzee's writing as 'literary'. As Attridge points out, 'The singularity of the literary work is produced not just by its difference from all other works, but by the new possibilities for thought and feeling it opens up in its creative transformation of familiar norms and habits' (*J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* 11). However, as Derrida notes, the perpetrators of such creative transformations are subject to a certain kind of encounter in which the law of genre 'neither arrives nor lets anyone arrive' (211). As Attridge points out in his introduction to Derrida's essay, 'Not only does literature simultaneously depend on and interrogate laws, but the law—the continual subject of narratives—can only be understood as self-contradictory, lacking in pure essence, and structurally related to what Derrida terms *difference* or, in its nonmetaphysical sense, "literature"' (182). More than this, the literary text, 'ultimately ungraspable, incomprehensible' is, as Derrida writes, 'also that which we have not the *right* to touch' (211). In a move reminiscent of his paradoxical injunction from "The Law of Genre"—'genres shall not be mixed'—Derrida sets out the terms of culpability, and they apply to 'any reader in the presence of the text, to critic, publisher, translator, heirs, or professors':

This is an 'original' text, as we say; it is forbidden or illicit to change or disfigure it, or to touch its form. [...] If someone were to change one word

or alter a single sentence, a judge could always declare him or her to have infringed upon, violated, or disfigured the text. [...] Anyone impairing the original identity of this text may have to appear before the law. This may happen to any reader in the presence of the text, to critic, publisher, translator, heirs, or professors. All these are then at the same time doorkeepers and men from the country. (211)⁷

The generic non-sequitur of the Postscript, then, is contraband reality, delivered through the ‘thousand bars’ of the literary prison, as if we were Rilke’s panther pacing out the ‘mean, constricted ground’ of the *Jardin des Plantes* (cf Mulhall 110-12). In this, Coetzee’s ‘crime against literature’ is two-fold for not only does the inclusion of the Postscript tamper with the expected trajectory of the literary novel, it also structurally transforms Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s ‘Letter of Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon.’ On the question of whether we should take the Postscript to be part of *Elizabeth Costello*, Mulhall writes that any evidence ‘assembled by examining this postscript is unlikely to settle the matter, since it might well be taken simply to show that what we have is, indeed, a postscript—something at once supplementary to the primary text, and yet deemed sufficiently important or relevant to it by the writer of that text to be included, even at the cost of violating certain (let us say) formal requirements’ (231). In this Mulhall seems to be saying that we might consider the Postscript to be at once included *and yet somehow outside* Coetzee’s novel. What this perspective obscures is that there really is a text that is at once crucial to and yet not *of* the novel, Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s ‘Letter of Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon’. The epigraphical inclusion of a paragraph from the letter operates as a kind of valve that trespasses against yet another of literature’s injunctions—as Derrida writes of Kafka’s *Before the Law*, it ‘does not tell or describe anything but itself as text’ (211). Where for Kafka, however, ‘It is as if nothing had come to pass’ (212), Coetzee’s inclusion of the Postscript, the skerrick from ‘Letter of Lord Chandos’ and Lady Chandos’ entreaties to Francis Bacon—‘Save me, dear Sir, save my husband! Write!’ – function as a kind of insurance that the importance of the Postscript—and, through the efficacy of the valve, of literature itself—will not be overlooked. Mulhall’s remarks on the Postscript ending with these two sentences: ‘The one thing with which he [Lord Chandos] cannot fuse, into which he cannot infuse, his soul is his body; and so he and his wife ... remain beyond one another’s empathetic reach. It is from this fate of separation and isolation that Coetzee’s Chandos letter aims to rescue its (and so Von Hofmannsthal’s) characters; and in addressing its redemptive appeal for redemption to Lord Bacon, it also addresses us’ (239). When viewed from this perspective it is as if Coetzee is inviting the reader to follow his own strategy in reading Kafka. In *Doubling the Point* he writes, ‘No intensity of reading that I can imagine would succeed in guiding me through Kafka’s word-labyrinth: to do that I would once again have to take up the pen and, step by step, write my way after him’ (199; cf Attridge, *Singularity* 92). Such a strategy would necessitate a return to the Postscript and the indication of some key points at which it might be investigated. In what follows I will intervene at a number of points at which I think an understanding of the Postscript would benefit from a Badiouian reading. In this, I am in agreement with Žižek when he reminds us that ‘A subject’s intervention ... cannot consist merely in showing or recognizing the traumatic impossibility around which the situation as a whole is structured. [...] Badiou’s thought, by contrast, seeks to be both dialectical and materialist in understanding the production of a new truth as the torsion, or forcing, of the entire situation from the precise point of a generic truth, as if the latter had already

been added successfully to the resources of knowledge available in this situation itself' (160).⁸

