J. M. COETZEE AND LITERARY DEVELOPMENTS: THE FARM THEME IN BOYHOOD AND LIFE AND TIMES OF MICHAEL K

Dr. Shadi Neimneh
Hashemite University (JORDAN)
E-mails: shadin@hu.edu.jo, snaamneh@excite.com
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ABSTRACT

A look at J. M. Coetzee’s fictionalized memoir Boyhood (1997) and his earlier novel Life and Times of Michael K (1983) reveals that the farm is one thematic and intertextual link. In both works, a South African Karoo farm is viewed as a site of freedom, belonging, abundance, fulfillment, and endurance. It is also seen as a pillar for identity formation and communing with nature. However, this particular theme the works share has been relatively ignored by Coetzee’s critics. More importantly, the way it functions in the works deserves special attention. In one tricky sense, the farm theme in the latter fictionalized memoir seems a natural development from the earlier novel, which was published in 1983, and Coetzee’s rewriting of the plaasroman genre. In another—more convincing—sense, the experiences recounted in Boyhood seem essential for the depiction of the farm theme in Michael K because, regardless of the publication dates, Boyhood stages formative years in the life of the author as a boy and before the writing of Life and Times of Michael K. Thus, both works complicate the idea of literary developments in literature, specifically with relation to publication history and autobiography. In literature, thematic development is not bound by chronology. Rather, it is a matter of intertextuality, influence, and doubling.

Key words: Farm Novel; Intertextuality; Literary Development; J. M. Coetzee; South African Fiction; Boyhood; Life and Times of Michael K; Comparative Literature

Biographical Statement: Dr. Shadi Neimneh (pronounced “Na’amneh”) got his Ph.D. from Oklahoma University (USA) in 2011. He has published numerous articles in international journals in Canada, Australia, Britain, India, and the USA on the South African (Apartheid) literature of J. M. Coetzee and literary modernism. He has served as the Assistant Dean in the College of Arts at Hashemite University (HU) in 2012 and currently chairs the English Department as of January 2013.

1. INTRODUCTION: COETZEE AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Boyhood (1997) and Youth (2002) are J. M. Coetzee’s fictionalized “biographies.” Coetzee uses third-person narration and present tense to trace the development of his protagonist, his alter ego, John Coetzee, from boyhood to youth and probe the formative impact of such years on the protagonist’s identity. Coetzee takes us, among other things, through his protagonist’s school years and childhood in Worcester and Cape Town, family upbringing, university years in Cape Town, life in London as a computer programmer, attempts at writing poetry, and failed love affairs. In Boyhood, in particular, we see Coetzee’s boy as a school student between the ages of ten and thirteen, struggling against the orbits of his mother’s influence and her stifling love and internalizing the shame of his family’s racist prejudice. Above all, we have a confessional account of a rural boyhood in the Karoo. In Youth, by contrast, we see Coetzee’s youth as a young man in his late teens and early twenties pursuing a university degree in English and Mathematics in Cape Town and then working as a programmer for IBM and International Computers in London while working on a Master’s thesis on Ford. It is in Boyhood, however, that the farm theme relevant here is treated.

Readers of Coetzee’s biography can easily see the relevance of these two works to Coetzee’s life. What might be disturbing, nonetheless, is that Coetzee, often described as a shy, reticent figure, does not resort to past tense and first-person narration in these two works. Instead, he significantly uses present tense and third-person narration to recall his past as a lived experience in the present and fictionalize himself as an alien John Coetzee. Coetzee describes this distant or detached narrative technique, in an interview with David Attwell, as “autrebiography” (Doubling the Point 394). The
narrator in *autobiography* is not close enough to the autobiographical *I*. When this closeness is achieved, the result is autobiography in the first person rather than *autobiography* (*Doubling the Point* 394). This might mean that Coetzee is avoiding a direct confessional mode in the first person. However, Coetzee does communicate a truth about himself in the very act of conveying his reflections about his protagonist in the third person, which again reveals something about Coetzee the writer. Therefore, if we cannot ascertain the historical or factual truth of Coetzee’s narrative in the third person and the present tense, we can definitely follow Derek Attridge in his contention that the “truth that *Boyhood* offers, then, is first and foremost that of testimony: a vivid account of what it was like to grow up as a white male in the 1950s in South Africa...” who absorbs and internalizes his country’s political and social milieu (155). If *Boyhood* is a testimony, I argue in this paper, it is one about the importance of farm life to its fictionalized hero John Coetzee and to Coetzee’s novel *Life and Times of Michael K* (henceforth abbreviated as *Michael K*).

