

Fugal Musemathematics Track One, Point One: J.M. Coetzee, Ethics, and Joycean Counterpoint

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Abstract

This multi-parted essay pursues as contrapuntal set of relationships some points of contact, overlap, or synchrony among various border-voicings: literary, linguistic, musical, autobiographical, mathematical, and ethical. Its controlling technique is the inescapably abstract and general notion of fugal pursuit more particularly lodged in the etymological derivation of “fugue” from *fugere* and *fugare* — to flee and to pursue. What the essay pursues, by way of that hunting call and response that characterizes fugal texture, is concretely particular: a reading of how the nomadic expatriate J.M. Coetzee in his later fiction follows into exile James Joyce’s siren-song fugal practice; especially — to begin with — in the contrapuntal arrangement of *Diary of a Bad Year*. Migrating across its own rows on the page and again migrating to and from the various segments of this multipartite essay, my reading articulates an always at least doubled performance, a fugal reading and writing, that first follows by imitation the linguistic practice of Coetzee following Joyce, but that also — as in Coetzee — subsequently seeks to unsettle the Sameness of imitation by the contrapuntal surprise attending the always unique advent of individual exile, expatriation, or the unexpected arrival of some Other, harbingers all of ethics perchance. In order to pursue its prey, this essay has itself entered into exile, fleeing from the eminent domain of orthodoxly-governed argument even to the point of risking the exceptionable: whereby, for example, and for the shape of its presentation, it eschews Chicago Style citation while conforming in other respects to the stylistic protocols of *Word and Text*.

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What usually follows the abstract to an essay are the more particular constituents of thinking — here about exile, to begin with, but as beginning point only: exile is here neither more nor less than a state linking Joyce and Coetzee, both of whom (along with Beckett as crucial middle) can be said to have voluntarily expatriated themselves into exile in the pursuit of their art.

Usually also such initial movement leads directly towards some statement and exercise of *argument*; but this is not always the case, nor is it the case that arguments are always teleological or even direct. Some arguments and other discursive pursuits indirectly proceed elsewhere and otherwise, even and often — as the case of Nikolay Gogol and that of countless other writers will attest — into self-exile.

In his movingly astute “Reflections on Exile”, Edward Said more or less autobiographically begins by registering literary responses to exile as “efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement” (173), and — having alluded to Joyce as exemplary in all sorts of ways — ends alongside Theodor Adorno, exiled for his German Jewishness, delicately associating exile with contrapuntal insight or intuition:

Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that — to borrow a phrase from music — is *contrapuntal*. (Said 186)

Exile is first of all loss: not a privilege, of course, but still an “*alternative* to the mass institutions that dominate modern life” (184). Exile is a loss the exiled one might — at an *incalculable price* and through some maybe musical mediation or other composition — be able to embrace as a sort of joy; or as a “scrupulous [neither “indulgent” nor “sulky”] subjectivity” (184). And this is a matter of thinking, a frisson between the abstract and particular, a collaboration between memory and forgetting that allows for thought. “It is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home” Adorno had written in exile (*Minima Moralia* 39); Said remembers this, and adds by way of gloss: “Adorno’s reflections are informed by the belief that the only home truly available now, though fragile and vulnerable, is in writing” (184) where — possibly — exiles again “cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience” (185). “Exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal” (186): in a word, *fugal*.

In the Cora Diamond edition of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s lectures on the foundations of mathematics and in his own *Remarks* on this subject, Wittgenstein considers various accounts of how people might go about the mathematico-economics of calculating a selling price for wood (by cubic measure or by weight, say, or by the time it took to collect or by its scarcity, or by some other circumstance of measure, labour, and topography [*Lectures* 202-205; *Remarks* 93-95]). Each of these pricing systems has a systemically discernable point. But Wittgenstein also offers, by counterpoint as it were, a more perplexing scenario in which people sell wood in piles at a price proportionate to the area covered by the piles. This latter, exiled case perhaps, is not as easily explained. The point of *these* woodsellers’ practice is not easy to gauge in the usual way.

