

FORM IS AN EXPRESSION OF CONTENT: JOHN COETZEE AGAINST SUBSTITUTION ETHICAL THOUGHT

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Abstract

*This article aims at investigating how one of Martha Nussbaum's central claims in *Love's Knowledge* fits one specific work of contemporary literature. Nussbaum's main claim is that style or form of writing are not redundant in conveying meaning in general and ethical thought specifically, both in philosophical and in literary texts. Through a deep analysis of John Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*, which itself embodies a peculiar style of writing by dividing the page into three sections, each one corresponding to a different narrative voice with different sorts of ethical approaches to given issues, the present article ends up showing how the formal construction of Coetzee's (literary) text performs two interrelated tasks. On the one hand the article displays the question of whether it is possible for a work of literature to convey ethical thought without slipping into some form of Ersatz ethical thought; on the other hand it defends the idea that it is through that very questioning – in the work under analysis allowed for by the dividing of the page – that Coetzee found an unusual way of conveying genuine ethical thought, thus confirming Nussbaum's claim that the form of writing is by no means redundant in conveying ethical content.*

*The “ancient quarrel between the poets and the philosophers”, as Plato's *Republic* [...] calls it, could be called a quarrel only because it was about a single subject. The subject was human life and how to live it. And the quarrel was a quarrel about literary form as well as about ethical content, about literary forms understood as committed to certain ethical priorities [...]. Forms of writing were not seen as vessels into which different contents could be indifferently poured; form was itself a statement, a content.*

Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*¹

I. On the purpose of the enquiry

How can a contemporary work of literature convey ethical thought? Is it capable of conveying it essentially? And how can its style of composition – a certain writing technique, strategically focused on a way of reading which is by no means accidental – serve that purpose?

¹ In Nussbaum, Martha, 1990.

This article is construed as a philosophical reflection on one of J.M. Coetzee's works: *Diary of a Bad Year*.² I will be contending that Coetzee's literary text is an excellent instance of the argument defended by Martha Nussbaum in *Love's Knowledge*, whose structural points are outlined in the epigraph.

Nussbaum's main thesis represents a combination square: both in the philosophical text (in which literary style, the *way* to convey content, is often sacrificed in favor of substantial theoretical claims) and in the literary text (in which cultivating the art of form can reach such baroque heights that the content becomes unfathomable), style is an "assertion of content" in itself. Since I have chosen to analyze a literary text, I will focus mainly on the second part of the square. Coetzee's (literary) text is a remarkable example in contemporary literature of how successfully conveying of contents of thought is indissociable from the most effective literary form.

Amongst the South African author's vast work, I have chosen to focus on *Diary of a Bad Year*, since this text by Coetzee is paradigmatic on several levels – as an "isolated" literary text (inasmuch as such an exercise is possible for a mature reader) and especially within the author's literary production.

In *Diary*, Coetzee applies a technique of text composition unprecedented in his previous work. The text is synchronically structured into two or three levels, with a formal *graphic* correspondence, which comes across as disconcerting on a first approach. As if it were made up of three layers of text, the top of the page consists of a series of "opinion chronicles"³ by an experienced South African author, JC; the intermediate layer of the page corresponds to JC's private voice, a raw account of his daily rendezvous with his Filipino typist, the beautiful young Anya, who is helping JC compose his opinion book, commissioned by a German publisher; the lower layer of the page corresponds to the private voices of Anya and Alan, who is Anya's misogynist partner. From the two "lower text layers", we can *see* how JC's daily life is haunted by an impending death and somehow comforted by the daily contact with a beautiful woman.

On a first and more superficial approach, one could claim there are three different narrative voices in the text, plus a sort of "technical voice" petrified in JC's public and political opinions – the book at the top of the page which the old South African author so aptly named *Strong Opinions*.

Framed by the *motto* of Martha Nussbaum's claim, which is already known to us, this text's conceiving voice has found a paradigm that serves as an example

2 In elaborating this article, I have followed the Penguin Books edition of *Diary of a Bad Year*. (Coetzee, J.M.: *Diary of a Bad Year*, Penguin Books, London, 2008).