The same logic applies to *Youth* in that it can be read as a “testimony” of life in Cape Town and London in the 1960s, what it means to leave a mother country for another country, resist a life in computer industry to pursue an artistic vocation, and be frustrated in love or in art (Attridge 160). The blurred distinction between truth/life and fiction in *Boyhood* and *Youth* can be thought of as an extension of Coetzee’s treatment of this theme in novels like *Foe* (1986) and *Dusklands* (1974). In *Foe*, for example, Susan Barton wants her life story to be told as a memoir, i.e. as a truthful or historical account of her adventures on an island. The writer Foe, on the other hand, wants to add imaginative scenes of encounters with cannibals and quests and reunions. Though there is no room for further exploration of possible connections in this regard, I think Coetzee is essentially pursuing an earlier preoccupation concerning the interplay of life versus art or fiction. In *Michael K*, Coetzee uses life material about farm life he also uses in *Boyhood*. The personalized farm theme in the fictionalized memoir is fictively treated in the novel.

Coetzee manifests his reluctance to write about himself directly by writing in the third person in *Boyhood* and *Youth*. Having that such an act makes these potential “memoirs” more of novels than anything else, it gets difficult to ascertain their biographical accuracy. In this regard, Coetzee asserts in the same interview in *Doubling the Point* mentioned above that “[a]ll autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography” (391). This should justify his resort to the third person in giving an autobiographical account. It is also axiomatic that Coetzee’s narrative technique of present tense and third-person narration gives a sense of immediacy and erases his adult or mature perspective on what is narrated. More importantly, Coetzee’s technique allows him to revisit/relive his experiences as a teenager and an adult and probably come to terms with their impact. If this is the case, then Coetzee is using these works as a Freudian talking cure whereby expressing something heals the repressed traumas of being a marginalized figure who escapes the political turmoil of his country to the cold London just to be disillusioned by its inability to offer him art or romance. On the whole, one can claim that *Boyhood* and *Youth* do have an autobiographical value. From another perspective, Coetzee is continuing his earlier concern with the relationship between life and art as I stated earlier. If he fictionalized the Russian novelist F. Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) and, to an extent, the English novelist Daniel Defoe in *Foe*, he now turns to fictionalizing himself as an aspiring writer fleeing Cape Town to London.

In this recent autobiographical feat *Summertime* (2009), Coetzee revisits and further complicates a theme he took up in his earlier fictionalized memoirs *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and, to a lesser extent, *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007). Namely, he reexamines the relationship between life and fiction, but at a more intense level this time. Coetzee continues a conviction expressed to David Attwell in an interview in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* that, broadly, all writing is autobiographical, having to do with truth, confession, and writing the self: “everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it” (17). However, Coetzee carries to an extreme in *Summertime* a postmodern self-consciousness about the process of writing the self. Aware of his status as an accomplished world author and and of his age as a man in his late sixties, Coetzee defamiliarizes and mediates how we typically view him and his works by having interviewees reflect on a late fictional J. M. Coetzee—who died years ago in Australia—as a distant, cold human being with no distinction as a writer, lover, or teacher. Mr. Vincent, an English academic and biographer, has secured the late writer’s dated and undated notebooks included at the beginning and the end of the novel. In between, we have the interviews conducted between the biographer and some people Coetzee knew, typically women, in 2007 and 2008. The novel we have is actually a self-conscious biography in progress, and, more importantly, the general picture of the fictional Coetzee is characteristicly negative; (self-) disparagement is a unifying thread among the interviews, even in the more sympathetic ones.