'and now I add my voice to his'

In *Theoretical Writings*, Badiou writes on what we might think of as Lacan's primary equivocation—that is, when Lacan (referring to the nineteenth-century German mathematician Georg Cantor) says that 'Cantor's non-denumerable transfinite Cardinals represent 'an object which I would have to characterize as mythic' (129). For Badiou, 'it is not possible to proceed very far in drawing the consequences of the infinity of the true without insisting that non-denumerable Cardinals are real, not mythic.' In 'The Subject and Infinity', Badiou draws on Cantor ('the acknowledged father of abstract set theory and transfinite math'⁹) to demonstrate that Lacan's notorious formulas of sexuation are 'pre-Cantorian'. In reworking Lacan's formulas, he argues for a 'secularisation of the infinite', re-evaluating them to argue that 'Lacan only summons the infinite to dismiss it.' What Badiou wants to do is give 'full recognition to the existence of the infinite' and to insist that 'the infinite of inaccessibility is not adequate. What must be discovered is the affirmative force of the infinite, which is always lodged in some axiomatic decision' (227). To do this he must show that the Lacanian matheme is 'pre-Cantorian' and show the error in his notorious formulas of sexuation. In *Encore*, Lacan remarks on his conception of Woman as 'not-all':

A woman can but be excluded by the nature of things, which is the nature of words, and it must be said that if there is something that women themselves complain about enough for the time being, that's it. It's just that they don't know what they're saying—that's the whole difference between them and me.

The fact remains that if she is excluded by the nature of things, it is precisely in the following respect: being not-whole, she has a supplementary jouissance compared to what the phallic function designates by way of jouissance.

You will notice that I said 'supplementary'. If I had said 'complementary' what a mess we'd be in! We would fall back into the whole. (73)

There is no space to go into Lacan's formulas here, nor to set out the method by which Badiou axiomatically decides for mathematics as ontology, thus configuring the event as that which disappears and the Subject as that which makes a decision for the event in the wake of which it conducts a series of investigations that will, from the perspective of the future anterior, 'have been true'. Suffice to say that Badiou submits the Lacanian mathematical formulas that figure Woman as not-whole (uncastratable)—and render feminine enjoyment outside speech—to the rigours of Cantor's 'actually existing infinite' (216). As he writes, 'If therefore the existence of a woman as not-whole means that there exists an x totally subtracted from castration, it would follow that, unsubdued by the real of language, this woman would not speak.' For Badiou, Lacan's restriction of the infinite to 'inaccessibility alone'—Woman speaks but does not know what she is saying; in effect, she babbles incoherently, she is 'dumb' (213)—means that 'The Lacanian doctrine of the subject is essentially finite, to the extent that even the infinite has to show that its existence does not exceed that of the finite'

(225). As Bartlett and Clemens write, Badiou shows how Lacan's 'own formulas succumb to the very Aristotelean logic they were arrayed against'. What this means is that 'Lacan requires the thought of an infinite point, one inaccessible to any finite creature, rather than the actual infinities of the Cantorian paradise. As such, for Lacan, the "infinite is not a set, but a virtual point subtracted from the action of the finite."' (229)

This is unacceptable for Badiou, for whom 'What must be discovered is the affirmative force of the infinite'. In using Cantorian set theory to show that 'infinity is what there is', Badiou detaches the feminine from its homologous Hegelian/Romantic relationship with nature and the Lacanian infinite/'not-whole'. Reworking Lacan's formulas, Badiou argues for a 'secularisation of the infinite' that forms the basis of his philosophical enterprise and can be drawn on, I suggest, to enable an affirmative reading of the 'Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos', one which draws the 'dumb' girl of Lacanian enjoyment into the arena of speech.

