

Reading, Deconstruction and Technological excess: some thoughts on J.M. Coetzee's "Hero and bad Mother in Epic, a poem"

Abstract: *This essay explores what refocusing critical attention on the question of technological invention might mean for an 'ethics of reading', a nascent approach to literary texts pioneered by scholars of both the novelist JM Coetzee and Jacques Derrida amongst others. What would an ethical response to a machine-generated poem be? In approaching this question, I turn to the matter of excess in Derrida; to the originally technical nature of excess or metaphysical breach – in reference, intention and conveyance of meaning – as constituted by writing, and attempt to think, as Derrida did, the "two registers" of invention, technological and literary, together. As question of techne became increasingly lost in the later Derrida, I advocate a return to the earlier work. To do so I apply to some little known early poetry by Coetzee that he wrote by feeding a simple computer programme a basic vocabulary.*

Keywords: *Coetzee, Computer Poetry, Technology, Poetry, Ethics, Deconstruction, Invention*

"By way of parenthetical introduction, I'd like to say that the question I am going to put to Jacques Derrida are double. I'll repeat it: *the* question I am going to put to Jacques Derrida *are* double"

This is how David Wills began his address to Derrida in a seminar in Sydney in 1999.¹ In a move faithful to the writings of the man he was interviewing, Wills was aware that that which is delivered in parenthesis, as marginalia, often prove important. He continued with "[n]ow I think you will have to be someone working on literature or something like that to be allowed such a formulation. You wouldn't be allowed such an ungrammatical statement in philosophy". *The/are* indicate a grammar that overflows metaphysical oppo-

¹ Jacques Derrida, "Affirmative Deconstruction, Inheritance, Technology," in: *Deconstruction Engaged: The Sydney Seminars*, 72 (Sydney: Power Publications, 2006).

sitions such as *either/and*: neither singular, nor plural but both and neither. Throughout Derrida this question of excess is apparent, but in this interview – via an introduction that explicitly raises the difference between literature and philosophy – it is connected to the question of technology, the idea of which, Derrida says in *Échographies*, is felt to “exceed[s] the ontological opposition between absence and presence”.²

This essay seeks to pick up these threads through the idea of the specifically *technological* determination of excess or exteriority in relation to literature through the marginalia of the South African novelist and Nobel Prize winner J.M. Coetzee’s hyper-technologized computer poetry and the concerns expressed about this mode of generation in his semi-autobiographical work *Youth*. By connecting Coetzee’s youthful work on computer poetry with his equally youthful logical investigations on “the moment in history when *either-or* [was] chosen and *and/or* discarded”,³ and by focusing on the bifurcation between the received idea of literary inventiveness with machine-like repetition and binary finitude, we will be able to extend the thinking of technological excess in relation to the question of literary reading.

In a passage from *Psyche: Invention of the Other*, Jacques Derrida sketches a relation that links metaphysics to both technoscience and humanism.⁴ In it, he outlines a dominant vision of inventiveness as being a strictly human property. By “dominant”, he indicates a mode of invention related to programmability, a mode of growth out a determinate set of factors that devolves with relative predictability. Within this set, he says, “man himself, and the human world, is defined by the human subjects aptitude for invention in the double sense of narrative fiction or fable and of technical or technoepistemic innovation”, and this he calls a “techno-epistemo-anthropocentric dimension” to invention.⁵ This bifurcation of the human subject from the objects of “his” innovation – history teaches us that “inventor” in the humanist sense is so often a “he” – reaches deeply into that which ties a metaphysical humanism to the history of its inventions, engines and devices, as well as works of fiction.

Earlier in the essay he had described a part of his intention as bringing the two *authorized* registers of invention – that of stories and devices – together such that we may see their “invisible harmony”.⁶ The interest of such

² Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler. *Échographies: de la television* (Paris: Galilée-INA, 1996), cited by David Wills in the interview Derrida, “Affirmative Deconstruction”, 33.

³ John M. Coetzee, *Youth* (London: Vintage, 2003), 160.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Psyche: Invention of the Other,” in: *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, 338-339 (London – New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁵ Derrida, “Psyche”, 339.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 322.

an effort, politically speaking, may be seen when we note the fact that both the author-as-writer of fiction and the inventor-scientist of mechanisms are implicated, albeit differently, in a human-centred tradition that sees them as autonomous agents acting out of the vacuum of their own “genius”.

