

Article

Virtuality Versus Spectrality: Epistolarity and the Problematics of Truth-Telling in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

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Abstract

This contribution to the Special Issue on J. M. Coetzee's use of epistolary forms examines the unique and unconventional deployment of epistolarity in *Age of Iron* (1990). It argues that, instead of following traditional epistolary conventions, *Age of Iron* uses the protagonist's letter as an investigative tool to probe the inherent problematics of truth-telling from a precarious and complex subject position. The article highlights absence as the central motif that underpins the urgency of communicating the truth. Central to this investigation is the distinction between virtuality and spectrality, approached through the critical philosophies of Bergson, Deleuze, Lyotard, and Derrida. It shows how shifting dimensions of narrative imagination (Coetzee and Kurtz), moving from virtuality to spectrality within an epistolary framework, restrain the otherwise endless interplay of binaries, restrict the arbitrary construction of meanings, and foreground the importance of authorial intent (Coetzee) in the author's exercise of authority to speak the truth. It further argues that, through the use of epistolary discourse, the novel endorses a performative mode of engagement that seeks to establish the authenticity and legitimacy of the truth (Lyotard), instead of speaking it.

Keywords: *Age of Iron*; epistolarity; virtuality; spectrality; helmet effect; authenticity; truth-telling

J. M. Coetzee's oeuvre persistently engages with multiple epistolary modes—journals, memoranda, reports, exchanges, letters—reflecting a quest for a precise subject position from which objective truth might be represented by an impartial and legitimate narrative agency. This experimentation began with *Dusklands* (Coetzee [1974] 1998), continued through *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), and *Foe* (1986), and reached a significant high point in *Age of Iron* (1990). Though the experiment continues in later works, *Age of Iron* remains the culmination of Coetzee's exploration of diverse epistolary forms. In all such works, distinct epistolary strategies facilitate the examination of manifold critical and thematic concerns, including the dynamics of authorship and authorial authority (Reza 2023), the methods and limitations of psychoanalysis (Hallemeier 2026; Coetzee and Kurtz [2015] 2016), ethical engagement, and, most notably, the problematics of articulating the truth. The deployment of multiple epistolary forms across Coetzee's oeuvre, particularly the use of letters, serves as a vehicle for dialogic exchange, confession, confrontation, self-representation, and ethico-philosophical as well as psycho-social reciprocation. Additionally, letters perform an instrumental role as interlocutors, typically mediating the relationship between addresser

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and addressee, either reinforcing the communicative bond (as in *Foe*) or destabilizing it (as in *Elizabeth Costello*). This article analyzes *Age of Iron*, a novel structured as an extended letter from the protagonist Elizabeth Curren, a retired professor of Classics, to her estranged daughter residing in the United States. It is widely regarded as Coetzee's most fully developed epistolary novel, particularly when compared with *Foe*, *Elizabeth Costello* (Coetzee [2003] 2004), and *Summertime* (2009). Rachel Bower observes that *Age of Iron* explores "the possibilities and constraints of epistolary conventions" (Bower 2020, p. 131). Bower's observation highlights the novel's self-reflexive approach as it interrogates and disrupts generic conventions, thereby inviting a re-evaluation in light of the established motifs found in conventional epistolary novels.

According to Rosbottom, the structural integrity of conventional epistolary novels is formalized by the functional presence of certain dominant motifs¹ (Rosbottom 1977, p. 282). He argues that these serve as primary frameworks facilitating readers' interaction with the text. Among them, he highlights *absence* as the most pervasive, positing that the epistolary novel is "par excellence a literature of absence" (Rosbottom 1977, p. 283). In *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, Janet Altman echoes Rosbottom's assertion and emphasizes the instrumental role of the letter in "signifying" the physical distance between addresser and addressee, foregrounding absence while negotiating spatial separation through the "concomitant thematics of Love, Friendship, Coquetry, Trust, and Mistrust" (Prince 1983, p. 199; see also Altman 1982). Stanley likewise links absence to "epistolary intent," identifying it as the defining condition of epistolarity (Stanley 2015, p. 242–243).²