Coetzee’s 1985 article “Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky” makes it clear that confession can take place in fictional as well as autobiographical writing and has to
do with issues of “truth-telling and self-recognition, deception and self-deception” (194). The “end of confession” Coetzee writes, “is to tell the truth to and for oneself” (230). Coetzee, hence, articulates the idea of doubling when it comes to confessional writing. A legitimate question now is: How does this theorizing about confession and autobiography in literature fit the focus of this paper? Michael K and Boyhood can be seen in terms of a relationship of doubling/mirroring whereby the farm theme in each work writes back to the other, which is what I explain in this essay in terms of intertextuality. In both works, Coetzee essentially expresses an apparently autobiographical concern with farm life. What seems fictional in Michael K is actually autobiographical as the treatment of the farm theme in Boyhood shows. Moreover, the mature K in the novel repeats the interest in farm life the boy John Coetzee has in the memoir. It should come as no exaggeration that K sounds like the first sound in Coetzee himself, but my idea is that K’s ecological investment is reminiscent of John’s love for farm life in Boyhood and is, in this light, autobiographical. Instead of beginning with the earlier novel Michael K, I choose to begin with the more recent work Boyhood to show how the experiences recounted theoretically impact the treatment of the farm theme in the novel. So, my overall goal is to complicate the notion of literary development in literature with relation to Coetzee’s work and using the farm theme in particular. The theme itself, I should reiterate, is autobiographical in conception. However, its treatment in both works is a matter of relationality, i.e. intertextuality and repeatability within literary discourse.

2. BOYHOOD AND MICHAEL K: THE FARM THEME AS AN INTERTEXUAL LINK

A. Boyhood

The child in Boyhood is fond of farms. He finds special pleasure in family stories about the family farms of his father and his mother (Scenes 19). His family lives in Worcester in the Karoo about 90 miles from Cape Town. For the boy, the farm is an escape from the boredom of a provincial life and the routine of school and daily events.

The farm is what gives the boy a sense of identity and belonging: “Through the farms he is rooted in the past; through the farms he has substance” (Scenes 19). For the boy, “All farms are important. Farms are places of freedom, of life” (19). His grandfather’s farm passed to his uncle Son. Once or twice a year his father takes him to the family’s farm he loves a lot called Voëlfontein, meaning “bird fountain” (67). The child lived in Prince Albert for a while nearby the farm in the Karoo. The farm for him stands for rebirth, for feeling one with nature. Christmas visits to the farm color his imagination with all the farm animals he used to see as well as the stories the family members shared there (68-69). The farm is his sanctuary, the place where he feels at home: “This is the farm: no ill can happen here” (70). Near the farmhouse is a “stone-walled dam, twelve feet square, filled by a wind pump, which provides water for the house and garden” (70). This dam reminds us of the one K uses to water his plats in Michael K. The boy prizes himself on his ability to drink little water and wants to live as a creature of the desert like lizards (70): “He is proud of how little he drinks. It will stand him in good stead, he hopes, if he is ever lost in the veld” (70). In a sense, the boy is like K who starves himself on the farm and minimally eats what the earth produces only.

The boy enjoys hunting with his uncle. Among the things he relishes are pumpkins and watermelons, things K in the novel likes to eat: “Everything in the Karoo is delicious, the peaches, the watermelons, the pumpkin, the mutton, as though whatever can find sustenance in this arid earth is hereby blessed” (75-76). All in all, Coetzee seems to follow idyllic representations of farm life common in the plaasroman tradition he was familiar with as an academic and a man of letters. And regardless of the truth value of the farm scenes in Boyhood, they remain confessional and autobiographical to the extent that they try to depict Coetzee the boy. Importantly, the echoes of Michael K in Boyhood, or the allusions of Boyhood to Michael K, are too strong to ignore.

