In *Here and Now* (2013), J.M. Coetzee asks “how seriously we should take Jorge Luis Borges” (135). The substance of his question (whether Borges is indulging in a *jeu d’esprit* or proposing an idea with “real philosophical depth”) for my present purposes interests me less than the fact of Coetzee’s interrogation of a Borges story on these terms. It echoes the sort of questions I want to ask about Coetzee: when are the ideas, beliefs, and opinions expressed in a particular subset of his published works to be taken “seriously”? What, if anything, gives us a warrant to believe that the opinions a Coetzee character or persona expresses are shared by the author?

This is the kind of question I would normally be reluctant to pose, having been thoroughly schooled in critical admonitions against the Intentional Fallacy, but my interest is aroused by three recent Coetzee books that seem to invite such interrogation. These three books, which fall outside the context of the academic essay proper, have included extensive expressions of opinion. Two of them, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), contain lectures and essays within their fictional frames, and the third, *Here and Now*, presents itself as a published sequence of letters between Coetzee and the American author Paul Auster. The wide-ranging discussions in these books cover topics from political philosophy, language, animal rights, and paedophilia to music, food, and sport. There is substantial continuity in the opinions expressed, and the characters or personae expressing these views also have a good deal in common: they are all highly intelligent novelists educated in the western tradition, sceptical, left-leaning though by no means consistently or conventionally so, and all are approaching old age. Nevertheless, these opinions are expressed in three explicitly different personae, and from three different rhetorical positions. What I find most tantalizing is that with each of these three books these personae are progressively more closely identifiable with Coetzee himself. Elizabeth Costello, in the book of that name, is a character who crosses gender and national boundaries from her creator. JC in *Diary of a Bad Year* shares at least some biographical circumstances with Coetzee—land of birth, gender, initials, and occupation, for example. Then, in *Here and Now*, we are
presented with what at least purports transparently to be the author J.M. Coetzee’s own voice in correspondence with Auster. How do I, as a reader and a critic, negotiate this progression? Just how much licence does the apparently closer correspondence between author and writing persona give me to believe that I know what Coetzee really thinks or believes?

Despite their different shades of meaning, in this essay I will sometimes use the terms ‘opinion’ and ‘belief’ more or less interchangeably. This is partly driven by their use in the two books Elizabeth Costello and Diary of a Bad Year, the former of which is largely concerned with belief—what is both felt and thought to be true—and the latter with opinion, which under some circumstances can have less favourable connotations, lacking the aura of heartfelt conviction which in some senses redeems belief, and having its unpleasant echo in the word “opinionated” and its cognates—“Opinâître, say the French, obdurate, stony, mulish,” says JC in Diary (101). JC refers to the distinction his publisher draws between the German words Ansichten (usually denoting convictions of a putatively ‘factual’ kind) and Meinungen (personal opinions, more closely related to beliefs): “The Meinungen I held yesterday are not necessarily the Meinungen I hold today. Ansichten, by contrast, are firmer” (102). According to my German dictionary, both words can mean “view” or “opinion,” but only Meinung includes “belief” in its definition. This contributes to the imprecision, or nuance, or potential for alternate perspectives within the latter term. Even though the shadow of the Christian credo colours the word, and this shadow is surely implicit in the word “belief” as it appears in Elizabeth Costello, pervaded as that novel is by a wary engagement with Christian concepts such as caritas and salvation of the soul, beliefs can change, and are more likely to vary from community to community, from faith to faith. JC in Diary of a Bad Year hopes his German publisher will use the title Feste Ansichten, “Strong Opinions”, for the book to which JC has been invited to contribute. However, the essays he writes are undermined, almost literally, by two other narratives running in parallel along the pages underneath. The first of these is a first-person narrative by the writer of these essays, and the second is an account by a young woman, Anya, whom the writer encounters, is smitten by, and whom he employs to help him type and edit his essays.

In one of the essays that occupy the upper part of each page, “On Harold Pinter,” JC writes of Pinter’s bravery in criticizing Tony Blair:

When one speaks in one’s own person—that is, not through one’s art—to denounce some politician or other, using the rhetoric of the agora, one embarks on a contest which one is likely to lose because it takes
place on a ground where one’s opponent is far more practised and adept.  
(Diary 107)

Let us, for the moment, take speaking “in one’s own person” in the straightforward sense that JC offers here, allowing it for now to mean “not through one’s art.” According to such a definition, Coetzee is of course not actually speaking ‘in his own person’ here. Although there are many similarities between Coetzee and his character, known to Anya as Señor C, and whom I am calling, for convenience, JC, there are many formal signs within the book that mark it as fiction. On the other hand, although the book is an instance of art, there are some occasions when voice is given to opinions that can plausibly be attributed to the author himself as well as to the fictional alter ego.