The awarding of singular inventiveness as a property to such a subject is bound to seem problematic to the contemporary critical scene. Moreover the products of the mechanist-inventor, the predictability and repeatability of his devices, are customarily viewed as a direct threat to the metaphysically centred subject (hence, perhaps the origin of the Frankenstein myths so ubiquitous today). In other words, the metaphysical underpinnings of the humanist author/subject are the same as those that establish the machine as a threat to it. This is a source of technophobia, in which the regularity of machines represents a figurative death of the author, against the singularly creative life of the human mind. The danger then is this: emphasis on an ethics of/for singularity and inventiveness runs the risk of becoming an analogue to a problematic humanism (and, by extension, the form of reading directed toward such an ethics may prove to appear like a formalism based essentially on the intuition and sensitivity of a specially endowed reader). Hence, we surmise, Derrida’s concern to align this anthropocentric version of inventiveness with a “dominant” notion of the concept, and his writing to “reinvent invention”, a project in which deconstruction must prepare for the “to come” – the excess, alterity and indetermination of futurity – in invention beyond calculability.

It is at this point that Richard Beardsworth, following Bernard Stiegler,⁷ differs slightly from the account offered in “Psyche”. In this argument, the idea that deconstruction must prepare for invention beyond calculability continues the bifurcation insofar as the excess “to come” remains distinct to the idea of the technical. As such, as Beardsworth particularly makes clear, something of the radical character of the earlier Derrida, in which the question of *techné* in the shape of (*arche*) writing *qua* technical prosthesis was more explicitly in focus, has been lost in the “theological” turn of the later work. For Stiegler, being human *is* being technical via the logic of supplementarity and original synthesis, and this fact is itself a source of the indeterminacy (the beyond of calculability) out of which “invention” is to arrive. As Beardsworth puts it, the incalculable must be “worked through the calculable”.⁸

⁷ Richard Beardsworth, “Thinking Technicity,” in: *Jacques Derrida, Vol. III*, eds. Christopher Norris and David Rodden (London: Sage, 2003); Bernard Stiegler, “Derrida and technology: fidelity at the limits of deconstruction and the prosthesis of faith,” in: *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities*, ed. Tom Cohen. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). See also Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time. Volume 1: The Fault of Epitheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins, Vol I (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁸ Beardsworth, “Thinking Technicity”, 48.

Now, the strategic question here is whether the call to re-focus on the specific question of *techne* offers any grounds on which to base an objection to the “ethics of reading” approach that has been exemplified in recent years by the work of Derek Attridge⁹ amongst others. If it is true to say that this approach draws much from deconstruction’s interest in Levinas in particular, and the later “theological” turn in Derrida in general, it seems at least plausible that a challenge of sorts might be mounted at this juncture.

One might begin by questioning how Levinas would deal with non-human forms of otherness like animals, cyborgs, or the materiality of books themselves, and whether this has any consequences for an ethics of reading. At the extreme, one might wish to enquire whether the reliance on an anthropocentric destabilization of ontology in Levinas leaves intact a conception of subjectivity that forces a literary reading based on an ethics of/for singularity and inventiveness to respond to the text as, in a Kantian vein, effectively, an honorary human being with both value and dignity, and being “unethical” entailing treating someone as means rather than an end.¹⁰ This would require, amongst other things, a very careful sifting between what in the theoretical matrix is specifically Derridian, and what comes from Levinas (if such thematization is possible). This essay can do nothing so ambitious, although it begins work in this area by starting to think how the challenge of *techne* may be absorbed and, in turn, encourage new developments in the “ethics of reading”.

Before resuming a deconstructive register, a number of detours will be useful. Firstly, by establishing more clearly the position of humanist conceptions of authorship and reading in relation to technology, we can indicate the relevance of computer poetry to the debate; secondly, that this relation of the technological non-human and the human subject continues to involve questions of morality or fairness, a notion that can be extended via some work in the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), and thirdly that this social-scientific enclave offers the possibility of further engagement with Derrida’s call to think the two registers of invention together.

⁹ In particular, Derek Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee & the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004); *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁰ Richard Rorty offered a critique of Umberto Eco in similar terms – a critique of Eco that is also applicable, he claimed, to deconstructive reading. Rorty in fact distinguished between De Man and Derrida: De Man, he claimed “offered aid and comfort to the unfortunate idea that there is something useful called “the ‘deconstructive method’” and, by “taking philosophy too seriously”, attempted to divide language up into “the kind called ‘literary’ and some other kind.” See Richard Rorty, “The Pragmatist’s Progress: Umberto Eco on Interpretation,” in: Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 141 (London: Penguin, 1999).