John the boy loves the landscape around him, “the beloved landscape of ochre and grey and fawn and olive-green” (76). He hunts muisvöëls by the riverbed (76). He wants to live in the Karoo, preferably without family attachments (76). He simply adores farm life: “There is not enough time in a single life to know all of Voëlfontein, know its every stone and bush. No time can be enough when one loves a place with such devouring love” (77). Just as the boy is sensitive to growth and fertility, he is also aware of waste and infertility. He is a meticulous observer of all the details of farm life positive or negative. Again, he embodies, in this regard, aspects of K’s personality as a gardener, as we will see in the next section: “The kraal walls ramble for miles up and down the hillside. Nothing grows here:

1 All future references to Boyhood and quotations will be from this text: Scenes from Provincial Life. See Works Cited.
2 Coetzee wrote a travesty of this genre, the plaasroman or farm novel, in his In the Heart of the Country (1977).
earth has been trampled flat and killed forever, he does not know how: it has a stained, unhealthy, yellow look” (77). As with Michael K, the farm is apparently in the Prince Albert district, in the Karoo. John the boy remembers shearing time and how the farm is in the heart of the country. “Is there a country deeper even than the country Voëlfontein, a heartland even more secluded from the world?” (78). The boy worships the farm because it endows his being with meaning: “The secret and sacred word that binds him to the farm is belong” (80). He both “belongs to” the farm and “belongs on” it (80). The farm gives the boy a sense of identity or rather allows for the realization of his identity. But the enduring farm is more than belonging. Even when they are dead or when it falls into ruins, it will still be there: “The farm is greater than any of them. The farm exists from eternity to eternity” (81). The boy’s devotion to the farm is ritualistic and ceremonious: “Once, out in the veld far from the house, he bends down and rubs his palms in the dust as if washing them. It is ritual” (81). He thinks of the farm in terms of filial relations and in a language reminiscent of that used Michael K: “He has two mothers. Twice-born: born from woman and born from the farm. Two mothers and no father” (81). Against the flux of life outside the farm, the boy comes to new realizations: “No one in the Karoo believes in spirits. Whatever dies here dies firmly and finally: its flesh is picked off by the ants, its bones are bleached by the sun, and that is that!”(82). The boy comes to appreciate the flow of time and the engulfing silence around him on the farm: “From the earth comes a deep silence, so deep that it could almost be a hum” (82). And he wants to return to the object of his belonging should he die: “When he dies he wants to be buried on the farm. If they will not permit that, then he wants to be cremated and have his ashes scattered here” (82). If such accounts of farm life in Boyhood stand in a relationship of mirroring to the real John Coetzee, they also mirror and double the representation of farm life in the earlier novel Michael K.

Among the details the boy recounts and which find echoes in Michael K are memories of slaughtering a sheep and cleaning the carcase every Friday for the residents of the farm (82). Fencing the land is another intertextual link between the memoir and the novel. Uncle Son and his helpers, because of lack of rain, set about “re-fencing the entire farm, breaking it into smaller camps so that the sheep can be shifted from camp to camp and the veld given time to recover. He and Ros and Freek go out every day, driving fence posts into the rock-hard earth, spanning furlong after furlong of wire, drawing it taut as a bowstring, clamping it” (84). Such details of farm life echo throughout Michael K and will be examined in the next section. The theme of animals used in Boyhood is made more elaborate in later works. The boy “does not understand why sheep accept their fate, why they never rebel but instead go meekly to their death” (85). He wonders why their instinct does not save the animals from death at the hands of humans, especially sheep as they were available on the farm. He finds in them resignation as they get transported to the slaughterhouses. The animals “have calculated the price and are prepared to pay it—the price of being on earth, the price of being alive” (86). The boy is interested in the farm with all of its aspects and creatures. The farm theme in Boyhood, and animals in particular, can be a necessary step toward understanding Coetzee’s preoccupations with animals in other works like Elisabeth Costello (2003) and Lives of Animals (1999). The theme of animals in Coetzee’s fictions is an extension of an autobiographical treatment of the same theme in the fictionalized memoir Boyhood.