In one of his short essays in the second part of the book, the “Second Diary,” JC relates giving a reading from his novel Waiting for the Barbarians at the National Library of Australia, prefaced by an introduction in which he compared the anti-terror legislation about to be introduced by the Howard Government to laws in apartheid South Africa. His speech, he says, was quoted, inaccurately, in The Australian newspaper and provoked an irascible letter to the editor a couple of days later: “In the rough-and-tumble world of politics, a letter like this counts as no more than a pinprick, yet me it numbs like a blow from a lead cosh” (140). In fact, on 24 October 2005, a report did indeed appear in The Australian announcing that, at a reading at the National Library of Australia on the previous day, Coetzee had “launched a thinly veiled attack on Australia’s proposed anti-terrorism laws, likening the Howard Government’s controversial reforms to human rights abuses under apartheid in his native South Africa” (Price). The wording of the article quoted in the novel matches that of the article published by The Australian, and a letter such as the one JC describes appeared on the following day. Can we therefore be excused if we conflate the character with the author? And, to what extent? Also, if we do, where does such conflation lead us? The path may well be a thorny one, but if we are alert to its perils it may take us to a new vantage point without risk of substantial injury. Chris Danta, for one, in his introduction to the anthology Strong Opinions: JM Coetzee and the Authority of Contemporary Fiction, argues that JC can, at least to some extent, “be read as a lyrical abbreviation of JMC,” and proceeds from that position—which he concedes some might think “wrongheaded”—to build an argument about Coetzee’s commitment in his fiction to “writing without authority” (xiii):

As I see it, Elizabeth Costello is an experiment in incarnation through which Coetzee expresses the Janus face of literary authority: the sense in which the writer is paradoxically turned outward towards his or her
community, but also inward towards the higher authority of his or her own conscience. (xv)

*Here and Now* was published two years after Danta’s preface. The book is formally nonfiction, but very little about it claims to be written with ‘absolute’ authority—it contains much that is clearly posed for the sake of argument, or discussion, and many of the ideas floated would not stand up to rigorous interrogation. The last sentence of the last letter from Coetzee to Auster reads, “The world keeps throwing up its surprises. We keep learning” (248)—and I am still intrigued by the congruence and contiguity between this sentence and those in *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary*. I continue to wonder what they tell us about Coetzee, his beliefs and opinions, and what it means to him to speak *in propria persona*.

The incident of *The Australian* article is not mentioned in *Here*, but Coetzee does there describe his reaction to a letter he received from a member of the public. In this case, it was from a woman who had read *Slow Man* and objected to an anti-Semitic remark by Marijana, a character in this novel. The letter writer’s reaction is silly, but I wonder if being misinterpreted in this way might be the impetus for Coetzee’s attempt to speak more clearly in a public forum about what he *does* believe in order to forestall such misunderstandings.

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Elizabeth Costello is a world-renowned, award-winning novelist. Her novels are the subject of dissertations; the “Elizabeth Costello Society” publishes an “Elizabeth Costello Newsletter.” But she is not as eminent as J.M. Coetzee. She apparently does not have two Booker prizes to her name, nor has she won the Nobel Prize for Literature. We learn that she has not been in the habit of expressing opinions, at least not to her family: her son John has lived around her for nearly four decades, on and off, and is still not sure what she thinks about the big questions. Not sure and, on the whole, thankful not to have to hear. For her thoughts would be, he suspects, as uninteresting as most people’s. A writer, not a thinker. *(Elizabeth 10)*

However, in the chapters that follow, her thoughts—opinions or beliefs—on various topics, including some of “the big questions,” are expressed in a series of public lectures given in *her* own person. The most consistent and perhaps controversial of these opinions, and those that have generated the most
commentary, relate to human relations with animals. She, like Coetzee, is a vegetarian by conviction. This is also the one question on which she expresses firm opinions:

The death camps would not have been dreamed up without the example of the meat-processing plants before them.