In 'The true words at last from the mind in ruins', Jonathan Lamb finds a preoccupation in Coetzee's novels with 'the problem of truth and how it might be elicited or stated.' For Lamb, this frequently 'leads him to scenes that literalize Bacon's metaphor of the torture chamber, in which reticent Nature is subjected to the vexations of art so that she may be induced to speak more freely' (178). The mention of Bacon's metaphor is apposite given the manner in which he forms a 'Two' with Lord Chandos in von Hoffmansthal's letter and, with the introduction of Coetzee's Lady Chandos, comes to function as a kind of angel that disrupts the purity of the Two (although, as Lacan wonders in *On Feminine Sexuality*, 'I suppose that it even happens that materialists, all the same, get to know something about the ménage à trois, no?'¹⁰). Indeed, no, Badiou would not have it, for his secular conception of the infinite affects, for one thing, the concept of the angel which figures prominently in 'Lesson 7: Eros'. Here, Elizabeth Costello imagines what it would have been like for Anchises, lover of Aphrodite, who was warned 'pretty plainly to keep his mouth shut' (185), or the Virgin Mary who, impregnated by Gabriel, utters a few words of Latin and thereafter is silent, 'as though struck dumb for the rest of her life by what befell her' (187). For Badiou, as he sets out in 'What is Love', there is no angel (and no Francis Bacon either, presumably). To demonstrate how this might be possible, Badiou divides his thesis into three distinct points: 1) *There are two positions of the experience of love*; 2) *The two positions are totally disjunct* and; 3) *There is no third position*. For Badiou, 'the idea of a third position engages the function of the imaginary: this involves the angel' (183):

What makes it possible here for me, then, to announce this disjunction, that is, without having recourse to any angel, without acting as an angel? It is the requirement that the situation, which is not adequate in itself, is supplemented. Not by a third structural position but by a singular event. This event is what initiates the amorous procedure, and we might agree to call it an *encounter* (184).

What this ends up meaning is that where 'Lacan started with the phallic function', attributing 'the universal quantifier to man (for every man)', and defining 'woman through a combination of the existential and negation', thus designating woman as 'not-whole', Badiou's secularization of the infinite ends up achieving a post-Hegelian

move. Where, for Hegel, woman is 'the irony of the community' who 'makes holes in the whole that men strive to consolidate' ('Love' 198), for Badiou, 'Love is that which, splitting the humanity function from the phallic function, returns to women, within the complete range of truth procedures, the universal quantifier.' Thus, as Sigi Jottkandt remarks, Badiou's Scene of the Two serves as the theatrical space for the staging of his 'stunning contribution to the philosophical dilemma of unity and difference' (78).

It is one of the principles of Badiou's philosophy that 'The circumstantial failures of history should not invoke melancholy but, rather, should activate the deployment of the idea in the tension of its future, a future to be persevered for a long time' ('The Lessons', 53). In 'Philosophy and Psychoanalysis', he hinges this principle on an aversion to the 'speculative parricide' of his Platonic 'criminal heritage'. What deters him is 'no doubt the fact that I object to the sermon of today announcing philosophy's end, that I modestly claim to take a single step forward, and thus that as the commonplace of today's thought is parricide, it is filial respect that forms a figure of singularity' (*Conditions* 201).¹¹ In keeping with this, Badiou's reworking of Lacan constitutes, not an abolition, but an inquiry—'From the Eden of thought that Lacan opened up for us we shall not be banished. But we shall also, as has been attempted here, inquire into its marvel'. In their account of Lacan's influence on Badiou's philosophy, Bartlett and Clemens write of Badiou as 'remorselessly tracking' Lacan's thought 'to its symptomatic point of failure'. In doing so, they argue, 'Badiou reveals a new impasse, and makes a decision that will take him beyond Lacan—all without any simple repudiation' (195-96). Coetzee's achievement—in passing through 'Kafka's Gate' only to encounter the impasse of von Hofmannsthal's *Letter*—is undeniably of this order.

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Notes

¹ J. M. Coetzee. *Elizabeth Costello*. London: Knopf, 2003.

² Lucy Graham. "Textual Transvestism: The Female Voices of J. M. Coetzee".