3 "Strong Opinions", in the original version.

of the American philosopher's strong position. To start with, what Coetzee's text prodigiously shows is that "(literary) form is itself a statement, a content". But the content conveyed by literary form itself isn't a mere "well-informed matter", an accidentally happy combination of a textual composition technique and the thought expressed by that literary structure in a privileged way – a way which is aesthetically effective, theoretically convincing, but sterile from a practical point of view.

Coetzee's text goes as far as conveying ethical thought by staging something that could be only a *simulation* of ethical thought, *in a register very close to its own*: something which is aesthetically maimed, theoretically convincing and completely *sterile from a practical point of view*. This idea will be elaborated on further ahead in the present article.

For now: what exactly does this mean – that a literary work can convey ethical thought? And how can it be done without slipping into what has been called "*Ersatz* ethical thought", i.e., a substitute or a mere simulation of ethical thought?

Let us return to Martha Nussbaum in order to answer that first question:

Certain works of literature [...] [give a contribution] to the exploration of some important questions about human beings and human life. [In them] a view of life is *told*. The telling itself – the whole manner of addressing the reader's sense of life – expresses a sense of life and of value, a sense of what matters and what does not. Life is never simply *presented* by a text; it is always *represented as* something. [...] However much Plato and the poets disagreed, they agreed that the aim of their work was to provide illumination concerning *how one should live*.⁴

Here we can see the sketch of a first answer to the broader question that guides this article. We will say that a literary work expresses ethical thought if its reading enables us to derive (practical) guidance as to *how we should live* – and that derivation can, undoubtedly be related to the author's original intentions, without being unambiguously and inextricably subordinated to those same intentions.

Let us then see more clearly how in *Diary of a Bad Year* J.M. Coetzee was ambitious enough so as to sketch the second question hereby addressed through the form of his text (all things considered, he is a writer and not a philosopher) and to find an ingenious answer which unavoidably lies in the tripartite narrative voice and the corresponding structure of the book's page. How does Coetzee enquire in *Diary* about the possibility of a literary work conveying

4 In Nussbaum, *opus cit.*, p. 18.

ethical thought without turning into a vehicle of substitution ethical thought? The next section will address this issue.

2. Of form and content: literary voices and the different parts of the soul

We needn't go very far in speculating about what could possibly be the connection between the author of the book *Strong Opinions*, JC, and the author of *Diary of a Bad Year*. However, something must be said about this matter; and not merely prevent the present article in coming across as if it were intended to feint a truism that any unaware reader of Coetzee's book could detect – as if it were something that a philosophical essay can allegedly do without – but especially because the supposed “truism” is only partially so. Associating JC and John Coetzee has far more elusive implications than mere stylistic or heteronymic curiosity, easily imputable to self-indulgent vanity on the part of the latter.

After all, JC is an elderly South African author, who has recently relocated to Australia. When requested by a German publisher, he agrees to record in a collective book his opinions on some of the most pressing issues of our global society: terrorism, ethnic conflicts, global warming, animal rights, genetic experiments. *Strong Opinions*: “An opportunity to grumble in public, an opportunity to take magic revenge on the world for declining to conform to my fantasies: how could I refuse?”⁵, JC confesses in John Coetzee's book.

Yet there is something that unmistakably sets them apart from each other: JC is clearly willing to publish his strong opinions on contemporary social issues, like parched theoretical fruits of a stage of life of decreasing vitality. John Coetzee is not. The latter only published strong opinions side by side with “weak opinions” – a “Second Diary” of intimate notes, erotic ones, for instance –, along with notes about an everyday life in an accentuated process of decrepitude, an almost always dull routine that still coexists with a series of nuisances. John Coetzee tells us about JC, delivering us *also* his opinion book (i.e., *Strong Opinions*).