Although the volume of wood in this latter instance is being “measured”, the measurement is calculated only by reference to the length and breadth of the base of the woodpile. If, without adding any more wood or taking any away, the seller or buyer were to adjust the height of a particular pile so as to rearrange the dimensions of its base, the price of the wood in that pile would increase or decrease. A discrepancy between “what we do” and what *these* woodsellers do hence opens up “in such a way that the whole point of what they are doing seems to be lost” (*Lectures* 203). But is the point here (apparently) lost in the blindness of the woodsellers’ practice, or lost only to our perception of their practice: our failure to imagine dwelling within their practice? The former are mathematical matters; this last is (initially) a question of exile that sooner or later becomes a question of empathy, ethics, and vision — later to be elaborated as such.

Over its several centuries of existence, fugue — a name given to that most complex of contrapuntal music — has meant different things at various times and even different things at the same time. As used in the middle ages, the term *fuga* signified any sort of imitative counterpoint, particularly the canon and round, but the fugue as we recognize it today begins its individualized identity with the renaissance reconfiguration of counterpoint itself. In this regard, fugal counterpoint can be compared to the contemporaneous development of perspective in the pictorial arts, and has been described as a musical attempt to push the fundamentally two-dimensional practice of medieval polyphony towards a third dimension by *integrating* “vertical and horizontal concepts”, as Alfred Mann puts it in the “Introduction” to his translation of Johann Fux’s *Gradus ad Parnassum*; or, to use other words, by adopting a “vertical way of thinking” in which “simultaneous composition” of multiple voices comes to replace the linearly “successive” practice of medieval canon composition (Walker 1).

So construed, the fugal idea re-born in the renaissance (along with the modern idea of “author”) is fundamentally about compositional technique, texture, and circulation; it only later becomes an academic genre-notion constrained by its relationship to vocal text and to the authority of text in competition between vocal and non-vocal registers of music, both sacred and secular (Mann 4-8; Walker 54; Barthes, and Foucault, famously mark the birth of the author on his and her way to death).

Fugue thus derives its sense of process and texture from renaissance counterpoint, the baroque interpretation of which culminates in Johann Joseph Fux’s *Gradus*, enthusiastically received by J.S. Bach, Haydn, Beethoven, Mozart and others, and to this day still in service as a teaching tool. Published in 1725, Fux’s *Gradus* initially proffers a mathematical analysis of the interval among notes, but then becomes and mostly stays a dialogue — autobiographically staged — between Aloysius, the teacher (modelled after Palestrina, renaissance master of polyphony), and Josephus, the student (standing in for Fux himself, borrowing the author’s middle name). Fux in this paradigm is both student and teacher; indeed, the historical record shows considerable overlap between particular exchanges in the dialogue and the learning experience as recollected by at least one of Fux’s students (Mann 77 — in *Doubling the Point* J.M. Coetzee repeatedly insists that *all writing is autobiographical*).

Is it fair to say of Wittgenstein’s peculiar woodsellors that they arrive at a price for their wood by pointless calculation? (Might this peculiar manner of calculation not sufficiently serve their interests, whatever these might be, however different these might be to what for ‘us’ constitutes the possibility of interest? Is it telling that in this sentence “interest” in its last appearance reverts to the singular?) If, as one might be inclined to say, these woodsellors are not calculating truly, how reasonable is it to say of them that they are or are not truly calculating? When we say “calculation” *must* we mean *pointed* calculation? (Wittgenstein is clearly not here thinking of music, which — it so happens — was once marked by its points; nor is *pointed* here necessarily analogous to quiddity, the “whatness” of a thing, potential site — for Joyce — of epiphany; and why does “woodpile” — in the vernacular of music — signal a xylophone or marimba?)

Aloysius begins by explaining the derivation of the term counterpoint: “in earlier times, instead of our modern notes, dots or points were used. Thus one used to call a composition in which point was set against or counter to point, *counterpoint*; this usage is still followed today, even though the form of the notes has been changed” (23). Proceeding to treat the several “species” of counterpoint one by one, Aloysius repeatedly encourages Josephus “not only to pay attention to the measure upon which you are working but also to those following” (48), emphasizing thus the requisitely integral inter-relationship of vertical voices pursued in horizontal context: “it becomes most difficult, indeed nearly impossible [to proceed] if one does not consider one or two measures in advance before deciding to write” (90).