In *Youth*, the young Coetzee, creator of the computer poems, as narrated by the older Coetzee (if it fair to draw these kinds of correspondences), seems aware of the way his efforts feature in a history of authorship that aligns truth and authenticity with an anthropocentric imperative against the anti-human consequences of technological inventions. If he were not aware of this history, it is unlikely he would display what he experiences as a moral dilemma in the form of a question of fairness to other authors who do not have access to the UNIVAC machine, and nor would he speculate on whether “the invention of computers has changed the nature of art, by making the condition of the author’s [human] heart irrelevant.”¹¹ Certainly, being accused of being the “barbarian” who wishes to oppose the genius of Shakespeare with a computer should have alerted the young man to the stakes. What he appears unaware of is the metaphysics which connects this imperative to technophobia and which he is already at work on, on the same page of *Youth*, in his historical excavations of the either/or binary on which his computer – the mediator *and* (not *or*) generator of his poems – is based.¹² This is a question to which we shall have occasion to return. For now, we may note the bifurcation between the human and the technical; the human linked to authorship/authenticity, inventiveness, truth, life and *logos*, the technical to that which diminishes the human, to the mundane and earthly, to death.

These two possibilities are re-coded by Derrida in terms of the difference between iterability and repeatability. Iterability – repeating with room for affirmation and hence life: Repeatability – the eternal (re)production of the same, and hence death.¹³ This division is as common as it is old, recurring – always differently expressed – in the nostalgia of Heidegger’s “The question concerning technology” and Donna Haraway’s radically affirmative re-thinking of non-human otherness in the form of both cyborgs.¹⁴ The desire for the *logos* is also a desire for the prelapsarian, for the experience of plenitude and presence beyond the reach of the technological exterior, understood as the product of necessity after the Fall. But, in an example which makes sense of Derrida’s return to questions of interdiction and sin in his discussion of original supplementarity

¹¹ Coetzee, *Youth*, 161, insertion added.

¹² *Ibid.*, 161.

¹³ See for instance Derrida’s response to Wills’s question in the interview “Affirmative Deconstruction”, 73. The way this simple topography is always questioned in Derrida, by the logic of iterability itself (which demands repeatability), is the subject of a later section.

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, “The question concerning technology,” in: *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1996); Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s,” in: *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990).

in Rousseau,¹⁵ the first example of technical artefact in Genesis are the skins given by God to mankind to hide his nakedness, thus *restoring* the moral order. They are both products of, in the sense of necessitated by the Fall, and the mode of its arrest.¹⁶ This indicates the unsatisfactory simplicity of describing *techne* as merely/always a diminishment of man, including his moral capacity.

A further example, from STS, adds to the intuition that questions of morality or ethics need not be lost in a return to *techne*, in general terms of excess/exteriority or, as in Stiegler, in terms of the differentiation of *epochs* tied to specifically empirical instances of technology, from writing to the Internet. Bruno Latour's work on Actor-Network Theory, which posits a radical symmetry between human and non-human, proposes a model which distributes moral responsibility (indeed all agency) between humans and things, rather than seeing things as always at work in either acting unilaterally upon us – a technophobic fear –, or, what is the same thing, taking away human ability to make moral decisions ourselves by “nannying” us.

One of his examples is a “sleeping policeman” on the road running through a campus.¹⁷ The speed bump forces the driver to slow down for fear of wrecking her car's undercarriage – an act of pragmatic self-preservation. But, as ethical creatures, she should not need such technological compulsion and should rather have acted purely voluntarily in terms of decision and responsibility for not hurting others. In this view human ability to act ethically is diminished by the technology, demonstrating the traditional reliance of the vocabulary of ethics and responsibility on conscious and autonomous human action.¹⁸ Instead, for Latour, moral responsibility is partly delegated to things, and we share this with them as ethico-technological prosthesis.

¹⁵ See the chapter “... That Dangerous Supplement ...,” in: Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore – London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976). The argument that this original supplementarity is originally technical will be strengthened below.

¹⁶ I owe this example to Jonathan Sawday's discussion of Milton, although I take responsibility for connecting it to Derrida's Rousseau – see Jonathan Sawday, *Engines of the Imagination: Renaissance culture and the rise of the machine* (London: Routledge, 2007).