The writing technique employed by Coetzee in *Diary of a Bad Year* can be interpreted as a rhetorical maneuver that confronts the reader with a reading challenge (a *difficulty*, one might say) and hereby manages to convey heteroclitic contents, graspable only by “different parts of the soul”.

5 In *Diary of a Bad Year*. Ed. Cit., page 33.

One should be clear at this point: the disparity between the type of content articulated at the top of the page in *Strong Opinions*, and JC's, Anya's and Alan's notes on daily life is abysmal enough to induce a schizoid reading approach, as well as a schizoid assimilation of what is read. Let us read in which way and *how much* that is so:

[*Strong Opinions*] One would like to retain some respect for any person who chooses death over dishonor, but in the case of Islamist suicide bombers respect does not come easily when one sees how many of them there are, and therefore (by a logical step that may be *badly* flawed, that may simply express the old Western prejudice against the mass mentality of the Other) how cheaply they must value life. In such a quandary, it may help to think of suicide bombings as a response, of a somewhat despairing nature, against American (and Israeli) achievements in guidance technology far beyond the capacities of their opponents.⁶

[*Private dialogue between Anya and JC*] Nothing like the feel of words coming into the world, he says, it is enough to make you shiver. I draw myself up, make a prune mouth. You shouldn't say things like that to a nice girl, Señor, I say. And I turn my back and off I go with a waggle of the bum, his eyes avid upon me. I picked it up from the ducks, I think: a shake of the tail so quick it is almost a shiver.. Quick-quack.⁷

Since “the ancient quarrel” between Poets and Philosophers is mentioned already in the epigraph and seeing these two extracts from *Diary* confront us with something like the tension between the voice of the Philosopher-writer on the one hand and the voice of the Philosopher-poet on the other, it would not be unwise to focus our attention on two other positions by Plato – on *Phaedrus* and *The Republic*, respectively. This will serve my purpose of seeing more clearly how the core position defended in the present article, i.e., that the writing technique is indissociable from conveying a certain meaning and is in itself a statement – can be thoroughly analyzed in the literary text I called upon, and furthermore testify that it has historical roots as remote and deep as some of the founding texts of our culture.

In *Phaedrus*, in 261a, Socrates confronts Phaedrus with the following line:

Is not rhetoric in its entire nature an art which leads the soul by means of words, not only in law courts and the various other public assemblages, but in private companies as well?⁸

6 Idem, p. 39-40.

7 Idem, Ibidem.

8 Plato, *Phaedrus*. Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1995.

On its turn, in the famous Book VII of *The Republic* – which includes the Allegory of the Cave – it is said that education should not be conceived as the deposition of knowledge on a mind which craves it, but as the easiest and most effective way to convert the soul as a whole, to enable it to contemplate the Good using the means it already has.⁹ Also the writing technique employed by Coetzee in *Diary of a Bad Year* is a psychagogy in the platonic sense. Let us see how and why.

If we read JC's book *Strong Opinions* only horizontally, we come across an argumentation platform. JC's book, which John Coetzee refused to present to us separately, addresses almost exclusively the rational part of the soul. We would like to say that approach includes an *affinity* between sender and receiver, seeing that the rational part of JC's soul addresses the rational part of the soul of the reader of *Strong Opinions*. Obviously, this is an oversimplified remark. However, it is useful regarding methodology.

If we adopt a vertical reading of the page of *Diary of a Bad Year* instead, we will come across something a philosopher like Jonathan Lear called “a spectacle of embedding”¹⁰. With this expression's plasticity, Lear made the epicenter of the connection between form and content in *Diary of a Bad Year* almost *visual* to us: this means that, by reading the book vertically, we see how the compilation of JC's strong opinions is embedded at the top in the display of fantasies and daily rites of the three characters that Coetzee's work introduces to us.