That and more she had said: it had seemed to her obvious, barely worth pausing over. (Elizabeth 156)

Although she casts this in the past tense, looking back on her lecture at Appleton College in “Lesson 3,” she does not repudiate what she had said. The controversy, according to this retrospective account, had entered when she equated the moral import of animal slaughter with “what we call the holocaust.” She had been attacked for “belittling the Holocaust,” and, significantly, had been “defended by people whose support for the most part embarrassed her: covert anti-Semites, animal-rights sentimentalists” (156). In the earlier lesson, Costello’s daughter-in-law Norma, who “holds a PhD in philosophy with a specialism in the philosophy of mind,” had complained that Costello’s “opinions on animals, animal consciousness and ethical relations with animals are jejune and sentimental” (61). “There is no position outside of reason where you can stand and lecture about reason and pass judgement on reason,” Norma had told John in reaction to Costello’s lecture (93). But in “Lesson 4” Costello vehemently rejects the type of reasoning deployed by “one of the academic philosophers I read in preparing for yesterday’s lecture” (111). Is Costello’s later dismissal of animal-rights sentimentalists an inconsistency in her character or does she believe that her position is not susceptible of this interpretation?

JC also writes about the cruelty of slaughtering animals, not only those exported alive to Egypt and ill-treated in a Port Said abattoir (he is thinking of a documentary he saw), but any animal killed for meat. He, too, is apparently a vegetarian: when he entertains Anya and her partner Alan to dinner he provides quail for them but eats a “butternut and tofu tartlet” himself (Diary 134). Unlike Costello, he mounts a semblance of an orthodoxy rational argument: “the notion of compassionate killing is riddled with absurdities” (54), while the critique of his opinions staged in the book repudiates pedantry and argumentation in favour of Anya’s more personal (or sentimental) approach and in contrast to the criticisms in Elizabeth Costello that Costello’s opinions lack philosophical rigour. Each particular character and situation comes with its necessary foil.

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1 “Of course I don’t” eat meat, says Coetzee in a 2004 interview: “It’s a repulsive habit. I gave it up 30 years ago. God knows why it took me so long” (Coetzee and Susskind 14).
When the controversy aroused by her parallel between the abattoirs and the Holocaust prompts an invitation to a conference in the Netherlands to speak about the problem of evil, Elizabeth Costello finds herself in the position of attacking the work of a fellow author who is, unexpectedly, present. Once again, fact and fiction intersect: Paul West, the (actual, ‘real-life’) author of The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg, appears in the novel Elizabeth Costello as the unresponsive addressee of a warning and apology by Costello for what she is about to say about him in public. Although she feels that “there ought to be [...] some way of rounding off the morning and giving it shape and meaning: some confrontation leading to some final word” in the corridors of the conference venue, she is left unsatisfied (182).

Despite the contests in which she embroils herself—reason versus sentiment, experience versus demonstration, poetry versus philosophy—Elizabeth Costello often exhibits what might be called conviction fatigue. At the end of the uncomfortable dinner that follows the lecture in which she has drawn parallels between Nazi death camps and abattoirs, she responds, warily, to a politely offered opinion about the double standard involved in human beliefs about animals, “I don’t know what I think […]. I often wonder what thinking is, what understanding is” (90). This is not the first time we have encountered such doubts. In “Lesson 2,” which is focalized through Costello rather than her son, she “listens to her own voice” giving an oft-repeated lecture on “The Future of the Novel,” and is uncertain “whether she believes any longer in what she is saying.” Furthermore,

she no longer believes very strongly in belief. Things can be true, she now thinks, even if one does not believe in them, and conversely. Belief may be no more, in the end, than a source of energy, like a battery which one clips into an idea to make it run. (39)

This, without even considering the opposing viewpoints that are presented in the novel, should alert us to treat any of her statements of opinion with caution as firmly held beliefs of the fictional character Elizabeth Costello, or doubly so as those of Coetzee himself. Is it fair to say that beliefs are more akin to feelings, while opinions are more akin to thoughts or ideas? There is undoubtedly some overlap between these concepts; this might be a way of making sense of Costello’s implication that beliefs give energy to ideas. In the surreal purgatory of “Lesson 8 [:] At the Gate,” the first attempt at the statement of belief Costello is required to provide begins, “I am a writer, a trader in fictions,” and continues: “I maintain beliefs only provisionally: fixed beliefs would stand in my way. I change my beliefs as I change my habitation or my clothes, according to my needs” (195). And indeed, when she finds that her lack
of conviction is standing in her way, impeding her progress through the gate, she maintains, or discovers, or invents, a belief in a species of Australian frogs that remain underground in suspended animation until the rain comes. When pressed and cross-examined by the judges, who are sceptical, she responds by saying, “I believe in what does not bother to believe in me” (218).

