ONE OF THE PHRASES used by the Swedish Academy to describe J.M. Coetzee, winner of this year’s Nobel Prize in Literature, is ‘scrupulous doubter’. In his novels, memoirs, essays, lectures and academic criticism, Coetzee conveys the uncertainty and complexity of lived experience with extraordinary precision and, sometimes, with a clarity that is almost unbearable. Coetzee’s work is triumphant confirmation of the allegiance owed by literature to nothing except the truth of the human condition. His art succeeds despite, or rather because of, the fact that it is so alive to all the problems of form and content standing in its way. His prose communicates difficulty, dissonance and doubt without itself being any of these things.

In his Letters to a Young Novelist, Mario Vargas Llosa writes that ‘the defining characteristic of the literary vocation may be that those who possess it experience the exercise of their craft as its own best reward, much superior to anything they might gain from the fruits of their labours’. Coetzee himself has written that the ‘feel of writing fiction is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something that has not emerged, that lies somewhere down the end of the road’.

Chief among the media myths about Coetzee is the idea that he is reclusive, yet there can be few contemporary writers as revealing and uninhibited where it counts, which of course is in the work itself. True to the Wildean notion that the artist can only tell the truth when wearing a mask, Coetzee uses the indirect approach as his preferred method of getting to the heart of the matter. The two memoirs, Boyhood (1997) and Youth (2002), are narrated in the third person to devastating effect, while his latest book, Elizabeth Costello (reviewed in the October issue of ABR), uses the character of an elderly Australian woman novelist to examine, among other contentious issues, the nature of literary fame and the uses of literature. Similarly, David Lurie, the doomed protagonist in Disgrace (1999), is a lecturer at a South African university, a job very close to the position held by the author, who was Professor of General Literature at Cape Town University at the time that novel was written.

To draw attention to these obvious parallels is not to suggest that there is a straightforward correlation between life and art, but simply to signal the fact that something much more profound and rewarding is going on. What matters is that Coetzee achieves aesthetic distance without sacrificing authenticity, and speaks knowledgeably, searchingly and with perfect licence.

In attempting to describe his younger self, Coetzee has spoken in Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews (1992) of an Orwell-like disenchantment with the language of absolutes:

Sympathetic to the human concerns of the left, he is alienated, when the crunch comes, by its language — by all political language, in fact. As far back as he can see he has been ill at ease with language that lays down the law, that is not provisional, that does not as one of its habitual motions glance back sceptically at its premises.

It is this honest ambivalence, this state of creative grace so many writers strive for but few ever achieve, that marks Coetzee as an important novelist.

Coetzee is a self-conscious heir to the twentieth-century existentialists. In Disgrace, David Lurie’s refusal to repent publicly for his affair with a student has all the perverse integrity displayed by Meursault in Camus’s L’Etranger. The consequences of taking a stand on a matter of private principle in a hypocritical and complacent world are bound to be similarly harsh. Obliged to resign his teaching post, Lurie soon discovers that the privileges he enjoyed as a white man in apartheid-era South Africa have disappeared. Eventually, he is forced to confront the problem of his own survival. In the end, he is reduced to assisting in the incineration of dead dogs, while being unable to prevent his daughter’s apparent acquiescence in her own gang rape.

A writer as keenly aware as Coetzee is of the moral and ethical weight that words carry would naturally be very sensitive to any attempt to control him. One of Coetzee’s major concerns as a critic has been the question of censorship, both in South Africa and elsewhere, a subject explored at length in Giving Offence: Essays on Censorship (1996). Though opposed to literary censorship as such, Coetzee is also well aware that its effect on art can be positive, as, for instance, in the kind of negative acknowledgment of the importance of literature that censorship bestows. Much great art has been produced under oppressive régimes, and censorship may serve to sharpen artists’ creative minds: ‘Censorship stifles books that have been written, only loosely can one say that it stifles books that might have been written.’
Though not inclined to talk to reporters, Coetzee has spoken in detail about himself and his work in *Doubling the Point*. There he describes writing as a process of uncovering, rather than inventing: ‘It is naïve to think that writing is a simple two-stage process: first you decide what you want to say, then you say it. On the contrary, as all of us know, you write because you do not know what to say. Writing reveals to you what you wanted to say in the first place.’

The ease and apparent naturalness of Coetzee’s prose belies the immense creative and intellectual effort behind it. Coetzee’s long road to global literary pre-eminence began in a rarefied academic context at a provincial university. In the early 1970s Coetzee published the findings of a computer-aided linguistic analysis of one of Beckett’s texts. His literary career has involved a serious critical examination of language and literary form. How many other Booker Prize-winning novelists have published academic articles bearing titles such as ‘The Agentless Sentence as Rhetorical Device’ or ‘Isaac Newton and the Ideal of a Transparent Scientific Language’? Like all the best writers, Coetzee is compelling no matter what the subject or genre.

Coetzee’s creative process has come to be defined by the intimacy between the fictional and the critical. Novels such as *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) and *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), inspired by writers such as Kafka and Dostoevsky, have been prefigured or accompanied by serious academic criticism of Coetzee’s tutelary gods.

In more recent work, Coetzee has succeeded in merging the critical and creative aspects of his work to create a new kind of literature of ideas. A prime example is *The Lives of Animals* (1999), which was delivered by Coetzee as a pair of lectures at an American university. Contrary to established academic practice, Coetzee presented the lectures on animal rights as a dramatised account of his alter ego, Elizabeth Costello, delivering the lecture together with discussion among fictional members of the audience that precedes and follows the imaginary address.

By using fiction to elucidate this difficult and emotive area of philosophy, Coetzee reminds us that the way people hold their ideas may well be as important as the ideas themselves. The American edition of *The Lives of Animals* even includes a series of responses to Coetzee’s lectures by, among other scholars, Peter Singer. Singer responds to Coetzee in the form of a short story, and the exchange between them suggests that fiction is the vehicle by which the possibilities of academic discourse might potentially be expanded to encompass whole fields of study.

According to Mario Vargas Llosa, literary awards ‘are extraordinarily arbitrary, sometimes stubbornly evading those who most deserve them while besieging and overwhelming those who merit them least’. Many of the world’s most influential writers — among them Henry James, Marcel Proust and James Joyce — did not receive the Nobel Prize, but Coetzee is a deserving recipient. Posterity will deliver the ultimate judgment on Coetzee’s work. For now, it has all the qualities of the finest literature.