It is also remarkable that, as we go down on the page while reading, we go down into the lower part of the soul as well (and even to the presentation of lower parts of the body: Anya's body, JC's body and Alan's body). The “inferior”

9 *The Republic*, Book VII, 518c: “[...] “our view of these matters must be this, that education is not in reality what some people proclaim it to be in their professions. What they aver is that they can put true knowledge into a soul that does not possess it, as if they were inserting vision into blind eyes”. “They do, indeed,” he said. “But our present argument indicates”, said I, “that the true analogy for this indwelling power in the soul and the instrument whereby each of us apprehends is that of an eye that could not be converted to the light from the darkness except by turning the whole body. Even so this organ of knowledge must be turned around from the world of becoming together with the entire soul, like the scene-shifting periaet in the theatre, until the soul is able to endure the contemplation of essence and the brightest region of being. And this, we say, is the good, do we not?” “Yes”. “Of this very thing, then,” I said, “there might be an art, an art of the speediest and most effective shifting or conversion of the soul, not an art of producing vision in it, but on the assumption that it possesses vision but does not rightly direct it and does not look where it should, an art of bringing this about”. In Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1994.

10 Lear, Jonathan, 2010. “Ethical Thought and the Problem of Communication: A Strategy for Reading *Diary of a Bad Year* “. In Leist, A. and Singer, P., 2010. *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics. Philosophical Perspectives on Literature*. New York, Columbia University Press.

display of aspects of the daily life of the three characters is the expungeable part of a book of *strong opinions* on contemporary social and political issues, approached from an ethical perspective. But it is not expungeable from the book John Coetzee wanted to write. Therefore, *Strong Opinions* is a (pseudo) book written in the form and under the influence of argument, but that *form* is only an aspect of the organic unity of matter and form embodied by JC's book of strong opinions, embedded in the things and episodes that make up his daily life. Coetzee delegates the supply of the form of *Diary of a Bad Year* to JC and lets us read *Strong Opinions*, instead of telling us only about the process and the production accidents of the latter within the former (which, were it so, would not work like *Diary of a Bad Year* so effectively works).

We will have to examine in more detail and *go beyond* the more or less methodological and associative elements given until now, if we want to make clear how embedding JC's strong moral opinions in the description of his daily private life, of Anya's and Alan's *deauthorizes* a way of substitution ethical thought (*Ersatz ethical thought*), by promoting authentic ethical thought through the disconcerting form of John Coetzee's present text. To do so, this article will still perform two movements:

- a) Examine how the form of writing in *Diary of a Bad Year* demarcates from what I have been calling *Ersatz Ethical Thought*, thus incorporating a simulation of that type of thought;
- b) Analyze one of the opinions in *Strong Opinions*, almost like a “case study”, to obtain a confirmation of a).

3. Substitution of substitution ethical thought

It seems to me obvious that nothing we could ever think or say should be the thing. I can only describe my feeling by the metaphor, that, if a man could write a book on Ethics which really was a book on Ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world.¹¹

L. Wittgenstein. *A Lecture on Ethics*

What is that which I have been calling “*Ersatz ethical thought*”? The underlying

¹¹ In Wittgenstein, L., 1993.

ing idea can more easily be expressed through the contrast allowed for by a simulation, a “thought experiment”.

Let’s imagine there is a respectable figure in a certain academic milieu – a Professor of Contemporary Ethical Issues in Yale, for instance – who spends a semester at the university he is affiliated to and another semester at a foreign university; let’s concede that our distinguished academic has a teaching activity which makes him commute between Europe and the United States. This distinguished academic figure dedicates his professional life to writing technical articles, opinion columns and conference texts on “contemporary ethical questions and issues” (and it would be possible that one of those articles bear the title “Form is an expression of Content: John Coetzee against substitution ethical thought”). University professors are usually well-paid, both in European and in American institutions, and our notable academic is, by no means, an exception. Committed to writing specialized articles, opinion columns, encyclopaedia entries, etc., on such current affairs as global warming, animal rights, gender-based violence, the Middle East, paedophilia or the sale of nuclear weapons to Iran, our distinguished academic figure has grown accustomed to accepting the current state of affairs and to taking several advantages of his own intellectual advantage.