Having worked his graded way through the various species of counterpoint, Aloysius turns his student’s attention to “the art of imitation and fugue”, explaining the relationship of these two terms etymologically: “Fugue takes its name from the words *fugere* and *fugare* — to flee and to pursue [:] one part flees, pursued by another [and] this is actually nothing but what has been explained as imitation” (Mann 80; [the fugal section of Fux’s dialogue is translated in Mann 78-138]).

“Calculation would lose its point, if *confusion* supervened”, writes Wittgenstein: “And yet it seems to be nonsense to say — that a proposition of arithmetic *asserts* that there will not be confusion. –Is the solution simply that the arithmetical proposition would not be *false* but useless, if confusion supervened?” (*Remarks* 200). What here does “useless” mean? The actions of the woodsellers confuse us; but for them, let’s say, there is no confusion, and the point of their calculating price as they do can perhaps be clarified or ‘explained’ or identified — can even be measured, more or less gauged — by some narrative or another:

- (a) These people don’t live by selling wood, and so it does not matter much what they get for it. (b) A great king long ago told them to reckon the price of wood by measuring just two dimensions, keeping the height the same. (c) They have done so ever since, except that they later came not to worry about the height of the heaps. (*Lectures* 204)

Confusion also goes away if and when we forgo thoughtful inquiry. Alan, the antagonist (fugally speaking, the countersubject) to “JC” from Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year*, appears regularly to forgo just such (‘pointless’) inquiry.

Confusion abates if we stick to Alan’s dictum that “numbers are just numbers. They don’t stand for anything” (111), ignoring the counter-point that for Alan himself numbers “stand” for the possibility of profit. For Alan, the verb “to count” operates *transitively*, and so accommodates a direct object: Alan counts some profit-thing or another. But it is also possible to count *intransitively*: to put oneself to sleep one does not have to count sheep; one can just count. Or maybe one counts just for the pleasure and joy of counting.

Perhaps the woodsellers are measuring for the joy of measuring.

Fugue, then, is imitative pursuit of what has already been, but tout ensemble pursued or novelly pushed across some new limit or novel-writing boundary, and the etymological identity claim affords a beginning point from which to pursue *fugal imitation* in its various forms.

Of the several such forms, Fux singles out three-part fugal composition as “the most perfect of all”, given that “in it one can have a complete harmonic triad without adding another voice” — the addition of which would only result in (unnecessary) doublings, and, perhaps, the threat of confusion (Fux 71; Mann 90).

These few beginning and general characteristics of fugal texture, the quite freely abstract character of which increasingly comes to distinguish fugue from the more strictly linear codification of cannon (etymologically related to “rule” and to “law”) perhaps suffice to suggest in broad outline some resemblances between J.M. Coetzee’s recent (novelistic) work and the work undertaken by fugue, especially in the case, first, of *Diary of a Bad Year*, which is structured as if in three-part fugal composition. In *Diary*, the “Strong Opinions” attributed to the aging writer-character “JC” are dominantly placed across the top section of each page, where they constitute an upper margin or leading voice. These discursively “Strong Opinions” on mostly political subjects are accompanied on the bottom section of each divided page by a brief and now *more* fictionally-constituted row of type anticipating in its exposition JC’s pursuit of the lovely young Anya in her “tomato-red shift [...] so startling in its brevity” (3).

Confusion that here renders the woodsellers’ calculations useless and false by ‘our’ (usual) standards (those we mostly share with Alan) is possibly palliated by Wittgenstein’s imagined gloss (or some other): by some linguistic event perhaps capable of verbally and novelly ‘calculating’ the point of an otherwise pointless-seeming set of calculations precisely by refusing to calculate *as usual*.