In *Age of Iron*, Coetzee employs the epistolary form, which underscores absence and deferred communication between the addresser and the addressee from the onset of the novel. I argue that *Age of Iron* transforms the absence motif from a mere structural necessity into a critical locus of literary and philosophical inquiry, challenging the conventional epistolary understanding of this structural feature by treating it as a factor that complicates the act of truth-telling. In this novel, absence tenaciously intersects with the problematics of truth-telling: the addresser responds to the urge to convey her perceived truth to the absent addressee while simultaneously growing aware of, and skeptical about, the interpretive tendencies of readers, i.e., the potential arbitrariness with which the addressee may construe the communicated truth. While navigating the complexities of truth-telling, Elizabeth Curren is troubled neither by the constraints inherent in the incommunicability of written words nor by the plurality of their signification; instead, she is concerned with retaining authorial authority, conveying "authorial intent" (Coetzee 2008, p. 229), and attending to the potential performative capacities of both the words she employs and the actors/agencies she deploys. The crux of this argument (let us put it hypothetically for now) lies in the assertion that it is a substantive task for a reader, positioned as the recipient of a letter written in the past (thus attesting to absence), to elicit truths from the available information and resources through sincere performative engagement. Coetzee connects absence to virtuality and spectrality—two distinct and legitimate modes/approaches to understanding it—the former accentuating absent presence, i.e., virtual reality, and the latter present absence, i.e., spectral reality. It is pertinent to note how Elizabeth Curren evokes the idea of absence, deliberately connecting it to spectrality while mourning the dead figures in an old photograph: "*Dies irae, dies illa* when the absent shall be present and the present absent" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 111, emphasis in the original). Thus, Coetzee not only interrogates and exposes the challenges of truth-telling through conventional epistolary forms, but also explores the specific conditions that govern the method and act of truth-telling by equating absence with death and/or the traces of those who are dead, and by conceiving absence in non-dialectical terms, i.e., as an end in itself.³

Set in Cape Town during the closing years of the apartheid era (1948–1994), *Age of Iron* is divided into four numbered parts constituting a single letter. Elizabeth Curren

entrusts the letter to Vercueil, her “messenger”, with instructions to mail it to her daughter after her death. However, even by the end of the novel, she is never certain that Vercueil will carry out her request. Despite this uncertainty, she continues to record the final days of her life, offering detailed firsthand accounts of the brutal violence and atrocities inflicted on Black South Africans under apartheid. She suffers from an incurable terminal disease. The pain she suffers, she believes, is the “price” that was “due to be paid in shame” (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 164). The confessional tone of her letter manifests as she acknowledges her precarious positionality, afflicted by an intense sense of shame and guilt, for being counted among those who perpetrate institutionalized racism and structural violence. She confesses her “ashamedness” for being unwittingly complicit in what she recognizes as a historical injustice and earnestly desires to absolve herself of the shame: “I accepted that. I did not try to set myself apart. Though it was not a crime I asked to be committed, it was committed in my name” (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 164). The novel concludes with Elizabeth Curren’s declaration of her own death, written in the past tense (the rest of the letter being written in the present tense): “I slept and woke up cold [...]. I got back into bed, into the tunnel between the cold sheets. The curtains parted; he came in beside me. For the first time I smelled nothing. He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had” (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 198). This extraordinary and anti-generic ending explains why this article endorses a discourse on *virtuality* versus *spectrality* to account for the unconventional use of epistolary form in *Age of Iron*.

Henri Bergson defines the virtual (or virtual reality) as a mode of the real that has not been actualized. In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson analyzes the virtual as a mode of memory, distinguished and curated from the past, which is purely *imaginary* and/or *unreal*, but acts as *real*: “The past appears to us, then, in the form of memory-images, but these images are virtual. They are not actual, but they are real, since they act upon us” (Bergson [1896] 1991, p. 150). Influenced by Bergson, Gilles Deleuze further develops the concept of the virtual. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze highlights the differences existing between the actual and the virtual while arguing, “the virtual is opposed not to the real but to the actual” and “fully real insofar as it is virtual” (Deleuze [1968] 1994, p. 208). Deleuze’s expansion of Bergson’s concept of the virtual suggests that readers typically interpret a given narrative, written in the past, by imagining a virtual version of the actual account produced by the author. Since the virtual version is created by language, it remains open to continuous reframing and/or reimagining. This openness, on the one hand, explains the risk of potentially arbitrary interpretations; on the other, it calls into question the legitimacy of the narrative itself. Deleuze did not raise the question of legitimacy, but his friend Lyotard did while introducing the concept of metanarratives. In fact, Lyotard begins where Deleuze leaves off, pointing to the incommensurable differences that perennially exist between the actual and the virtual (Lyotard 1979, pp. xxiv–v; p. 15). In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard warns against narratives that intentionally distort certain facts and construct seemingly trustworthy histories (Lyotard 1979). Such narratives, Lyotard argues, can mislead readers into accepting false histories as truth. Though Lyotard is not primarily concerned with literary works, his ideas are relevant because, while Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* is a work of fiction, Mrs Curren’s letter is not—it is a private letter to her daughter. It is non-literary and therefore subject to Lyotardian scrutiny. Mrs Curren herself invites such scrutiny when she instructs her daughter: “So I ask you: attend to the writing, not to me. If lies and pleas and excuses weave among the words, listen for them. Do not pass them over, do not forgive them easily. Read all, even this adjuration, with a cold eye” (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 104).