¹⁷ See Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: essays on the reality of science studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 186-87. For a complete introduction to Actor-Network Theory, see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

¹⁸ There is of course a huge leap between the term “ethics” as used here, which approached more the sense of “morality” than, for instance, we find in Levinas. The point though is the reliance on human consciousness, an argument which surely applies to Levinas equally.

If with “prosthesis” the language of the previous paragraph slid toward a lexis of supplementarity again, this was not – entirely – by chance, as we are still seeking communication between the registers of invention. A further example from STS brings us closer to our theme in terms of all language use – whether directly out of an author’s mouth or re-routed through a machine – as being subject to the same forces of communication and dissemination, the possibility of loss and perversion, and iterability.

In Weibe Bijker’s work on the social construction of technology, he explores what he refers to as the “interpretative flexibility” of artefacts.¹⁹ By this he means that there is no inner dynamic or techno-logical essence which guarantees the way in which the artefact will be understood and activated by its users. Like language, it is subject to all kinds of hits and misses along the way. He uses the example of the bicycle, an object which we tend to see as a relatively stable object that has been, according to immutable physical laws, tending toward its present perfection – inventors/designers have simply been the midwives to this inner dynamic that reveals itself consistently.

What Bijker shows however is that there is nothing intrinsic to the present day design of the safety bicycle that makes it superior to yesterday’s high wheelers, but rather the way the design has been tailored by the demands (and misunderstandings) of the users, distributors and producers of the product. Principally, if the demand for safety and comfort had not (presently) won out over speed and masculine pleasure in danger, we might still be riding Penny Farthings. In a sense then, the bicycle (and all technological artefacts insofar as they escape both the intention of their inventors/authors and do not have a logic internal to them which assures the mode of their arrival or use), is like the metaphor of the postcard in Derrida or the plethora of technological mediation devices uncovered in “Ulysses Gramophone”.²⁰

Technological objects, this example indicates, have something akin to life and are not simply a neutral death of continual repeatability. In principle this applies equally to the products of the pen, the computer, and to each of these devices themselves. This must always be a possibility for technology if it is to escape the strictures of technophobia and metaphysical humanism described earlier. Expressed in Derrida’s words, despite the immanent danger of repeatability, affirmation is always also associated with technology: if it were not, “the discourse of affirmation would be a traditional discourse on some

¹⁹ Weibe Bijker, *Of Bicycles, Bakelites, and Bulbs: Toward a Theory of Sociotechnical Change* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997).

²⁰ See Jacques Derrida, “Ulysses Gramophone: here say yes in Joyce,” in: *Acts of Literature*, eds. Derek Attridge (London – New York: Routledge, 1992).

spiritual ontology, a spirit foreign to the body, to the technique [...], and that is exactly what I would like to avoid".²¹

If it is becoming clearer that the mediation of technics might threaten singularity *and* that there is also no singularity without technics in the sense that exteriority, inventiveness and the productive indeterminacy of absolute futurity are (partly) already technical, we should not be surprised at the young Coetzee's fascination with the moment when the history of logic decided upon either/*or* as opposed to either/*and*. Such oppositions occur at the moment of metaphysical institution which structure humanist reading and authorship such that the young Coetzee's dabbling in computer poetry may be read as an extension of his logical investigations and a plumbing of the depths of the traditional author and his death by technological repetition.

It is possible to argue that what troubles the focalizing consciousness of *Youth* at this point, and which underlies his concerns regarding fairness and authenticity, is the intuition that the truth of writing (poetry in this case), does not lie entirely exterior to the fact of writing itself and "in the human heart" alone. It is necessary here to introduce the question of writing and truth in order to understand how life "itself" is composed with death as *techne* and singularity with repetition.

Continental thought has been for some time concerned with "getting behind" the opposition logic central to western metaphysics.²² In Levinas, this effort takes the form of the ethical overturning of ontological priority, bringing with it the baggage of homization.²³ In Derrida, the scene is the excavation of "undecidables" which structure and precede (if not in a simply linear way) the possibility of opposition. Crucial in this, particularly in the earlier work, is the idea of writing as the disavowed exterior or excess that constantly interrupts the consistency of the interior *logos*, constituting a scar that the apparently seamless history of philosophy has been concerned to cover up. The argument is well rehearsed, and cuts through many of texts from the 1960's and 70's.²⁴

In these texts writing is peculiarly poised as both a privileged entry point into the generalized dependency of metaphysics on that which it also disavows (the outside of metaphysics), as well as being merely one possible example of a plethora other forms of exteriority. What is important to hold in mind here is the foregrounded *technicity* of writing-as-exteriority, a sense which by degrees is lost as the idea of excess begins to span many other lo-

²¹ Derrida, "Affirmative Deconstruction", 78.