We are confronted here by at least two interrelated difficulties. The first is the problem of justifying — as true — practices that are not as self-evidently justifiable as we might assume: “It must be like this, does not mean: it will be like this” writes Wittgenstein. “On the contrary: “it will be like this” chooses between one possibility and another. “It must be like this” sees only *one* possibility” (*Remarks* 239). *It must be like this* bypasses consideration of alterity in the name of the Same, as Emmanuel Levinas might have said.

These two initial parts chasing one another across the opening *Diary* pages — above, a commentary on politics, below, an articulation of narrative desire quickly growing — soon modulate into three rows of text, three sites of articulation, as with pipe organ voicing — top, manual bass, pedal bass — the middle position becoming occupied with what generically most-resembles the titular “Diary” in which JC records his impressions of Anya, whom he has managed to employ as typist or “secret aria secretary” as Anya mischievously calls herself (225). The other two voices remain as they were, albeit that all three voices open themselves in the ensuing pages to contrapuntal voice-crossing, “a very important expedient” notes Mann in a gloss on Fux, “especially in three and four part writing” (Fux 36).

And thus the three voices pursue one another and flee from one another, strong opinions beating dominantly from above, narrative quickenings resonating from below, the latter engendered sometimes by Anya, who comes to think of herself as affording JC with “*a perspective from below, so to speak, an opinion of his opinions*” (196), sometimes by Alan, whose opinions counter those of JC often on a note to note and point to point basis, sometimes by JC himself in self-reflexive counterpoint, sometimes by yet larger movements of structural development and intra- and inter-textual reference, whereby, for instance, an ostensibly unpublished “Second Diary” (155 ff.) of “Soft Opinions” (193), soon rendered as lower-case “soft opinions” (197), contrapuntally and intra-textually qualifies the earlier “Strong Opinions”, while “Strong Opinions” as intra-title *inter-textually* points as playful counter to Vladimir Nabokov’s collection of interviews and articles published under the same title.

All this beating and chasing — as if in the course of a hunt (*chace* and *caccia* [hunt] are vernacular equivalents of *fuga*; before the fifteenth century these three terms were interchangeable in music [Walker 7]) — flushes out a dense population of motifs in *Diary*, most notably those belonging to the thematic life of shame, suffering, counting, exile, music, morality, and joy.

According to the demand that *it must be like this*, we dismiss the woodsellors’ practice and justify our own, though we should more cautiously say of our practice not that it is exclusively true, but simply “*that’s how we do it*” (*Remarks* 199). When we speak of counting or measuring, even of academic writing, we are usually in agreement that we mean “counting [and measuring or writing] like *this*” (37), according to these rules. (“The word “agreement” and the word “rule” are *related*, they are cousins” [344].) That’s the first difficulty.

The second difficulty: but, if we are not all agreed, and if justification is not guaranteed, does this mean that justification is thus necessarily contingent on local practice? Does this mean we have to resign ourselves either to the *doxa*-dogma or to a proliferation of private languages up to and including the numeration practiced by one like “Funes the Memorious” in the Borges story of that title, a story that attracts JC’s interest in *Diary*? Neither account of the alternatives here entirely satisfies.

These themes — shame, suffering, counting, exile, music, morality, joy — mark each of the polyphonic voices, and so come from various points of domicile in the three, sometimes four such voices, each of which sings its own distinctive melody that contrapuntally complements the others without being absorbed by them. The attentive ear can track many melodies without becoming confused — can indeed be joyfully delighted by a composer’s staging of complementary competition among sonorously cognitive *subjects* and *countersubjects* (the usual fugal terms) or *concepts* (as Adorno might say).

In Adorno’s *Essays on Music*, where an essay is often the applied instance of that *Negative Dialectics* for which Adorno is especially known, we are reminded that music closely resembles language, but also that, however much this might be so: music is not language, and vice versa.

Music is not language; language is not music. These facts do not deter James Joyce from describing the “Sirens” episode in *Ulysses* as “a fugue with all musical notations” (Ellmann 459), nor from describing the chapter in a letter to Harriet Weaver as the stricter form of “a *fuga per canonem*” by means of which “to describe the seductions of music” (*Selected Letters* 242); all of which should be counted as compositional conceit or literary ruse: language is not music.