JC in *Diary of a Bad Year* is surer of his opinions, and has accepted with alacrity “an opportunity to grumble in public, an opportunity to take magic revenge on the world for declining to conform to my fantasies” (22). These views are thoroughly ingrained:

The passions and prejudices out of which my opinions grew were laid down long before I first set eyes on Anya, and were by now so strong—that is to say, so settled, so rigid—that aside from the odd word here and there there was no chance that refraction through her gaze could alter their angle. (100–101)

He is, however, influenced by Anya: “What has begun to change since I moved into the orbit of Anya is not my opinions themselves but my opinions of my opinions” (106). It is this change of heart, rather than change of mind, that leads him to write a second set of essays, more personal in tone and content, less magisterial and more revealing (at least superficially so) than the first, to lure Anya back after they have had a disagreement.

Anya is the agent of change in this novel. Her appearance in JC’s life drives the plot, such as it is. But reading the novel for the third or fourth time before writing this essay, I was struck by how unconvincing Anya is. Her voice, especially when she first speaks directly to the reader, seems to me like the wishful fantasy of an ageing male. Her sensual exhibitionism—“If I were a man I would not be able to keep my eyes off me” (23)—takes her into the realm of crude and rather tasteless caricature. She does become a more rounded character later, but I am not entirely convinced by her devotion to JC. I realize others disagree. Robert Hahn, for example, calls Anya’s voice “strikingly, refreshingly new” and says she is “a vividly imagined character” (5). But what interests me here is that I automatically impute the fantasy to JC the character rather than to Coetzee the author. I find myself unwilling to believe that Coetzee would invent such an implausible character in his own person. It follows therefore that—as I see it—Anya is a projection of JC’s: perhaps a woman he has seen but with whom he invents a relationship to comfort himself and to provide some drama in his dreary life. Or perhaps she ‘actually’ does his typing, and the rest is fantasy.
The speculation above is not only speculation, but also a matter of opinion: something again not easily able to be settled one way or another. But if we accept that Anya is an unconvincing caricature, then each reader has to decide whether he or she believes Coetzee is playing a subtle game or has become unaccountably inexpert in character delineation in this single case. My next step along this thorny path of suppositions is to contemplate how the novel is affected by the possibility that Anya is not (within the world of the novel) actually the narrator of the third strand of text. Might this be a strategy on the part of Coetzee to provide a particular type of challenge to the opinions he is voicing through JC, different to the challenge that would be offered if Anya were a character with the same fictional status as JC? To accept this possibility as a narrative stratagem is to make of JC a more pathetic character, a lonely old man in bad health with nothing but his opinions and his fantasy life. To accept this possibility is to make of Diary a far bleaker book. It would also mean that all the countervoices are in JC’s own mind, and that—as he approaches death—JC is tempering his irascible view of the world by a process that is purely internal.

Elizabeth Costello’s opinions, or beliefs, are, as I have said above, subject to change according to circumstances, and are always challenged within the narrative, both by her own statements and internal monologue and by other characters. Being left without an answer, without resolution or vindication, is the usual state of affairs in this novel. This is not the case in Diary of a Bad Year. The premise of the narrative is that Anya is won over by JC and repelled by Alan’s attempt at cheating him. JC’s early judgment is that she has “a spoiled child’s way of thinking. The trouble is she is not a child any more. It leaves a disturbing taste” (40). However, she turns out to be intelligent, though not intellectual, honest, and good-hearted—as well as generous at displaying her “silky moves” for his benefit (25). She promises to be with him when he dies, and to look after his affairs: a prospective happy ending of a kind rare in a Coetzee novel, offering both resolution and a kind of vindication of his life and of their friendship. Anya writes to him from her new home in Queensland, “We had a good relationship, you and I—don’t you think?—and it was based on honesty” (172). If this is ‘actually’ happening in the world of the novel, then it is about the best outcome that could be imagined for a terminally ill single man with no family and, it seems, no other friends. This is one reason to doubt whether Anya exists independently of JC.

