



### **J.M. Coetzee and the ethics of textual transitivity**

**Katherine Doig**  
**University of Paris 8**

J.M. Coetzee's 1991 masterpiece, *Age of Iron*, explores a question which is still underanalyzed in his work: the pragmatic aspects of literary address. In particular, he tackles one of the great paradoxes faced by the postcolonial storyteller, the exercise of authority - not over the text itself, but over its reader.

The text is a single long letter to the distant daughter of the narrator, Elizabeth Curren; thanks to its highly metapoetic trio of writer-text-reader, the letter inevitably stands in for fictional creation. (The protagonist's successor quoted above is Coetzee's own alter ego, Elizabeth Costello.) The letter-form reminds us of the novel's role as a speech act with an impact on its you; in doing so, it invites an analysis of literature in which a focus on intention, or even on textuality, is replaced by an interest in impact. It's a subtle but telling paradigm shift, reconciling reception theory with postcolonial assumptions of the responsibility of those in power.

Coetzee raises ethical questions associated with that responsibility : How to speak to others? How to speak to others from a position of authority? How to speak to others who are obliged to silence by the very context of the speech act itself? Epistolary tactics on several different scales contribute to the possibility of an ethics of alterity in fiction's linguistic structures themselves. Firstly, linguistic frameworks of politeness and face; a form of sincerity, refusing irony or the literary wink ; the epistolary structure, which puts the text at one ambiguity-preserving remove.

Finally, the constant reminder of the letter-writer's presence reminds the reader that the pact evoked by Elizabeth's own name ("My God is an oath") is not only a Genettian categorization device, but an ethical engagement taken by the author towards the reader. Coetzee thus suggests that while the address seems inescapable - along with its illocutory and perlocutory functions, its capacity for authoritarianism or for underhand seduction or manipulation - it is the responsibility of turn-of-the-century literature to both acknowledge and obviate those potential abuses of authority.