For Bergson, to reiterate, the virtual is ontologically non-existing, yet it is a force from the past (from the realm of the past, from history, from memory) that influences and shapes the present. This critical positing simultaneously converges with and diverges from Jacques Derrida’s notion of spectrality, otherwise known as the theory of

hauntology. Derrida's example is the ghost of King Hamlet, which emerges from the realm of the past to reveal the mystery of the King's death in Shakespeare's play. The ghost's unreal body appears before Prince Hamlet, clad in full armor and a helmet, typically worn by a soldier ready for battle. The attire signifies a wartime emergency, demanding certain decisive actions/performances to be taken up. For Derrida, the king's ghost, though naturally invisible, becomes visible because of the armor and the face-covering helmet with its visor on⁴ (Reza 2026, pp. 11–13). The ghost, according to Derrida, exerts a powerful impact on Prince Hamlet who, already jolted by the ghost's revelation, undertakes a series of actions—most notably his performance in the play-within-the-play—in order to verify the legitimacy of the ghost's message and elicit the truth. Derrida calls this impact the “helmet effect”—the central idea of the theory of hauntology. The helmet effect, he argues, mandatorily leads to investigational and performative responses (Derrida [1993] 1994, pp. 7–10). To be precise, the helmet effect refers to the spectral presence of the past, its *absent presence*, its indelible impact on the present, and its undeniable capacity to influence rational thought. For Bergson, the virtual influences the present, but not in the same way as the spectral does for Derrida. Derrida conceives of the specter not in its literal sense but as a philosophical concept that defies and resists definition through traditional binaries, such as life/death, reality/illusion, and past/present. The virtual, on the contrary, is defined in terms of binary opposites, leading to multiple interpretations, often endless and arbitrary. The spectral resists such possibilities; instead, it intrinsically promotes “authorial intent,” which readers are invited to verify in order to elicit the truth. Understanding this fundamental distinction between virtuality and spectrality is crucial for appreciating the unique epistolary technique, the unconventional use of the epistolary form, and the complexities involved in the act of truth-telling in *Age of Iron*.

In the initial pages of the novel, Elizabeth Curren is dismissive of the idea of visitation, i.e., invoking a muse prior to the commencement of writing. Later in the novel, she again dismisses the idea while denying God's intervention in helping her describe the atrocities she bears witness to (see Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 9; pp. 137–38). The idea of invoking a muse occurs to her likely because she is a retired professor of Classics familiar with the artistic practices of the Greek classical masters. This dismissal reinforces the idea that what she is writing is a private letter rather than a literary narrative that allows for the blending of fact and fiction, or even the complete erasure of fact. Elizabeth Curren reinforces the non-literary framework of her letter time and again. Nevertheless, she does not rule out the possibility that her daughter (in the capacity of a reader) might read it like any other story, offering an engaging plot that transports the reader to another world—a virtual one. Halfway through her letter, she adopts a self-conscious approach to negotiating the distance that exists between the addresser and the addressee. She writes, “I tell you the story of this morning mindful that the storyteller, from her office, claims the place of right. It is through my eyes that you see; the voice that speaks in your head is mine” (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 103). A pre-emptive approach such as this acknowledges the power of absence and explains why she gradually becomes inclined to draw attention to the spectrality of events, things, people, and ideas. However, her acknowledgement of the power of absence also reverberates with an underlying anxiety about the potential misreading and risk of endless interpretations of her letter.