**B. Michael K**

In the midst of an ongoing civil war, K in Coetzee's Michael K finds in farm life an escape from turbulent politics. In fact, the novel rewrites or offers a challenge to the farm novel of the early 20th century, the plaasroman, Coetzee already parodied in In the Heart of the Country. According to Rita Barnard, the novel Michael K presents “albeit in anorexic form, a new pastoral dream: a vision of rural life without patriarchal or colonial domination” (205). However, the novel also builds on autobiographical experiences Coetzee lived as a child and recollected about fourteen years later in Boyhood. In one sense, the novel rewrites farm scenes “already” given in Boyhood. Or is it the case that Boyhood rewrites farm scenes already presented in Michael K? One good explanation is that both works represent Coetzee’s childhood experiences. In this sense, Boyhood is a more pivotal text because it is more oriented toward the autobiographical. Although Michael K comes before Boyhood in terms of publication history, it is actually Boyhood that logically sets the farm theme prevalent in Michael K. Thematically speaking, Boyhood predates Michael K. Thematically speaking, again, both works are interconnected as far as the farm theme is concerned.

Actually, the farm theme begins early in the novel. A gardener by nature, K takes his sick mother, Anna K, to the Karoo. He leaves working for Parks and Gardens in Cape Town to take his mother to the quiet countryside of her childhood. The farm on which she was born was in the district of Prince Albert (7). She dreams of “escaping from the careless violence” (8) and dying “under blue skies” (8). The country of Prince Albert is a safe haven for her from the ongoing civil war, homeless
people, packed life of the town, and the curfew. When the permits do not come, he modifies a wheelbarrow to carry his mother to her birthplace in the countryside. He thinks that once she arrives in Prince Albert, "she would quickly recover her health" (18). They leave Sea Point to the Karoo trying to avoid traffic. When he stops her at a hospital in Stellenbosch after she gets sick, he explains that he was taking her "home" since it was cold where she lived in Cape Town and since cold weather was bad for her health. He explains: "I was taking her to a place where she could get better" (31). His mother dies and a parcel containing her ashes is given to him. As with Boyhood, farm in Michael K is a healthy place free from strife and worries.

On his way to Prince Albert, K hides in the fenced land of the veld away from the highway. The countryside is his new abode: "I could live here forever, he thought, or till I die. Nothing would happen, every day would be the same as the day before, there would be nothing to say" (46). He relishes the idea of "silence" away from the confusion of city life. Like the boy in Boyhood, K comes to appreciate the silence around him: "He climbed a hill and lay on his back listening to the silence, feeling the warmth of the sun soak into his bones" (46). Once he is in Prince Albert, he arrives at a farm for the Visagies, a deserted farmhouse with a garden and a broken pump. He thinks: "Now I am here... Or at least I am somewhere" (52). His sense of identity and belonging is felt in the farm, in this remote veld. This is where he begins to live on the land and its creatures of animals and birds. He distributes his mother's ashes over the earth and covers them with soil (59). In a sense, John's wish in Boyhood of being cremated and buried on the farm is fulfilled here, but for K's mother. Near the dam, he begins to cultivate the seeds and lives in the meantime on birds waiting for the produce to grow, which signals "the beginning of his life as a cultivator" (59). He becomes preoccupied with the idea of making his deserted land bloom, trying to forget the turbulent politics of his country: "He lived by the rising and setting of the sun, in a pocket outside time. Cape Town and the war and his passage to the farm slipped further and further into forgetfulness" (60). The farm is a site of peace away from war (64). Just as John has a bond with the farm, K here has "a cord of tenderness" with the earth of the farm that he does not want to end (66). K views a labor camp trampled by masses of people as "the stone-hard veld" (95). One night, he escapes this fenced camp into the open country and crosses fenced farms one after another. He lives in the countryside as an ecological spirit: "He thought of himself not as something heavy that left tracks behind it, but if anything as a speck upon the surface of an earth too deeply asleep to notice the scratch of ant-feet, the rasp of butterfly teeth, the tumbling of dust" (97).