There’s space here, and perhaps even need, for another voice: a third voice,
or a third-position voice.

If neither account satisfies, it might then be better to look for a third, somewhere in-between, to grounds other than only instrumentality, elsewhere than the priority of transitivity or Sameness, looking, as Barthes following Nietzsche and Deleuze does, to culture rather than to method (3-4), retaining for method — as Mallarmé also does — the “useful” status of a “fiction” (Barthes, 177 n. 10). Better perhaps to look to possibilities other than only self-interest and unquestioning confidence in the power of familiar philosophical, methodological, rhetorical, or mathematical system. Such a position (a ‘third position’) might accept that, more than “simply a pastime”, counting is a truly useful activity, “an important part of our life’s activities”, without conceding hereby that ““being true” means: being usable (or useful)” but only that counting “is usable, and, above all, *it is used*” (*Remarks* 37-38); its usability is everyday put to the test, as Bach’s music has everyday been put to the test, which, according to Coetzee in *Stranger Shores*, largely explains its status as classic: not because of its timelessness (“Bach the classic was historically constituted”) but because, in a “testing process” of intimate performance, it has survived the century or so of Bach’s obscurity as a composer, and to this day continues to survive the testing (10, 15), enabling JC to register Bach as “The best proof we have that life is good” since “to each of us, on the day we are born” comes Bach’s music: “as a gift, unearned, unmerited, for free”, and prompting JC to “elect” Bach as an adopted father (221-22).

Any reader still at this point reading has presumably accepted my invitation to follow this thing that by now typographically simulates some thing resembling a three-voiced fugue.

Even if language is not music, to consider the “Sirens” episode fugally is to accept Joyce’s invitation to think about ‘fugal language’ and also thus about what Coetzee — autobiographically remembering his first Bach-encounter — refers to as a compositional texture “more general than music.” In this Coetzee essay that pursues what it means to be “a classic” and that begins by considering how T.S. Eliot remakes his identity in the “unsuspected paternity” of Virgil and Dante but that culminates in Bach, J.M. Coetzee, like JC, surreptitiously claims Bach as an adopted father (*Stranger* 6-9). I shall later link this fugal notion “more general than music” to the ethically-charged concept of “sympathetic imagination” evoked by one of Coetzee’s characters (Elizabeth Costello), and, later still in the multiparted sequence of which this essay is a part, to the practice of *meegevoel* or feeling-with alluded to by another Coetzee character (Margot Jonker, née Coetzee, cousin to the late John Coetzee of *Summertime*): women both, insofar as a fictional character can be a woman.

Such a third position might accept that, like language or music, counting relates to “a way of living” (Wittgenstein, *Remarks* 335), a specifically human way as far as we know, acknowledging hereby that we simply don’t know if the same can be said for dogs or for lobsters.

Wittgenstein, at least, feels confident enough to write that “Following a rule is a human activity”, though he does note that “The agreement of people in calculation is not an agreement in opinions or conviction” (331-32).

Surely it is the case that we (humans) can agree on the rules of calculation without forgetting that the mechanisms and results of such calculation are not going to be value-free, that the values thus engendered will be related, and not exiguously so, to the moral domain we inhabit as humanimals; indeed, that counting — like some kinds of language, literature, philosophy, and music — might even open up ethical possibilities of empathetic cognition, possibilities that can be articulated in language of some sort, and that can so be shared and even acted upon.

What sort of language would this be? Perhaps a historical gloss of the sort Wittgenstein uses in an attempt to alleviate confusion over the woodsellers’ practice — explicative discourse, broadly speaking — or perhaps a species of fictive language even, bearing in mind that Wittgenstein invents the gloss he applies to this hypothetical situation in order to stage a problem; or perhaps an auto-bio-performative and responsibly ethical language of Saying, per Levinas, in which the ethical Saying cannot exactly be reduced to the constative Said; that is to say, can neither be reduced to description (*Otherwise* 5-7), nor to conventional argument. None of this discounts Wittgenstein’s doubts about the possibility of a language of ethics: let us again simply entertain the idea of an in-between, some third or middle language between description and performance that remains sufficiently attentive to the vagaries of intra-linguistic and possible inter-performative doublings of music, counting, and ethics.