Coetzee has said that “there is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them” (Doubling 65). On the face of it, we have two countervoices
external to JC in this book: one inexpert, and the other compromised by malicious intent. Anya’s opinion of JC’s Opinions is dismissive:

I have to be honest, the strong opinions on politics and so forth were not your best, maybe because there is no story in politics, maybe because you are a bit out of touch, maybe because the style does not suit you.

(174)

Her objections to the Opinions are unsophisticated and show little understanding of what he is trying to achieve and of what his German publisher has asked him to produce. Alan attacks the Opinions from a more intellectual standpoint. Anya reports that he “used to say you were sentimental. […] A sentimental socialist” (156). Whether these contrary views are ‘invented’ by JC or are part of the narrative created by Coetzee, neither of them poses a particularly compelling challenge to his Opinions.

The other countervoices are JC’s own, the persona in the narrative and the essay-writing persona. Even in the first part of the book, in the “Strong Opinions,” JC begins to entertain self-criticism. In an entry on English usage, he asks himself “what sort of essay was I engaged in: a piece of objective linguistic analysis or a verbal diatribe on declining standards?” (120). He goes on:

I survey my elderly coevals and see all too many consumed with grouchiness, all too many who allow their helpless bafflement about the way things are going to turn into the main theme of their final years. We will not be like that, we vow, each of us: we will heed the lesson of old King Knut, we will retreat gracefully before the tide of the times. But, truly, sometimes it is difficult. (121)

The next Opinion is “On authority in fiction.” Tolstoy, JC writes here, was treated not only as a great author but as an authority on life, a wise man, a sage. His contemporary Walt Whitman endured a similar fate. But neither had much wisdom to offer: wisdom was not what they dealt in. They were poets above all: otherwise they were ordinary men with ordinary, fallible opinions. […]

What the great authors are masters of is authority. […]

*Learn to speak without authority*, says Kierkegaard. By copying Kierkegaard’s words here, I make Kierkegaard into an authority. Authority cannot be taught, cannot be learned. The paradox is a true one. (124)
By writing thirty-one Opinions for publication, JC is confirming himself as at least a putative authority, or acquiescing in the enterprise of his publisher to present him as an authority of some sort. According to Carrol Clarkson, however, JC employs “the most elaborate and relentless syntactic constructions which deflect the attempt to attribute personal subjective agency, whether fictional or historical” (85). JC qualifies ‘his’ authority by the occasional admission of uncertainty within the Opinions, but the discursive authority at hand is more thoroughly questioned by his first-person narrative strand running beneath the essay-text. This narrative belies the authority of the essay-voice in the Opinions and shows its vessel to be an ageing, deteriorating body, buffeted by emotions which he knows to be, from many points of view, ridiculous, and beset by desires he often feels to be shameful.

These countervoices affect different readers differently. Some critics agree with Anya that the Opinions have little intrinsic interest—“The ruminations of JC / Coetzee are often annoying and can become oppressive,” says Hahn (5)—and that the vitality of the book is in the narrative of JC, Anya and Alan which runs along underneath. I am not of that opinion. I find the Opinions well-written, topical and thought-provoking. For me they are the most engaging part of the book, as well as the most substantial, while the ‘love story’ is rather slight and, as I have said, unconvincing to me. This latter is where the sentimentality of the book is located. Hence my suspicion that it is a fabrication by the character JC to provide his Opinions with countervoices that he can control.

Hahn, after an appropriate amount of demurral, decides to ascribe JC’s views to Coetzee, “relieved of a need to compose parables or allegories or plots, unbuttoned and uncensored, free to bombard us with whatever comes into his head while pretending to be JC” (5). Well, perhaps. The publication of Coetzee’s correspondence with Paul Auster does little to dispel the view that some of JC’s opinions are shared by Coetzee, though the context in which he writes them changes their expression subtly. Although writing a letter is of course as much an exercise in framing a discourse as any other act of writing, and as much care can be taken at presentation of the self and one’s opinions in that form as in any other, I believe one can expect a certain amount of transparency and sincerity which one is simply not entitled to expect in the case of fiction. Coetzee initiated the correspondence, according to the publisher’s blurb:

Although Paul Auster and J.M. Coetzee had been reading each other’s books for years, the two writers did not meet until February 2008. Not long after, Auster received a letter from Coetzee, suggesting they begin...
exchanging letters on a regular basis and, “God willing, strike sparks off each other.”