Upon his return to the farmhouse, he relishes the place he knows well: "Every stone, every bush along the way he recognized" (98). Just like John who finds in the family farm a sanctuary, K "felt at home at the dam as he had ever felt in the house" (99). K encounters abundant time and is surrounded by silence. Time is "poured out upon him in such an unending stream" and there are "whole mornings he could spend lying on his belly over an ant-nest picking out the larvae one by one with a grass-stalk and putting them in his mouth" (102). The typical days on the farm give K a sense of assurance and stability, an ease reminiscent of that John the boy feels in Boyhood when he is in the family farm: "The days passed and nothing happened. The sun shone, the birds skipped from bush to bush, the great silence reverberated from horizon to horizon, and K's confidence came back" (106). Like the boy John who finds in the farm an adequate substitute for family relations, K thinks: "I would not know what to do with a child out here in the heart of the country" (104). The Jakkalsdrif labor camp is "earth stamped so tight by the passage of their footsteps day after day, baked so hard by the sun, that nothing would ever grow there again" (104). Throughout, K is an ecologically aware creature. When he weighs his options regarding joining the revolutionaries or tending his garden, he chooses the latter justifying to himself the very farm theme I am advocating in this argument: "because enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children" (109). He reasons to himself that what is left for him "is to live here quietly for the rest of my life, eating the food that my own labour has made the earth to yield. All that remains is to be a tender of the soil" (113). He is confirmed in his vocation as a gardener. He enjoys "the bounty of the earth" in eating his melons and pumpkins (118). When he is discovered by soldiers, he is skeletal, dizzy, and feverish. They damage his crops and blow up the farmhouse, thus acting against K's nature as a tender of the land (125).

The ending of the novel supports the farm theme I have discussed. The official story after K's arrest is that "he was picked up all by himself in the middle of nowhere in the Karoo ..." and feeding local guerrillas (129). When asked about his mother in the medical facility of the rehabilitation camp, he is true to his nature as a gardener. He says "She makes the plants grow" (130). He refuses food and insists that he is not in the war (138). The Kenilworth camp officer says to the doctor that K "was living by himself on that farm of his free as a bird, eating the bread of freedom, yet he arrived here looking like a skeleton" (146). He leaves a burning city to the safety of the countryside, but war follows...
him there. K seems to others absorbed in an agricultural fantasy of making a deserted land bloom and oblivious of the historical forces around him (158-159). He escapes the camp after three months and returns to Sea Point. He still carries a packet of seeds and is concerned that the seeds which fell down under the shade of a pine tree will not grow (177). He has thoughts about himself as a gardener, about not having different seeds or not being able to plant them as he wished and about the farm he left (182-183). His last dream is about giving water in a teaspoon to an old man and a "shaft deep into the earth" (184), and as a reaction to the destruction of the pump by soldiers. Life and survival, Coetzee legitimately implies, are in the earth.

Nadine Gordimer, in her 1984 review of the novel, sees it as a distorted and allegorical version of the political climate in South Africa of the novel’s times. Due to her claim that the novel’s social and political message is inadequate, Gordimer asserts that "The idea is the idea of gardening" and that Coetzee draws on "the strength of the earth to keep his deceptively passive protagonist and the passionate vitality of this book alive." In other words, Coetzee for Gordimer is presenting in the novel a possibility for survival beyond politics. In Boyhood, the farm is the site of serenity and inner peace. In Michael K, the farm is equally the site of peace from turbulent politics. Gordimer’s idea of gardening is tantamount to what I call the farm theme in this article. In visiting and revisiting the farm theme in both works, Coetzee is keeping intertextual links alive in his oeuvre and inviting us, as well, to read the larger ramifications of the ecological project he employs elsewhere in his fictions and which he centers on plants and animals.3

3. CONCLUSION: FARM DOUBLING

Despite the similar conception of the farm in both works as a site of freedom, resourcefulness, independence, and pleasure, the farm theme in each work is used toward a different end. In Michael K, the serenity, peace, and abundance of nature contrast with the tyranny, injustice, and destruction of war. In Boyhood, nature romantically emerges as an educator and a formative influence on a young boy. The fictionalized memoir relegates the political message of the novel, and reasonably so, due to genre issues and the historical context of the writing time. While Michael K was written during the heyday of apartheid years in South Africa, Boyhood was written when apartheid was officially over. The childhood years of John depicted in Boyhood are basically the 1950s when apartheid was in its early stages.