The sort of work carried out by our notable academic (too realistic to be made up) could be considered an instance of what Jonathan Lear calls “*Ersatz ethical thought*”.

The literary style of John Coetzee – whose narrative voice reveals an apathy bordering on morbidity while narrating barbaric situations it has experienced directly – is always an antidote to any conceivable form of substitution ethical thought. Let’s see more clearly how that is realized in *Diary of a Bad Year*.

Diary portrays something that is an ethical issue on itself – the possibility of the intrusion of forms of *Ersatz ethical thought* in a literary work that aims to convey ethical thought – in a way we would describe as “juxtaposed”, self-aware. The writing technique Coetzee employs in *Diary* and more specifically what we have proposed to be its intended meaning – mostly by way of the superb inclusion of *Strong Opinions* literally *on top of* descriptions of the affective lives of the characters of *Diary* – allows the author to *show* how difficult it is for a literary text, animated to convey ethical thought, not to slip into becoming a vehicle of substitution ethical thought, like an opinion chronicle book, for instance. JC allowed himself to do this and he is “a prestigious South African writer”. What guarantee do we have that John Coetzee won’t fall into the same trap sooner or later?

All of Coetzee’s work incorporates a heavy self-referential component. How-

ever, in his most recent books that component is conspicuous: In addition to the present choice, we see this component in *Summertime* (2009), in which the author employs another technique to replace substitution ethical thought. Whereas the technique for screening forms of substitution ethical thought in *Diary of a Bad Year* is the tripartite narrative voice – with the nuances and degrees of formality I have analyzed until now –, in *Summertime* the writer uses a *post-mortem* feature story on himself. The writer John Coetzee has died recently and the whole book, whose starting point is that very fact, is a collection of personal accounts of parts of his life, told by such different people as a former lover, a neighbor or the mother of a former student in Cape Town.

But let's return to the substitution of substitution ethical thought in *Diary*. The significance of this writing technique of the tripartite page in *Diary of a Bad Year*, which is a resourceful way of screening the *Ersatz* ethical thought, is indebted to Plato in at least one more respect. It acknowledges a debt to an idea of the *Symposium*. In *Symposium*, Plato brings Socrates to the stage to tell of an encounter with the priestess Diotima. Diotima tells Socrates about the art of love and the “method of lovers” as an encounter with Beauty, through which human finitude can partake in the ideal infinitude. The speech of the priestess is well-known:

All men are bringing to the birth in their bodies and in their souls. There is a certain age at which human nature is desirous of procreation – procreation which must be in beauty and not in deformity.¹²

To procreate in Beauty: that is the method of lovers. Thus it becomes more obvious how and why we should return to Coetzee, to the art of writing of *Diary of a Bad Year* and very specifically to the way it incorporates *Strong Opinions* with the strategic goal of substituting substitution ethical thought.

Accompanying the end of *Strong Opinions* – a conscious example of substitution ethical thought for *Diary of a Bad Year* – a question is posed by JC's private voice about the possibility of Anya being “the natural mother of the miscellany of opinions” the notable South African writer was putting down on paper in exchange for payment and some social prestige. JC answers himself and answers us that it was not so:

Was Anya from 2514 in any but the most far-fetched sense the natural mother of the miscellany of opinions I was putting down on paper on commission from Mittwoch Verlag of Herderstrasse, Berlin? No. 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

12 In *Symposium* – 206C.

aside from the odd word here and there, there was no chance that refraction through her gaze could alter their angle.¹³

Even with a negative answer – an obvious sign that the question is actively asked –, this statement fits into the Socratic learning method: Anya was JC's beautiful Alcibiades and served the old writer as an inspiration to carry a long pregnancy of ideas to term. Under the guidance of this metaphor, what we can see and read at the top of the page in *Diary of a Bad Year* is the end of the gestation process of ideas and opinions in JC's soul, possible only in the presence of the beautiful Anya (while one shouldn't exclude the possibility that the ideas and moral opinions in *Strong Opinions* may preexist in JC's head, it is the daily contact with Anya that makes their birthing possible). According to the terms of the present allegory, the two lower sections of the page in Coetzee's book would correspond to something like the "labor and delivery" of JC's strong opinions.