The idea that Elizabeth Curren experiences anxiety during the act of writing is supported by Coetzee, who elsewhere argues, “The stories we set about writing sometimes begin to write themselves, after which their truth or falsehood is out of our hands and declarations of authorial intent carry no weight. Furthermore, once a book is launched into the world it becomes the property of its readers, who, given half a chance, will twist its meaning in accord with their own preconceptions and desires” (Coetzee 2008, p. 229). Through this critical observation, Coetzee asserts the possibility of a sudden autopoietic turn during the act of composition, referring to the metaphorical moment

when a story being written takes full control over the act of writing and begins to write itself. He also warns against readers' tendency to twist meanings arbitrarily "in accord with their own preconceptions and desires," once they are "given half a chance." Readers' responses, shaped by "desires," Coetzee implies, risk becoming biased, opinionated, prejudiced, or even falsified. According to Coetzee, the act of writing is governed by multiple dynamics, including an author's authorial intent, embedded in the very notion of authorship, in order to preserve authorial authority. Coetzee suggests that authors must adopt precautionary measures to forestall the construction of unsavory or unintended meanings, given that the majority of readers exhibit a proclivity toward arbitrary interpretation, often calling the author's authority into question. This explanation clarifies why Mrs Curren repeatedly implies the non-literary status of her letter, and why she eventually turns to alternative modes of narrative imagination, from virtuality to spectrality, in the course of her writing—reinforcing the claim of the unconventional use of epistolarity. It is unconventional because the unique self-reflexivity it exhibits has not, to my knowledge, been mapped or documented in any other epistolary fiction.

"Narrative imagination,"⁵ according to Coetzee, is the "faculty" that produces "self-narratives" in order to "elaborate for ourselves and our circle the story that suits us best, [...] a story in which we are generally right and other people are generally wrong" (Coetzee and Kurtz [2015] 2016, p. 4). While debating issues of psychoanalytic psychotherapy in his second exchange with Arabella Kurtz⁶, Coetzee further asserts: "In our liberal, post-religious culture we tend to think of the narrative imagination as a benign force within us. But there is another way of seeing it, based on our experience of how self-narratives work in many people's lives" (Coetzee and Kurtz [2015] 2016, p. 4). Self-narratives, intended to impress the "right" version of one's story, according to Coetzee, often clash "blatantly with reality" (Coetzee and Kurtz [2015] 2016, p. 4). This observation necessitates "another way" (an alternative way) of framing the narrative imagination by one who is aware of the adverse impact it might have on others.

Mrs Curren appears convinced that her claim to truth, contained in her self-narratives, may affect her intended reader (her daughter) unpredictably, leading her either to believe or disbelieve, or to accept or reject, the account presented to her. There are multiple occasions, chiefly in section 3 of the novel, when Mrs Curren grows doubtful about whether her daughter would believe what she is writing, given the unimaginable extent of atrocity she is narrating. She is further convinced that her claim of truthfulness is not an absolute assertion to prevent her intended reader (or any other reader) from interrogating the legitimacy of her narrative, given her subject position as someone implicated in the structures of apartheid—as a member of the privileged class that benefited from the system, although not as a willing perpetrator. This critical awareness prompts Mrs Curren to frame her narrative imagination alternatively, shifting its dimension from virtuality to spectrality. There are multiple moments in the novel, exemplified later, that register this shift. But this shift is not abrupt: it follows a series of instances that mark the failure of her self-narratives to convince Bheki and John, young revolutionaries fighting an asymmetric war against the apartheid system. She intends to persuade them to stay away from armed struggle. In response, she is met with either a harsh retort or indignant silence. During a conversation with Bheki, the son of her maidservant Florence, Mrs Curren asks: "Why won't you go to school?" Bheki takes no time to retort, "What is school for?" and continues, "It is to make us fit into the apartheid system" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 67). She also attempts in vain to dissuade John, Bheki's friend, from rebellious pursuits: "If you had been in my Thucydides class [...] you might have learned something about what can happen to our humanity in time of war. Our humanity, that we are born with, that we are born into" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 80). With a growing awareness of her precarious situatedness, she comes to regret her authoritative approach later in the novel and questions her own authority: "But now I ask myself: [...]"

What right have I to wish Bheki and his friend had kept out of trouble?" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 163).