This is the only explanatory information provided: there is no preface, no afterword, there are no acknowledgements, and no information is proffered about why and when the decision was made to publish. But one effect of the rhetorical situation here is that the immediate and explicit presence of an addressee whom Coetzee expects to be sympathetic though not uncritical cannot but help give his opinions a less uncompromising air than they assume in *Diary*. The questions, though still rhetorical in flavour, might actually have a role in a conversation, for example:

Your dismay and my dismay: the shared dismay of two aging gents at the way the world is going. How does one escape the entirely risible fate of turning into Gramps, the old codger who, when he embarks on one of his “Back in my time” discourses, makes the children roll their eyes in silent despair? The world is going to hell in a handbasket, said my father, and his father before him, and so on back to Adam. If the world has really been going to hell all these years, shouldn’t it have arrived there by now? When I look around, what I see doesn’t seem like hell to me.

But what is the alternative to griping? Clamping one’s lips shut and bearing the affronts? *(Here 181)*

This extract clearly bears a familial likeness to the passage quoted above from *Diary of a Bad Year* about “the grouchiness of [JC’s] coevals”: the jokey self-deprecation, the admission of futility accompanied by the inevitability of complaint from the elderly. Elsewhere in *Diary*, Anya reacts with distaste to one of the Opinions JC has asked her to type:

Among Señor C’s latest set of opinions there is one that disturbs me, makes me wonder if I have misjudged him all along. It is about sex with children. He doesn’t exactly come out in favour of it, but he doesn’t come out against it either. I ask myself, is this his way of saying his appetites run in that direction? Because why would he write about it otherwise? *(71)*

In the context of the novel, Anya’s question might echo a reader’s. Whether Anya is a construct of JC or of Coetzee, such a reaction is conventional and serves to underline JC’s complaint concerning “the current hysteria about sexual acts with children” *(45)*. But what Anya fails to understand is that this is not actually an opinion, but a critical response to a widely held attitude, and any suspicion that this Opinion is inserted into *Diary* by Coetzee as an indication of
JC’s hidden perversion (Anya assumes henceforth that he has a stash of pornography somewhere in his flat) is mitigated by the appearance of the same subject, twice, in *Here and Now*:

> Today pretty much everything seems to go. The righteous fury that used to be able to play over a whole range of tabooed sex acts (including adultery!) has been focused on a single act, namely grown men having sex with children. (59)

“Hystasia” in *Diary* versus “righteous fury” in *Here*: once again, the rhetoric of the letters echoes that of the novel. The second time he mentions paedophilia in the letters, Coetzee writes,

> I remember, a few years ago, writing an essay on pornography in which, as what I thought of as a winning rhetorical move, a reductio ad absurdum, I asked aloud whether we were going to require filmmakers to certify that the actors they used in sex scenes were in no case minors. (202–203)

I have not been able to trace the essay to which Coetzee here refers. There is an essay titled “The Harms of Pornography” in Coetzee’s *Giving Offense*, but it doesn’t pose that question, being principally about women and pornography in response to Catharine MacKinnon. However, the point is implicit in what JC writes in the Opinion “On paedophilia” in *Diary*, opening up the intriguing possibility that even Coetzee has conflated himself with his character. But the interest he shows in criticizing the logical and psychological contradictions in the moral crusade against paedophilia in popular culture shows that this is certainly more than a covert message to Anya inserted by JC in his Opinions.

There are many other examples of subjects that appear in both these books, one of which more or less asserts itself as fiction while the other presents itself as simply the publication of correspondence between colleagues. Coetzee writes archly in *Here* that “characters in novels have a degree of independence from their authors, and—particularly in the case of secondary characters—do not unfailingly speak for them” (96). Characters in novels—even major characters, for that matter—never “unfailingly” and exactly speak for their authors, though the word “unfailingly” surely does here allow for possible overlap. Equivocations of authority in this regard give rise to many questions. As David Robjant writes in his review of *Here*,

> Apparently these exchanges aren’t thrust out into the world by some vigilante hacker to demonstrate a moral vacuum at the heart of capitalism, but are actually “leaked,” as it were, by the authors themselves. For this oddity, a range of explanations present themselves.
A theory I would have liked to confirm is that the book is an epistolary novel, in which the authors surrender their true identities to the demands of plot and comedy. Sadly not.