JC wants to give the German publisher of his book the final product of the gestation of his ideas into strong opinions, sparing him the nuisances of their "labor and delivery" process. John Coetzee only agreed to offer *his* reader the joint and often schizoid reading of both. We understand why: the *amputation* of one of the parts of the process – however rationally justifiable as a form of "deuration" – would present us with an instance of substitution ethical thought, as blatantly as any other way.

4. A strong opinion and the dialectic of responsibility

In the "spectacle of embedding" that is *Diary of a Bad Year*, there is a strong opinion titled "On National Shame" – a section of JC's book *Strong Opinions*.

In that section, JC wrote:

An article in a recent *New Yorker* makes it as plain as day that the US administration, with the lead taken by Richard Cheney, not only sanctions the torture of prisoners taken in the so-called war on terror but is active in every way to subvert laws and conventions proscribing torture. [...] Their shamelessness is quite extraordinary. Their denials are less than half-hearted. The distinction their hired lawyers draw between torture and coercion is patently insincere, pro forma. In the new dispensation we have created, they implicitly say, the old powers of shame have been abolished. Whatever abhorrence you may feel counts for nothing. You cannot touch us, we are too powerful.

13 In *Diary of a Bad Year*. Ed. Cit., p.142-145.

Demosthenes: Whereas the slave fears only pain, what the free man fears most is shame. If we grant the truth of what the *New Yorker* claims, then the issue for individual Americans *becomes a moral one*: how, in the face of this shame to which I am subjected, do I behave? *How do I save my honour?*¹⁴ [...] Dishonour is no respecter of fine distinctions. Dishonour descends upon one's shoulders, and once it has descended no amount of clever pleading will dispel it.¹⁵

Now the aim of the conceiving voice of this reflection is to inquire how the “moral issue” mentioned by JC in the above-mentioned strong opinion articulates with what I have called the “Dialectic of Responsibility” in the title of this section 4.

Within JC's own book, *Strong Opinions*, there is indeed a stratification between a broader theoretical proposition and an illustration of that proposition in the strong opinion currently under analysis, titled “On National Shame”.

In the preceding section, JC had analyzed a moral-political position by Machiavelli: the *Necessità*. In terms of structure, Machiavelli's idea is that there is no such thing as “National Shame”, let alone “shame assimilated by mere citizenship” – contrary to what JC contends – because one has to do whatever needs to be done to protect and preserve the State.

Necessity, *necessità*, is Machiavelli's guiding principle. The old, pre-Machiavellian position was that the moral law was supreme. If it so happened that the moral law was sometimes broken, that was unfortunate, but rulers were merely human, after all. The new, Machiavellian position is that infringing the moral law is justified when it is necessary.

Thus is inaugurated the dualism of modern political culture, which simultaneously upholds absolute and relative standards of value. The modern state appeals to morality, to religion, and to natural law as the ideological foundation of its existence. At the same time it is prepared to infringe any or all of these in the interest of self-preservation.

Machiavelli does not deny that the claims morality makes on us are absolute. *At the same time he asserts that in the interest of the state the ruler “is often obliged [necessitate] to act without loyalty, without mercy, without humanity, and without religion.* (Quote from *The Prince*, chap. XVIII)¹⁶

It so happens that an important social group JC calls “liberal intellectuals” intends to reject both Machiavelli's *Necessità* and the “assimilation of shame by citizenship” contended by JC in this strong opinion. Here JC refers to the Bush administration and to the action of the aforementioned social group in post-2001 American society; however, by computing the structural aspects of

14 My italics.

15 In *Diary of a Bad Year*. Ed. Cit., p. 48-50.

16 In *Diary of a Bad Year*, Ed. Cit., page 26.

this criticism and the contrasting support in Machiavelli's ideas, this casuistry can easily be converted into an abstract social model. Liberal intellectuals aim to demarcate themselves from both positions by means of rational argumentation and a rationalizing self-justification mechanism.