Face to face with the brutal realities of the emergency period in South Africa, coinciding with her terminal illness, Mrs Curren begins to doubt the existence of her ontological self, often counting herself among the dead and describing her state of being alive as unsubstantial and her presence as spectral.⁷ She realizes that South Africa is undergoing a rapid transformation, ushering in a new era—the age of iron. She translates this change as the gradual transformation of her real self into a spectral one. Halfway through the novel, she raises the question, "Have I ever been fully awake?" She answers, "I have intimations older than any memory, unshakable, that once upon a time I was alive. Was alive and then was stolen from life" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 109). While one can find in this statement the exact moment when she shifts her narrative imagination from virtuality to spectrality, it also serves as a powerful metaphorical representation of her authorial self as a *specter*, validating our comparative analysis between Mrs Curren and the ghost of King Hamlet, both acting as authors. The letter she is writing, as noted earlier, ends with the description of her own death, written in the past tense—her final act as an author. Such an enigmatic ending ineluctably triggers the question: Who wrote the concluding lines describing her moment of death—Mrs Curren herself, someone impersonating her, or her ghost? Whoever or whatever the author may be, those closing lines pose a crisis for the intended reader—akin to the crisis Prince Hamlet (the reader) faces when the ghost of his dead father chooses to speak to him and report the mystery surrounding the alleged murder. It is pertinent to note that Prince Hamlet does not promptly believe the ghost's report. He is plunged into a dilemma—to believe or not to believe (*to do or not to do*)—whether to believe in the existence of the ghost and in the truth of its account. Mrs Curren's daughter must face a similar dilemma while reading the letter, as must the readers.

The concluding lines of Mrs Curren's letter also pose another critical challenge to readers trained to appreciate a fictional work by declaring the death of the author. The challenge arises because the author declares her own death, undermining any possibility of the reader emerging as an independent interpreter, i.e., what Barthes conceptualizes as the "birth of the reader" (Barthes [1967] 2008, pp. 120–23). Moreover, the simultaneity of the declaration of death and the end of writing is not analogous to the disappearance of the writing subject, which Foucault prescribes for the authors of literary texts. According to Foucault, the writing subject must disappear in order to allow dominant discourses to fill the gap left by the disappearance of the author (Foucault [1969] 1998, p. 217). The cumulative effect of Coetzee's critical stance, both anti-Barthesian and anti-Foucauldian, is that readers find it onerous and intractable to interpret the novel using conventional interpretive approaches. The difficulty, as previously explained, lies primarily in the restriction on applying binaries to explain the spectral. Readers are left with no choice but to follow the trails the specter leaves behind—as Hamlet does by undertaking a credibility assessment, or what Lyotard would call the legitimacy test. Hamlet conducts this test by orchestrating the play-within-the-play, in which he himself performs a significant role as an actor, explorer, or inventor (Lyotard 1979, p. xxv). Anyone reading Mrs Curren's letter is called upon to do the same. This agenda of engaging readers in action in order to elicit the truth for themselves is what makes Elizabeth Curren's letter unique and Coetzee's use of epistolarity unconventional.

Notably, what Derrida would theorize some three years later after the publication of *Age of Iron* (1990), Coetzee had already introduced as a subject for critical debate through Mrs Curren's reflections on the death of John and his posthumous presence (there are many other examples as well): "I want to tell you that, despite my dislike of him, he is with me more clearly, more piercingly than Bheki has ever been. He is with me or I am with him: him or the trace of him" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 175). Coetzee also explores the idea of a face-covering "helmet" (long before Derrida wrote on the subject) when, in a

“vision,” Mrs Curren sees Florence in the avatar of the Greek goddess Aphrodite—her face covered with a mask, yet exerting an undeniable impact on Mrs Curren through her spectral presence (Coetzee [1990] 2010, pp. 176–77). A bereaved mother, Florence has not been in contact with Mrs Curren ever since her son Bheki died in police action. Mrs Curren intends to talk to her over the telephone on a couple of occasions but fails to get in touch with her or locate her. This context shapes and defines the vision and justifies Florence’s spectral appearance—who, after losing her son, has surely become one of the living-dead, awaiting death, if not already dead. It may be noted that Coetzee’s treatment of spectrality bears the imprint of Roland Barthes’ concept of death—“undialectical death”—a term Barthes uses while mourning his deceased mother in *Camera Lucida* (Barthes 1981, p. 72).⁸