²² Beardsworth, "Thinking Technicity", 42.

²³ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁴ For instance, in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978); Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981); and Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

cales in the later work (or so Beardsworth and Stiegler argue). In Stiegler, the crucial moment occurs in Derrida's early writing on Husserl, while Beardsworth focuses on the instituting moment of metaphysics in Plato's *Meno*. They both find that Derrida's work on the trace and arche-writing (as the general possibility of language as such, in empirical writing or speech) introduce a moment of irreducible technicity behind transcendental thinking.²⁵ This allows for the claim that writing is "constitutive of truth as such" and constitutes a technical prosthesis in the processes of truth making/remembling,²⁶ which Beardsworth calls external "supports".²⁷ In Stiegler's discussion of roughly the same principle, he describes Derrida's work on Husserl as locating "tertiary memory" alongside the primary and secondary and that, external and technical, works, like writing in a supplementary fashion.²⁸

The notion that these "external memory drives", "supports" or "prostheses" work according to the logic of the supplement is arresting. It means, in Stiegler's words, that "documentarity is originary."²⁹ The relation of life to supplementarity is powerfully implied in Derrida's discussion of Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*. The prosthesis can be said to be already lodged in the proper body. Moreover, if supplementarity is original and originally technical and, since all life is supplementary, it is also conditional upon technicity.³⁰ And, as Beardsworth also argues, in our increasingly technologized world this has not changed but is becoming more and more obvious.³¹ To translate this into the terms of our discussion of technology versus the life of the humanist author/subject, we see that technics cannot simply be opposed to thought "*without repeating the logic informing the myth of recollection*": In other words, the autonomous discovery by an agent of a pure knowledge (that was already there) through the offices of genius.³²

If the "the living trace is always compounded with the dead", and "the singular is always already composed with that which reduces it", we are

²⁵ Beardsworth, "Thinking Technicity", 43; Steigler, "Derrida and technology", 244.

²⁶ Recalling that the *Meno* is a discourse on memory in which it is argued that souls are immortal and hence know everything and that, therefore, to learn something new is in truth a process of our souls remembering.

²⁷ Beardsworth, "Thinking Technicity", 43- 44.

²⁸ Stiegler, "Derrida and Technology", 245. Stiegler in fact claims that although Derrida identifies this dependency, he does not explicitly identify it as tertiary – this part of the argument is therefore properly Stiegler's.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 248.

³⁰ Beardsworth, "Thinking Technicity", 44-45.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

³² *Ibid.*, 45, emphasis in original.

being asked to hold a number of competing promises at once.³³ We can see the always-possible affirmation of technology, its ability to exceed its own repetitiveness, but should also recognize that this can only be expressed in its own programmability. Technology, like writing, remains a *pharmakon*, a supplementarity that sets in motion an undecidable oscillation between poison and cure.³⁴ Take for example the photograph as a form of technical inscription: a picture in a sense stores memories and jogs our gift for recollection about times past when we look at it. It supports and assists our memory faculties. At the same time however, the photograph obviates the need to remember at all insofar as it stores our memories for us. The transaction between our internal memories and the external one of the photograph recalls the STS example cited earlier regarding the “sleeping policeman” on the campus. But is perhaps a sense of the pharmacological nature of such delegation of responsibility with non-humans that Derrida would add to Latour’s story. And, if one takes rigorously into account the compoundedness of life and *techne*, this residual danger should not be ascribed to simple technophobia.