The idea of literary developments in Coetzee’s oeuvre is intriguing. In Elizabeth Costello, for example, Coetzee builds on his earlier book The Lives of Animals. Elizabeth Costello’s son, John, is an Assistant Professor of physics and astronomy at Appleton College where she is invited to lecture. Costello herself is an Australian writer. Elizabeth Costello expands the original two lectures on animals and literature and animals and philosophy that comprise The Lives of Animals. Both works are intertextually related, which should allow for further investigation into Coetzee’s postmodern project of writing interdependent texts and interrogating the relationship between life and fiction.

The relationship between Boyhood and Michael K is one of mirroring, which is a form of literary development. In both works, time and landscape emerge as powerful forces that form individuals. However, the flow of time in Michael K contrasts with the limitations of the pre-adolescence years of the memoir. The farms mirror and echo each other, and both texts are intertextual in this regard. Intertextuality, as Julia Kristeva conceives it, is a process whereby a text alludes to, revises, transforms, repeats, and quotes another text or other texts ("Intertextuality", Harmon 274). In Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, Kristeva elaborates her notion of intertextuality by arguing that texts are constructed from already existing discourse: A text is “a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text” whereby “several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another” (36). Kristeva famously puts it: "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (66). Such intertextuality revises our understanding of literary developments. The farm theme in both works, instead of being simply seen as an example of literary development, can be viewed as an intertextual link between the works, a matter of influence and textual sources. Both texts rewrite and reiterate the farm experiences of Coetzee’s childhood. Such an experience is recreated in the reader of the works, which is what I tried to convey to the readers of this essay. After all, the farm theme and the premise of an intertextual link between both works primarily emerge as a result of a reading process.

One alternative approach to the “Text” Roland Barthes presents is that of an open, plural space where languages circulate and where the Text answers to “an explosion, a dissemination” (1472). The text, Barthes reminds us, is "a tissue, a woven fabric" (1472). Using the same notion of intertextuality,
Barthes asserts that the text is "woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages..., antecedents or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony" (1473). In this light, we can think of *Michael K* and *Boyhood*, and as far as the farm theme is concerned, as one text or discourse that stretches to disseminate related ideas about farm life. When read against each other, both texts double and confess the farm theme as essentially autobiographical and apolitical.

Accepting Coetzee's autobiographical content of *Boyhood*, as a fictional autobiography or autobiographical fiction, also means granting an orientation toward selfhood in *Michael K*. If the farm theme in *Boyhood* is based on Coetzee's boyhood experiences and has some truth value, it also follows that the farm theme in *K* is influenced by the one in *Boyhood* and, in one way or another, is autobiographical. H. Porter Abbott argues that autobiographical writing should not be viewed as static, absolutely true, and finished: "the value of autobiography emerges when we read it instead as a kind of action, taking place at the moment of writing, responding to the complex play of our desires, always changing, always incomplete" (36). The farm theme in both works functions at the moment of reading as well. It gains more value in Coetzee's work when we read it by way of juxtaposing works against each other and interrogating their truth value.

According to the critic Derek Attridge, the truth value of *Boyhood* is "that of testimony" as a "documentary work" (155). If the truth behind *Boyhood* is not factual, it is an essential truth about South Africa of his childhood, youth, and adulthood. *Boyhood* and *Michael K* document not necessarily by way of giving facts but by capturing something essential about the writing subject in both works, namely an explicit interest in farm life as a site of protection and safety from the anxieties of growing up or the turmoil of politics.

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