³ For further references regarding Badiou on Lacan, Bartlett and Clemens suggest: 'Lacan and the Pre-Socratics' in *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, (ed) Slavoj Žižek, London, Verso, 2006, p. 7. See also 'The Formulas of l'Étourdit,' *Lacan Ink* 27, Spring, 2007, pp. 81-2.

⁴ I would like to acknowledge Teresa Dovey's *The Novels of J M Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* (1988) which is to date the only full-length study of Coetzee's work that sets out to locate evidence for the visibility of a Lacanian subject in his fiction. More than this, as David Atwell writes in *J M Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, Dovey's intervention initiated the very possibility of a critical debate surrounding Coetzee's work and 'was able to make the startling but justifiable claim that the novels possessed a preemptive theoretical sophistication that disarmed the critics in advance' (2). In an interview with David Atwell in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee's own comments on his use of and attitude towards Lacanian theory at once affirm and further problematise Dovey's intentions:

... some of Lacan's most inspired remarks have been about speaking from a position of ignorance. He finds his justification not only in the practice of analysis, where the patient seems to speak most truly when he is, so to speak, making a mistake, but in poetry. When one is getting as close to the centre of one's own endeavor as this question takes one—where am I when I write?—it may be best to be Lacanian and not to bother too much about what one means [...] and that would entail not knowing too much about where one stands in relation to the advice—Lacan's—that one can afford to speak without "thought." (29-30).

⁵ In *The Singularity of Literature*, Attridge writes 'I shall sometimes use the term "act-event" to refer to the creative process in its various forms, but when I use either "event" or "act" alone for this purpose, it may be taken to mean *both* event and act—and hence neither event nor act in their usual senses. The many different philosophical uses of the notion of the event—it plays an important part in the thinking of, among others, Heidegger, Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze, and Badiou—make it a particularly problematic term to use' (n. 16, 150).

⁶ The opening paragraphs of *Elizabeth Costello* run as follows:

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 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.

⁷ Although Badiou is notoriously critical of the sophistry of Derrida, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and others, I have taken the somewhat illegal liberty of reading Derrida alongside Badiou on the basis that, as Clemens points out, 'Jacques Derrida is probably the sophist whose work is most crucial for Badiou' ("Letters as the Condition of Conditions" 80). Clemens elaborates on the reasons for this in the aforementioned "Letters" and in "Platonic Meditations" 224-25.

⁸ The full quote runs as follows: 'A subject's intervention, moreover, cannot consist merely in showing or recognizing the traumatic impossibility around which the situation as a whole is structured. If such were to be the case, the structural dialectic would remain profoundly idealist—its operation delivering at most a radical, arch-aesthetic or arch-political act that either brings home the unbearable anxiety of the real itself, or ultimately calls upon the annihilation of the entire symbolic order in a mimicry of the revolutionary break, which can then perfectly well be illustrated with examples drawn from Antigone to Hollywood. Badiou's thought, by contrast, seeks to be both dialectical and materialist in understanding the production of a new truth as the torsion, or forcing, of the entire situation from the precise point of a generic truth, as if the latter had already been added successfully to the resources of knowledge available in this situation itself' (160).

⁹ David Foster Wallace. *Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2003, 5.

¹⁰ '... why should the materialists, as they say, become indignant that, like always, I even put, why not, God as a third party in the business of human love? I suppose that it even happens that materialists, all the same, get to know something about the *ménage à trois*, no?'

¹¹ This emphasis on singularity is revisited in "Rimbaud's Method" in which Badiou acknowledges that, whilst 'To love poetry is to love not being able to choose', he must, as a philosopher, 'in the constraints of our time, with its confusion and its atomism, ultimately choose Mallarme. Where, in Rimbaud, 'there is a power of unprecedented, evanescent grace, which brings me to say that, yes, as a

'pure poet', in those moments in which he avowed to be 'touched' by language, he went further in his inventions than is possible with Mallarmean labour', for Badiou, the work 'betokens the same mimetic temptation—which acts as if because truth was supposedly missing, it is spread out a little all over – that Plato, from the beginning, rebelled against. The only poets to escape his condemnation are those, like Mallarme, whose subtractive patience dispenses with corporeal mimesis, with pursuing the burden of the sensible, and who know that there is truth only in an onerous exception' (*Conditions*, 89).