The last letter in Here is dated 29 August 2011; the book was published in March 2013. When correspondence, diaries, and other such writings that are primarily private in their nature are published—in a case like this, especially, when publication occurs so soon, and with the active participation of the writers—one wonders whether it was contemplated all along. Perhaps one explanation for the “oddity” Robjant alludes to is that Coetzee, who suggested that they correspond, is experimenting with another way of voicing his opinions, without the need to embody them more overtly as fictions.² There is a revealing exchange in Here about Coetzee’s “faith” (or belief?) in himself as a writer. In response to Auster’s proposition that he—Coetzee—seems “to have solid faith” in what he is doing, the latter writes,

I think that for once you are wrong about me. I don’t have a great deal of faith in what I am doing. To be more precise, I have enough faith to get me through the writing itself—enough faith or perhaps enough hope, blind or blinkered hope. (134)

Whether it is Coetzee’s lucid and authoritative prose style or his prominence in the literary world that gives the impression of confident self-belief, this statement came as a surprise to me.

Self-doubt could be the spur to creative experimentation, of course. Perhaps believing he falls short in one aspect of his art, Coetzee has developed mastery of others. In both Diary and Here a somewhat gloomy attitude to what is expected of a novelist is expressed. JC writes, “I was never much good at evocation of the real, and have even less stomach for it now” (Diary 154); and Coetzee confides to Auster that, as a novelist, he would not pass Nabokov’s test of knowing and therefore being able to imply in his novels details like floor plans, as well as the back story and destiny of his characters outside the fiction. “If this is the industry standard, I fail,” he glumly concludes (Here 193). This is of course as much a criticism of the concept of an “industry standard” for fiction as it is an admission of his own possible shortcomings. In Doubling the Point Coetzee spoke about another aspect of fiction that is perhaps of more interest to him:

² Coetzee has not abandoned fiction, by any means: The Childhood of Jesus, a teasing, elliptical fable, containing no substantial discursive expressions of opinions or beliefs, was also published in 2013.
When a real passion of feeling is let loose in discursive prose, you feel that you are reading the utterances of a madman […] The novel, on the other hand, allows the writer to stage his passion: Magda, in *In the Heart of the Country*, may be mad […] but I, behind her, am merely passionate. […] [I]n the medium of prose commentary I can’t be passionate without being mad. (60–61)

One might, however, be permitted to be passionate in a letter to a friend, and so the project of writing to Auster might help bridge the gulf between passion and madness.

Unlike JC, Coetzee—now about the same age as his *Diary* character—does not yet seem to have lost the urge to experiment with new ways of creating fictional worlds. But, over the past twenty years or so, he has been displaying a concurrent (and not always unconnected) wish to express his opinions, or beliefs, his *Ansichten* or *Meinungen*, beyond the confines of the academic article or critical essay. The three books I have discussed in this article seem designed to find ways of doing that, gradually coming out—as it were—from behind the screen of fiction and addressing his readers directly *in propria persona*. As he writes to Paul Auster in *Here*, “what is the alternative to griping? Clamping one’s lips shut and bearing the affronts?” (181).

The gripes must out. One can’t easily see Coetzee becoming a newspaper columnist or a blogger. Writing a book of opinionated essays (certain to find an enthusiastic publisher), although it appeals to JC, seems out of character for Coetzee. *Elizabeth Costello*, which grew from a collection of talks he gave—in place of lectures and conference papers rather than public readings of his own more orthodoxly literary work—during the decade or so before its publication, must have seemed a viable solution for a time. However, as an alter ego, Costello left something to be desired; perhaps she was a means of dipping his toes in these seductive waters. With JC and his *Feste Ansichten* another protective layer came off, but the urge to speak more plainly outside the context of fiction, “not through one’s art” (*Diary* 107), seems to have prevailed and the idea of corresponding with Auster may then have presented itself as another way of decently airing these opinions in public without having their sincerity questioned by their framing devices. Wrongheaded and impertinent though it may be, for the sake of argument I here posit an opinion, if not a belief, that taken together these books provide a set of opinions that we can now ascribe to Coetzee, should we wish to do so.
Works Cited