Before progressing onto the long delayed discussion of Coetzee’s computer poetry, it is important to state our problem quite clearly: if writing is constitutive of truth, and being human dependent upon a relation to original technicity, why can the moral or ethical dimensions of such things as “truth” and “human” not themselves be technologically supplemented by non-human things as ethical prosthesis? Even our ethical impulses exhibit a lack, that which is filled by sharing the action of ethical responsibility with a thing but, as supplements, we are no longer sure whether that lack lay interior to ourselves, or is entailed in the action of supplementation itself. It is not a question of opposition, or that the ability to act ethically is taken away in the process of technological supplementation. Insofar as this is *always* already the case, the life and autonomy which constitutes the ethical subject is already technologically mediated even if there is no obvious external agent – it travels right down, we might say, into the depths of mind and biology.³⁵

Thus far, we have tried to show a meeting at the entrance of metaphysics between the young Coetzee’s interest in the founding of binary logic, and his discomfort with – and efforts to justify – his own experiments in computer poetry in *Youth*. This is the importance of the question of *either/and*: as life is

³³ Stiegler, “Derrida and Technology”, 245, 250.

³⁴ See the essay “Plato’s Pharmacy” in Derrida’s *Dissemination*.

³⁵ Beardsworth’s criticism of Stiegler is useful here to the extent which he points out that Stiegler loses the radicalism of his own argument by aligning the exterior entirely with technicity: “by developing technicity exclusively in terms of technical objects”, human life is effectively achieved by the suspension of biological, removing biological life *per se* from “the structure of originary technicity”. See Beardsworth, “Thinking Technicity”, 49-50.

composed with death, flux and repeatability in iteration, so computer poetry is not *either* barbarous and degenerate *or* authentic and worthy as it can be both (or neither). The question that remains – and this is the reason we have tried to keep the ethical in play throughout our discussion of *techne* – is how to engage ethically with a literary text that is *so* mediated and so obviously repeatable, a product of an absolutely binary machine? How do we respond to the singularity and inventiveness of such a text, stripped of autobiographical traits,³⁶ when its singularity and inventiveness lie exactly in the fact of its repeatability or programmatic deployment of binary statements that are *in principle* possible to critically reconstruct in their entirety? A part of the answer, clearly, lies in the logic of supplementary traced, that singularity and inventiveness (the human subject) are composed with repeatability (*techne*, the machine) from the beginning: As Derrida writes, “[i]nvention *begins* by being susceptible to repetition, exploitation, reinscription”.³⁷ Arche-writing (in trace and supplement) introduces *techne* into all acts of language. This means that, in principle, all inventive or creative writing involves a relation to some repeatability, some machine-like aspect of “itself”.

The idea can be developed by revisiting the matter of truth and writing which we earlier noted might structure some of the concerns over computer poetry in *Youth*. This intuition seems borne out in David Attwell’s interview with Coetzee in which the question of computer poetry in the novelists’ early career is raised.³⁸ Discussing a question of truth and autobiography, Coetzee argues that autobiographical writing is not necessarily different from any other kind of writing insofar “[t]ruth is something that comes in the process of writing, or comes from the process of writing”.³⁹ He describes this truth-writing in terms of a movement into futurity, recalling the argument proposed earlier in this paper that the “to come”, as excess and alterity, is always composed with *techne* and programmability. Coetzee then describes this as an

“interplay between the push into the future that takes you to the blank page in the first place, and a resistance. Part of that resistance is psychic, but part is also an *automatism* built into language”⁴⁰

³⁶ See autobiographical trait and singularity ““This Strange Institution Called Literature”: An interview with Jacques Derrida” in: *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London – New York Routledge, 1992).

³⁷ Derrida, “Psyche”, 316 emphasis in original.

³⁸ John M. Coetzee, “Beckett,” an interview with David Attwell, in: *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

³⁹ Coetzee, “Beckett”, 18.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

Auto: “self” acting, regenerating and repeating. As Coetzee continues, this property of language is “the tendency of words to call up other words, to fall into patterns that keep propagating themselves”.⁴¹ This integration of machine and creative writing evokes Derrida’s effort to think the two registers of invention together, and who wrote in the context of Ponge’s poem “Fable”, that for the poem to be readable as such it needs to exist relative to institutionality and repetition: The poem is an invention only insofar as it “puts out a machine”.⁴² The thought reoccurs in sub-chapter “The Exorbitant Question of Method” in *Of Grammatology*:

“the writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them only by letting himself, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system”⁴³

In a sense, *writing writes us* and given that it is the machine aspect of writing, writing as *techne*, that is proper to all language, all writing is computer writing even if it also always overflows this designation.