In Shakespeare’s play, Derrida argues that the helmet “indicated the chief’s [King’s] authority, like the blazon of his nobility”—a metonymic rhetoric (Derrida [1993] 1994, p. 7). If the helmet functions as the emblem of authority for the dead King Hamlet, what authority does Elizabeth Curren hold? Coetzee affirms, in a different context, prior to the publication of the novel, that Elizabeth Curren holds “two kinds of authority”: “the authority of the dying” and “the authority of the classics” (Coetzee 1992, p. 250). As an old woman dying of cancer, her first authority (i.e., authority of the dying) is supposedly rooted in the pain she endures. The excruciating pain she feels situates her on the same plane as those who are dying or awaiting death while struggling to claim back their lands, lives, and freedom. Buried in her pain is the quintessential impetus to write: “[So] without pain no writing: a new and terrible rule” (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 175). However, he further notes, “Both these authorities are denied and even derided in her world: the first because hers is a private death, the second because it speaks from long ago and far away” (Coetzee 1992, p. 250). With both authorities denied and derided, is Mrs Curren left with no other authority? Coetzee offers an answer that conspicuously indicates a third kind of authority, one that she exercises decisively: “What matters is that the contest is staged, that the dead have their say, even those who speak from a totally untenable historical position” (Coetzee 1992, p. 250). It is the authority of the dead, I claim, that Mrs Curren is ultimately entitled to exercise—an authority that explains why she declares her own death, producing an unconventional ending within the epistolary tradition.

A retired professor of Classics, Mrs Curren is undeniably well placed to speak on classical language, literature, and European pedagogical traditions. At times, she demonstrates her command of the classical languages and the linguistic frameworks employed by Virgil and other classical authors. She also displays extensive knowledge of ancient political realism, as elucidated by Thucydides and others. However, she soon comes to realize that these classical languages, linguistic structures, and political frameworks are profoundly inadequate for explaining the ongoing politico-historical realities of South Africa. David Attwell, who interviewed Coetzee prior to the publication of *Age of Iron*, later observed in his 1993 monograph *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* that while *Foe* interrogates the concept of narrative authority, *Age of Iron* presents a more challenging proposition, “a harder case”: “What does it mean to write without authority?” (Attwell 1993, p. 120). Mrs Curren initially struggles but eventually comes to realize that to “write without authority” requires a conscious and deliberate relinquishment of it—a concept that Kierkegaard articulated and Coetzee duly endorsed (see Coetzee 1992, p. 151). She arrives at two crucial realizations: first, the authority of the dead exerts a more enduring and lasting influence than the authority of the dying; and second, South African reality cannot be authentically represented through Eurocentric discursive practices or by being cast within classical lexical and syntactical frameworks (see Reza 2026, p. 98).

Mrs Curren’s reliance on the ideas of classical Humanism in order to convince a Black African boy allegedly highlights her limitations in interpreting the historico-political situation of South Africa. Benita Parry argues that Mrs Curren’s failure to convince John with her classical knowledge also exposes her lack of authority to represent the

contemporary political realities of South Africa (Parry 1996, p. 59). Parry's argument, however, may not fully account for the fact that Mrs Curren does not hesitate to openly acknowledge her limitations. It may also understate the significance of her subsequent struggles to confront and overcome those limitations. Once confronted and challenged by Mr. Thabane, Florence's brother and a schoolteacher, to speak on the violence she bears witness to, she says, "These are terrible sights. [...] They are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people's words. I must find my own words. Otherwise it is not the truth. That is all I can say now" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, pp. 98–99). Unable to make out the ulterior sense of her statement, an unidentified man from the crowd shouts, "This woman talks shit" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 99). She immediately responds, "You are right, what you say is true. To speak of this [...] you would need the tongue of a god" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 99). Her struggle to speak the truth by resolving the confusion she still experiences in selecting the right set of words that are not other people's words becomes increasingly conspicuous once she intends to pawn her own life for the sake of telling the truth: "I want to sell myself, redeem myself, but am full of confusion about how to do it" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 117). How to do it? She finds classical anthropocentrism objectionable and the lexicology inadequate to explain the Afrocentric humanism. Rather, it is the inhuman(e) that defines the White man's practices in South Africa—devoid of ethicality, leave aside morality. The challenge for Mrs Curren is not only to redefine her subject position, but also to undertake the task of selecting the right set of lexis and the proper linguistic framework that can potentially expunge the White/Black and oppressor/oppressed binaries. This line of argument once again explains why she finds spectral reality more sacrosanct than virtual reality. She employs spectrality as the navigational prism that facilitates seeing familiar things through spectral imagining. No other sub-genre, I claim, other than the epistolary one could serve this purpose better, as it enables the protagonist to record each layer of her experiences of unlearning and re-learning.