An attempt to think fugal thought as it gets registered in Coetzee's writing will need to pay attention to how one follows another (and not only in counting): to consider and to follow, for instance, the way Coetzee follows Joyce in fugal imitation. From a few pages ago, as if in fugal pursuit of this page, comes the reminder of Fux etymologically describing the fugue as a call and response composition in which "one part flees, pursued by another", and "this is actually nothing but what has been explained as imitation."

I elsewhere treat such imitation as a creative cannibal-practice of semiophagy or ingestion and incorporation ("Entr'acte"). Here, however, the imitation-beyond-mimicry is more centrally a matter of contrapuntal music, and calls for a recapitulation of the Siren-music in Joyce, as familiar as this might be; calls, that is, for some pointedly and contrapuntally arranged set of marks and remarks in generalizable particularity rather than for yet another 'strictly' academic attempt to debate the issue of 'fugal form' in "Sirens" itself.

Response to these calls will here emphasize the contingently contiguous co-occurrence or co-occurrence of compositional items, and will exploit especially those more or less haphazard instances of accident and chance among compositional events. In their mixed imbrication, such events are likely to afford a variety of entry ways, both horizontal and vertical.

Fugue is unconvincingly thought of as a "form" (except in didactic circumstances of apprenticeship). Nevertheless, the debate over fugal form in "Sirens" is considerable. It ranges from the suggestive as authorized by Joyce's schemata (Gilbert), to denial on more or less technical grounds (Bowen), to detailed accounts of the chapter as fugally formed in multiple key signatures (Rogers). The problem is perhaps a difficulty of thought itself, a difficulty not unlike that confronting Funes in Borges's "Funes the Memorious", whom Borges calls a "monster" evoked by a "reading of the four hundred thousand words of *Ulysses*" ("Fragment" 220). Funes is key, perhaps even some kind of skeleton key.

Let us invite our language or third position to be attentive to the way in which "the kinds of use we feel to be the "point" are connected with the role that such-and-such a use has in our whole life" (*Remarks* 43), and so allow "use" to open to an otherness beyond the familiarities of transitive instrumentality. From within some such diffusely pointed, mixed and polyphonic discourse, a series of "Strong Opinions" ranging from opinions on Guantanamo Bay to opinions on prepositions and paedophilia destined for publication in the German-language text to which JC is contributing, mixed with those gentler reflections of the "Second Diary", all attended by a group of "Notes" meeting scholarly obligations, but also all contaminated by fictively-constructed desire, event, and intrigue contrapuntally arranged, *Diary's* JC confesses to experiencing his "one and only idea" that "might count as abstract" quite late in life, at a mid-point of sorts, in his fifties: "when it dawned on me that certain everyday mathematical concepts might help clarify moral theory", which "has never quite known what to do with quantity":

The skeleton key to open multiple doors would be cut by imitation: not verisimilitude, but fugal imitation. The passport for a performance of such openings might be Funes, or else a remembering of Jacques Derrida's remarking of *Ulysses*, first presented at the Joyce Symposium of 1984 in Frankfurt, first of Joyce's non-resident cities to host the symposium, and by chance, as Derrida notes, the nominal capital of the Frankfurt School, intimately associated with Adorno ("Ulysses" 284).

Later, in a ceremony usually planned to coincide with Adorno's birthday on September 11 but postponed in 2001 for eleven days, Derrida received in Frankfurt the Adorno Prize. In his acceptance address, which Hélène Cixous speaks of as a love-letter to Benjamin via Adorno and a "twin-towered letter" revised up to that time "the planes of the death of the Century took off" (*Hyperdream* 65-66), Derrida claims Adorno as one of his "pères d'adoption": echoes of JC-Bach, and JMC-Bach here; adoption sound and echo both for Derrida and for Coetzee haunted by the memory of dying or already dead biological fathers (*Fichus* 36; *Diary* 165; *Summertime*).