That mechanism of self-justificating demarcation implies three movements: 1) an ascription of shameful guilt to the political leaders of the country when JC claims that “National Shame” exists; 2) massive distancing from the positions adopted and the actions carried out by those leaders 3) a rejection of both moral dualism and the divide between theory and practice inherent to Machiavelli's *Necessità*. The social group JC calls *liberal intellectuals* wants to actively demarcate itself from both the structuring idea of *Necessità* and the attribution of National Shame.

However there is something the social group JC calls “liberal intellectuals” does not see – mostly because they can't see it –, and that is the fact that shameful guilt descends like a curse and cannot be removed by an argument. Liberal intellectuals cannot see that phenomenon because they want to discard their involvement in “National Shame” by way of logical justification mechanisms.

At this point in JC's argumentation in this strong opinion on “National Shame”, the astute reader of *Diary* gradually realizes that JC is talking about himself and to himself whenever he talks about “liberal intellectuals”, by describing their behavior and the structure of their stance in the face of *this specific moral and political issue*. The dialectic of responsibility acts upon the reader of *Diary of a Bad Year* through an identification mechanism.

Once again, *formal method* and *conveyed content* only work as an organic whole.

At this moment in *Diary*, John Coetzee wants to make us understand that there is something extremely inconsistent about the stance of these “liberal intellectuals”. More specifically: how can “they”, these liberal intellectuals, oppose to both Machiavelli's *Necessità* as a positive position *and* to the assimilation of shame by citizenship, when both positions represent *contradictory* yet *complementary* ideas that “exhaustively cover a domain of intelligible positions”? Yes, because one must choose:

- a) Either there is no such thing as National Shame because you have to do whatever is needed to protect the interests of the State (*Necessità*);
- b) Or Shame does exist, and it does not pertain exclusively to political leaders, because it descends through non-rational mechanisms and its refusal cannot be effected by rational or justificatory mechanisms either. To accuse political leaders of “shameful behavior” *is to feel the curse of that shame already*.

But this inconsistency is *mine*, an astute, well-informed reader of *Diary of a Bad Year*. I am perfectly capable of understanding the structural meanders of that inconsistency and I can even detect the responsibility-divesting cynicism inherent to it, as long as I can rely on the scapegoat of the third person. It is “them”, the so-called liberal intellectuals.

Only by way of the formal stratagem of using the third person to refer to that social group JC calls “liberal intellectuals” does Coetzee manage to convey the content he intends to convey in an effective way, removing the veil of blindness that covered the eyes of the liberal intellectual reading *Diary of a Bad Year*. The Dialectic of Responsibility is the reading process by which we achieve that removal.

And it is more than plausible that, at the end of the reading of *Diary*, we are more than willing to call that formal stratagem a “formal subterfuge” because we feel naked and doubly deceived – because we don’t like the position of the liberal intellectuals, which isn’t actually their “position” because it’s *ours*, and we don’t like the way Coetzee’s text made *me* believe it was telling *me* about an abstract group of people who can only stand for strong positions by being blind to their own point of view, when it was really talking *about me*.

The Dialectic of Responsibility – which is the whole process – works like an articulation bridge between the *formal method of writing* and the *act of conveying ethical content*, because it is by means of that dialectic that the reader not only manages to understand his place in the space of reasons of *Diary of a Bad Year* – becoming aware that he or she is an *integral part* of that space of reasons and not a mere spectator-reader – but he or she also manages to replace substitution ethical thought (the only one available to any reader that is merely a spectator of what he reads) with a straightforward but difficult ethical attitude: to make up or create how I should live and behave, counting on the shame that is mine *ab initio*.

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