It may appear redundant to say that Coetzee's persistent preoccupation with different epistolary forms across his oeuvre is consistently aligned with the question of authority—the authority to speak or write the truth. However, what necessitates this reiteration is the fact that, in the initial years, of his writing career, Coetzee was accused of lacking the authority to write on and about South Africa by some of his fellow South African writers, including Nadine Gordimer and Athol Fugard (Reza 2026, p. 19). Gordimer alleged that Coetzee failed to address the historical realities of contemporary South Africa and criticized him for writing within an allegorical framework, calling him "a writer with an imagination that soars like a lark and sees from up there like an eagle" (Gordimer [1984] 1998, pp. 139–44). In 1987, three years after Gordimer's disparaging remarks, Coetzee delivered a lecture at Baxter Hall at the University of Cape Town in which he furnished a befitting reply to the former's allegation. The lecture was published later in the form of an essay titled "*The Novel Today*" (1987) in which he held historical reality to be a relative notion, its meaning contingent on interpretations, and described history both as "a kind of discourse" and "a certain kind of story" (Coetzee 1987, p. 4). In *Age of Iron*, Mrs Curren describes the content of her private letter as a story—a personal story—on several occasions: "If each of us has a story we tell to ourself about who we are and where we come from, then that is my story. That is the story I choose, or the story that has chosen me" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 120). The novel concludes with a reference to a time period: "1986–1989" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 198). This period falls within the nationwide State of Emergency (1986–1990) in South Africa, signifying that her story is *a certain kind of history* in its own right. The boundary between story and history, blurred in "*The Novel Today*," is fully erased in *Age of Iron*. Coetzee implies that one can write a story grounded in the present, but the specter of history never ceases to haunt it. Mrs Curren, for example, finds her existence partly seized by history, as she says, "A crime was committed long ago. How long ago? I do not know. But longer ago than 1916,

certainly. So long ago that I was born into it. It is part of my inheritance. It is part of me, I am part of it" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 164).

Coetzee's experiments with different epistolary forms, as argued at the outset of this article, constitute a quest for a legitimate subject position from which narrative agency can speak the truth. Accordingly, one can find that from the opening pages of the novel Mrs Curren becomes aware of the act and purpose of writing: "To whom this writing then? The answer: to you but not to you; to me; to you in me" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 6). Her "answer" sets the tone of the letter: it is a confessional document—she is to make the confession, and her daughter to bear witness. She seeks redemption through writing, which becomes the key to unlocking it. For her, therefore, writing the letter is an irresistible compulsion, while dispatching it to her daughter is a necessity. What if Vercueil never mails the letter? She says, "If Vercueil does not send these writings on [...] A certain body of truth will never take on flesh: my truth: how I lived in these times, in this place" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 130). In other words, it is neither the urgency of storytelling nor the immediacy of communication that propels her into the act of writing; instead, the urgency is embedded in the urge to absolve herself of her situatedness—her precarious positionality. It is an ethical urgency to confess and steer her conscience clear of the crimes committed in her name. However, despite the urgency, she still stumbles and struggles to tell the truth, even as she approaches the end of her letter: "Time is short. I must trust my heart and tell the truth" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 162). Can she tell the truth by trusting her heart? Shall her reader believe in the truth thus spoken? She becomes aware of the ambiguity and promptly revises her statement: "Sightless, ignorant, I follow where the truth takes me" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 162). The statement echoes her earlier assertion, "I follow the pen, going where it takes me" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 108). It is noteworthy what she says to Vercueil, in a patronizing tone, later in the novel: "So I have continued to tell myself stories in which you lead, I follow. [...] The angel goes before, the woman follows" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 168).

Confessional statements such as these, declaring her deliberate withdrawal from the act of speaking the truth, persistently underscore the problematics of truth-telling. She denies speaking the truth herself; instead, in her authorial capacity, she continues to search for an impartial and legitimate narrative capable of articulating it on her behalf—the search ultimately ends in Vercueil. This fact reinforces my earlier claim that Coetzee turns the letter into a tool to investigate the means of resolving the problematics of truth-telling. Coetzee finally resorts to the dramaturgical concept that he elsewhere defines as "performative conditions for messengerhood"—a concept that he acknowledges drawing from J. L. Austin's speech act theory (Coetzee 1992, p. 340; see also Austin [1962] 1975). By endorsing Austinian theoretical formulations, Coetzee suggests that an author must establish the "performative conditions" through the careful selection of lexis, actors, and agencies, and place them within a relevant contextual matrix, so that each of them transforms into a messenger capable of effectively conveying the truth. The concept is consonant with his conviction that "stories finally have to tell themselves, that the hand that holds the pen is only the conduit of a signifying process" (Coetzee 1992, p. 341). For Coetzee, satisfying the "performative conditions for messengerhood" is an essential criterion for enabling stories to tell themselves, i.e., to become autopoietic, self-reliant in terms of meaning construction, and resistant to readers' arbitrary interpretations. Awareness of this technicality closely informs Mrs Curren's letter and provides another reason why it is unconventional. There are innumerable moments in her letter in which she generates performative conditions for effective messengerhood by lending a spectral aura to people, things, events, and ideas. The list includes her own feeling of lacking ontological substantiality, Vercueil's spectral presence ["A presence or a smell. It was there, then it went away" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 13)], the invisible presence of John's ghost, and the appearance of the masked apparition of Florence in the guise of the goddess Aphrodite, among others. How does it facilitate the conveyance of truth? The spectral