If this serves to break down the distinction between the computer writing and traditional modes of creative composition and to indicate that reading it should entail the same ethical considerations, it also does no justice to the singular *experience* of reading a poem like “Hero and Bad Mother in Epic, a poem”, a piece Coetzee says in the same interview came out of his work with computers.⁴⁴ It is of course possible to read the poem with the knowledge of its generation bracketed out. Take for instance the first stanza:

dusk seeps up the entrail of the seaborn nude
the vegetable sleeps in its circle
the bedroom drowns
the casino is swathed in a tidal melancholia
the nude awaits the hero

⁴¹ Ibid., 18. Again, in “A Note on Writing”, Coetzee broaches the issue in terms of the passive voice: on the sentence “A is written by X”, he wonders whether it might be seen as a “linguistic metaphor for a particular kind of writing, writing in stereotyped forms and genres and characterological systems and narrative orderings, *where the machine runs the operator*”. See John M. Coetzee, “A Note on Writing,” in: *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell, 95 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁴² Derrida, “Psyche”, 334.

⁴³ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158.

⁴⁴ Coetzee, “A Note”, 22; John M. Coetzee, “Hero and Bad Mother in Epic,” *Staffrider* March (1978): 36.

The passage contains recognizable poetic imagery and device, for instance those created by the transferred epithets in lines three and four. The correspondences between the lexicon also invite a referential reading strategy focusing on the psycho-sexual imagery; water, dusk, sleep, the meeting of (presumably) masculine hero and seaborne nude. The sleeping vegetable conjures images of a phallus prior to arousal, or the potential for fertility already pregnant in the womb. This way of reading might in principle be extended to the whole poem, although this would be extremely trying.

What this raises, of course, is the possibility of reading all poems as though they were computer generated as well, insofar as their symmetry is allowed to stand. But from the point of view of the experience, this strategy becomes increasingly difficult as we read further into the poem and the relentless combining and recombining of a limited vocabulary forces itself further and further into view. We are no longer encouraged to seek meaning in reference, and the temptation becomes to compile lists of the way the words combine, and from there the various possibilities of how they might recombine in a long, but in principle finite reconstruction of the programme which generated the poem.

Reading Coetzee's notes on the composition of another computer poem published in *The Lion & the Impala*, we can see this finitude at work. In fact, Coetzee gives us quite a detailed look into the mechanics of the writing; the choosing of vocabularies; the structure of the poem, and the final selection of the preferred piece from a very long list of possible poems.⁴⁵ Some of the referential possibility of the computer poem or its "intention" is decided prior to the dissemination of the final product by the selection of an "area of life" out of which the vocabularies are selected.⁴⁶ In the case of *The Lion & the Impala* example the area is personal estrangement, in "Hero and Bad Mother" it might be sexual encounter or even more vaguely but in a sense no different, simply the selection of poetic sounding words out of another author's writing, like Pablo Neruda as noted in *Youth*.⁴⁷ However, the majority of the experience, in meaning and feeling, does not come from the knowledge of this destination encoded by the editor into the vocabularies before the intervention of the computer programme, but from the arrival of the product itself in the act

⁴⁵ John M. Coetzee, "Computer Poem," *The Lion & the Impala* (no further publication details available). On selection of diction or lexis, Harold Zapf notes that even if one does not want to deal with the intention of an author, one always has to start with the premise that there is an observer, something or someone, like a poet, artist, or computer who performs linguistic selections for whatever (sub)conscious or (in)dependent readings, see Harold Zapf, "Structure and Event in Poetry: "12" by Charles Bernstein," in: *Ideas of Order in Contemporary American Poetry*. Eds. Diana van Finck and Oliver Scheidung, 40 (Berlin: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007).

⁴⁶ Coetzee, "Computer Poem", 13.

⁴⁷ Coetzee, *Youth*, 160.

of reading. Once again, this differs only by degrees, not in principle, from “ordinary” writing. Even so, computer poetry takes the advice of T.S. Eliot that the young Coetzee wrote in his dairy seriously; “[p]oetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion”, insofar as “intention” and control of external reference is radically removed from “author/editor” even if some of it might be reinstalled at the final selection stage.⁴⁸ Citing just the first stanza indicates that any instance of language use is merely one possible citation, in a unique combination, of an extremely large vocabulary, containing all possible combinations in all language, which to reconstruct is in practice impossible if, once again, not so in principle.