Funes is embroiled in counting, itself implicated in the question of what counts (as evidence, say): how counting is allowed to count, and who is allowed to count (it / them). Despite his flawless memory, Funes is incapable of thought, suspects his narrator. (Funes "cannot *think*" Coetzee writes in *Stranger* [144].) His incapacity is occasioned by the veracity of his memory: "To think is to forget differences, to generalize, to make abstractions. In the teeming world of Funes, there were only details" (94; translation modified). The oddly specific practice whereby Funes conducts his counting by way of a nomenclature in which each number has "a particular sign" — "In place of seven thousand thirteen, he would say (for example) *Máximo Pérez*; in place of seven thousand fourteen, *The Railroad* ", and so on — illustrates his incapacity to generalize systemically, and renders his radically specific practice unsystematic and incomplete (92-93).

moral theory has never quite known what to do with quantity, with numbers. Is killing two people worse than killing one person, for example? If so, how much worse? Twice as bad? Not quite twice as bad — one and a half times as bad, say? Is stealing a million dollars worse than stealing one dollar? What if that one dollar is the widow's mite? (*Diary* 204)

These are difficult questions; difficult in the way questions of ethics, morality, and widow's mites easily turn out to be. These are the kinds of questions Elizabeth Costello, herself a widow (*Lives* 17), struggles with in *Lives of Animals* and again in *Elizabeth Costello*, struggling from within her "seven decades of life experience" (*Lives* 23) and as a writer of fictions (her mite?) to situate herself in a variously humanimal-populated world replete with often incommensurate ideas.

JC and Costello join Funes, Coetzee, and Joyce, in struggling with how the more or less abstractly general enters into relationship with the more or less concretely particular in thought, agency, and expression.

Such are the contingently disjunctive and (by design) more or less accidental imbrications that skeleton keys negotiate and in which fugal composition delights. These are also the kinds of overlap that Derrida pursues in his opening address as keynote speaker to the Joyce Symposium, imitating by way of his part-fugally arranged discourse for ear and for eye the circlings of audible sound and visible word on Homeric itinerary through *Ulysses*, paying particular attention along the way to the *yeses* and to the sound of laughter, a “yes-laughter” or *oui-rire* overlapping Hélène Cixous’s subversively laughing Medusa in which the feminine affirms: ““yes,” says Molly, carrying *Ulysses* off beyond any book and toward the new writing: “I said yes, I will Yes”” (Derrida, “Ulysses” 291; Cixous, “Laugh” 884).

Yes-laughter originates from the Joyce text where *yes* proliferates into the climax of *yeses* that mark Molly Bloom’s concluding sequence, but also from the speaking-occasion itself, in which the audience is invited to laugh: not only at themselves, for what they do, but also at others (Derrida for one, Julia Kristeva for another) who have been invited to speak as *strangers from outside*: in Derrida’s case to deliver the opening address on Joyce to Joyce-experts, an invitation to which Derrida says “yes”, accepting the key to the symposium-city, a key he turns by — risibly — counting the *yeses* in both the English and the French version authorized by Joyce, as though these *yeses* were tumblers in a lock which the key by design is committed to turn (291-92), when in fact one of Derrida’s points is surely to suggest that “a *yes* cannot be counted” (“Number” 240). There is no exactly counting a “yes”; nor (therefore?) can “yes” always be appreciated, especially as unconditional affirmation (another potential entry point for ethics).

Such extreme capacity for the particular aligns — by hyperbole — Funes to William Blake, who also militantly insists on the particular in hyperbolic maxims railing against abstraction in Locke, Bacon and Reynolds, mostly (“To Generalize is to be an Idiot. To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit — General Knowledges are those Knowledges that Idiots possess” [641]) and who, like the Wittgenstein of “Lecture on Ethics”, also thinks of ethics as part (“the most essential part” says Wittgenstein) of “what is generally called Aesthetics” (4). This last overlap also tangentially aligns Funes in a most surprising way, and again by hyperbole, to Levinas, who struggles against the assimilation of otherness to the Same, insisting instead on the radically exterior particularity of the Other, whose “strange” face locates ethics.