aura added to people, things, events, and ideas turns each into an individual agency, enabling them to function in the same way as the helmet does for the ghost of King Hamlet: by creating the *performative condition* for the invisible ghost, making its invisibility visible, and indicating “the chief’s [read the author’s] authority.”

In the concluding lines of the letter, while announcing her death, Mrs Curren mentions the “embrace” with Vercueil, her messenger: “From that embrace there was no warmth to be had” (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 198). This is perhaps the best example of what Coetzee means by the “performative conditions of messengerhood.” It records the moment of Mrs Curren’s dissolution into the past, into memory. Mrs Curren’s death, as Derrida would read it, is her final signature on the letter—the signature of authenticity and/or authority: the authority of the dead. At the moment of signing the letter, Derrida writes, “I hardly have the time to sign that I am already dead, that I am already dead” (Derrida [1974] 1986). Symbolically, through the embrace, Mrs Curren—or, in her own terms, “the spirit of her soul” (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 130)—turns into a messenger herself, a spectral messenger whose invisible presence shall be felt by her reader, just as Prince Hamlet felt the presence of his dead father. It is the fulfillment of a promise she makes to her daughter earlier: “It is not my soul that will remain with you but the spirit of my soul, the breath, the stirring of the air about these words, the faintest of turbulence traced in the air by the ghostly passage of my pen over the paper your fingers now hold” (Coetzee [1990] 2010, p. 130). To conclude in the words of the posthumanist thinker Rosi Braidotti, this is a case of “self-styling one’s death”—it is “a ‘style’ of life that progressively and continuously fixes the modalities and the stage for the final act, leaving nothing unattended. Pursuing a sort of seduction into immortality, the ethical life is life as virtual suicide. Life as virtual suicide is life as constant creation” (Braidotti 2013, p. 135).

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Notes

1. Rosbottom identifies five dominant and interlocking motifs (absence, time, exchange, reflexivity, and epistolarity), with absence being the first and most crucial among them.
2. Stanley conceives epistolary intent as preceding the conventional letter. It denotes the intention to communicate, in writing or through a cognate representational medium, with someone who is “not there,” that is, separated in time and/or space. In this sense, the conventional letter is only one historical realization of epistolary intent, while absence constitutes its defining communicative condition (Stanley 2015, pp. 242–43).
3. The idea finds an analogy in Roland Barthes’ concept of “undialectical death”, which inspired Derrida’s theory of spectrality.
4. In *Specter of Marx* (1993), Derrida develops two fundamental concepts, namely the Visor effect and the Helmet effect, which help explain the impact that history, or the past has on the present. The concept of the Helmet effect in particular, I believe, has neither been fully appreciated nor applied in critical discourse to date. I have attempted to explore its theoretical potential in my book *J. M. Coetzee: Authorship, Authority and Beyond* (Reza 2026).
5. Though formulated nearly a quarter of a century after the publication of *Age of Iron*, I find this Coetzeean idea highly effective when applied retrospectively.
6. Arabella Kurtz is a clinical psychologist and psychoanalytic psychotherapist. It is worth noting that Coetzee’s first correspondence with Kurtz seeks to explore “the qualities of a good story” that could potentially speak “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” (Coetzee and Kurtz [2015] 2016, p. 1).
7. The idea of ontological substantiality is exploited in *Foe* as well, where Susan Barton questions her own unsubstantiality, doubting the reality of her existence (Coetzee [1986] 2010).

8. Jacques Derrida also draws on Barthes's concept of undialectical death, while invoking the idea of spectrality (Derrida [1993] 1994). For Derrida's earlier discussion of the multiple dimensions of death, see Derrida ([1981] 2001). For Barthes's discussion of death, see Barthes (1981).

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