It seems then that we should suspend this principled symmetry – that which first offered the possibility of extending an “ethics of reading” to computer poetry – in order to offer precisely that: a reading which responds to its inventiveness and singularity, which lies exactly in its mode of composition and its sense of tireless recombination and repetition; in fact, exactly to the principle of its programme (literally, and in the sense of prefaced futurity as in Derrida). Would this mean reconstituting the binary sequence that gave birth to this particular citation, in a sense writing a biography of its *techne*? Would this only be possible through the use of another computer programme, perhaps one similar to those developed by Coetzee in his “stylostatistical” analysis of Beckett?⁴⁹ Or would this merely become a “doubling commentary”, as opposed to counter-signature?⁵⁰ An aporia: responding responsively to the inventiveness of the machine put out by the poem seems to be exactly to repeat it and reduce it to its constitutive procedures. If this essay has raised the notion that ethics does not or should not necessarily take a back seat when the problem of technics is foregrounded, it has not uncovered exactly what this might entail when it comes to reading. Perhaps nothing. In which case the whole oscillation between ethical extension and the symmetrical treatment of all genres of poetry begins. Again.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁹ It is no surprise that Coetzee’s interest in Beckett and his computer poetry and mathematics coincide: the concluding comments of his 1969 PhD on Beckett argue that Beckett was attempting to understand “all the possible permutations which the nouns *door, window, fire, and bed* can undergo” (quoted in David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 9. See also John M. Coetzee, “Samuel Beckett’s *Lessness*: An Exercise in Decomposition,” *Computers and the Humanities* 7, no 3 (1973): 195, in which Coetzee expresses an interest in Beckett’s *Lessness* because of its use of a mathematical or “compositional procedure which would allow it to extend in length almost infinitely without drawing on new items”.

⁵⁰ See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158.

In this paper we at first concentrated on the humanist myth of the author/subject, and opposed this to technics and technophobia. We then attempted to show how the “metaphysics of presence” which attend this opposition are always compounded with that which reduces it, in this case *techne* itself. At the same time, we were concerned to maintain a dialogue between this return to *techne* with the ethical vocabulary that is more obviously present in the later Derrida and is central to “the ethics of reading” approach. We have argued that in the same way life (the metaphysics of the humanist subject, etc.) is always composed with *techne* (death, repeatability) so it might be possible for the ethical vocabulary to be partially stripped of its anthropocentric bias and extended to things, although this process will always be attended by danger. In drawing the question of ethical reading into that of *techne* with the example of “Hero and Bad Mother”, we arrived at a possibly intractable relation between the poem whose inventiveness lies exactly in its programmability, where responding responsively rather than entailing a felicitous infidelity to the original “repetition” seems to involve, plainly, repeating it.

Perhaps we could at least conclude with this positive proposition: Possibly, what is disturbing about computer poetry is the way it reveals that something of all writing is automatic, self-generative, and refuses comfortable reference. Reading it discloses the primary importance of technical programmability to life, singularity and inventiveness which are together bound in originary synthesis. Shakespeare was a machine, *and* this is what made him a human genius. This may be as horrible for the humanist reader of poetry as it for the philosopher concerned to preserve the purity of the *logos*. Can this help avoid the objection that in reading ethically one is only responding to the human or autobiographical dimension and are treating texts as “honorary human beings”? Perhaps, and the answer might run along the lines of “so what?”, provided human beings are symmetrically treated as honorary texts, or machines.

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Резиме

Рубен Месиц

**Читање, деконструкција и технолошки екцес:
размишљања о Џ. М. Куцијевом делу „Херој и лоша
мајка у спеву, песма”**

Кључне речи: *Куци, рачунарска поезија, технологија, поезија, етика, деконструкција, изумевање*

Овај рад истражује шта преусмерење критичке пажње на питање технолошког изумевања може значити за ”етику читања”, нови приступ књижевним текстовима који су, између осталих, увели писац Џон Максвел Куци и Жак Дерида. Какав би етички одговор требало дати на песму коју је произвела машина? Приступајући овом питању, осврнућу се на питање *екцеса* код Дерида, на првобитно техничку природу *екцеса* или метафизичког продора и повреде – у референци, намери и преношењу значења – сачињеног од писања и покушаја да се заједно смисле, како је то Дерида радио, ”два регистра” изумевања: технолошки и књижевни. Како се питање *techné* све више губи у позном Дерида, вратићу се његовим ранијим делима. У том циљу, бавићу се мало познатом раном Куцијевом поезијом, коју је написао уносећи основни речник у једноставни рачунарски програм.