The terrain of such struggle in which JC, Costello, Funes, Coetzee, and Joyce become embroiled is marked by those familiar features generally present in each individual case: the particularities of genre (here especially fiction, autobiography, and ethics / aesthetics — in Borges, writes Coetzee, “the ethical and the aesthetic are tightly wound together” [*Stranger* 147]) — and by the generalities of systemic thought, including its particular manifestations in discourses like the mathematical and the philosophical and the musical.

Derrida's key-turning performance is supplemented by a telephone trope: for me a fugal rather than a cellular call, though the trope also returns to me the memory of being connected to a telephonic party line. All this telephoning alongside and inside *Ulysses* is enacted to situate Joyce's signature in its "grama-phoning" (by writing and speech and, I say, fugal music), in its location (between careful design and the vagaries of chance), and in its locutions (between the expected and the unexpected, the masculine and the feminine, the same and another, shared telephone party line), all countersigned by the idiom of an operator who interlaces his account of *yes* as always "a response to a request that has already been made" ("Ulysses" 299) with a brief thread of auto-itinerary crossing the time during which he prepared to meet the obligations imposed by this Joyce presentation as he travelled from Ohio to Tokyo to Paris: "A signature is always a *yes, yes*, the *synthetic* performative of a promise and a memory conditioning every commitment" (279): issue, then, of response, respect, and commitment.

Much travel, writing, telephoning, so soon after Paul de Man's death for a Derrida who never left the Algerian commune of his birth before age nineteen (Malabou 35, 209-211).

Numbers confound Levinas too, as the dedication to *Otherwise than Being* demonstrates; it begins: "To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated [...]". And JC asks what *exactly* does it mean "to say that six million deaths are, in ensemble, worse than one death? It is not a paralysis of the faculty of reason that leaves us staring helplessly at the question. It is the question itself that is at fault" (206). Costello enumerates various death camp casualties (*Lives* 19); Adorno insists that "to quote or haggle over the numbers is already inhumane" ("Education" 192).

In the Borges story, the problem of number spills over to Funes's linguistic endeavours, framed as these are by the history of mathematico-linguistic concerns about the limits of natural language.

JC presents his "one and only idea" by way of set theory, reminding us first that "In mathematics, a wholly ordered set is a set of elements in which each element has to stand either to the left of or to the right of each other element", and that positive and negative whole numbers constitute a wholly ordered set in which "*to the left of* can be interpreted to mean less than [as moral judgment, "worse than"], *to the right of* to mean greater than ["better than"]". In a partially ordered set, however, "the requirement that any given element must be *either* to the right of *or* to the left of any other given element does not hold." If one were to think of moral judgments as belonging to a partially ordered set, "there will be pairs of elements (a single victim as against two victims; a million dollars against a mite) to which the ordering relation, the moral question *better or worse?*, does not necessarily apply. In other words, the unrelieved *better or worse?* line of questioning has simply to be abandoned" (204-205).

This might all sound familiar; but that is the fugal point of repeating it. What is mostly here required from such repetition is the call or heartbeat of musical affirmation, the call and response of playing general against particular, and, crucially, playing the aesthetic alongside the ethical, the latter — as Spinoza, Agamben, and others have understood — more closely connected to living a happy life than to any juridical or numerical scaffolding. Here also, articulated in response to fugal writing, emerge the rudiments of a fugal practice of reading that would gather together the familiarities of imitation with contrapuntal surprise.

With his prodigious memory, Funes teaches himself Latin, English, French, and Portuguese; he proceeds to contemplate a language that could name all particular things extant in his world. This language is like the counting procedure he devises, and the foil is again that Locke distressed by the “Imperfection of Words” exacerbated by trope (146), who regards mathematics as the only trustworthy language. But, responds Blake: “God forbid that Truth should be Confined to Mathematical Demonstration” (659).

JC suspects that binary procedure here has to be abandoned for another, let us say a third or a fictive line of questioning. The phrase “third line of questioning” might even rescue some truth from the initial error of counting what cannot justly be counted, if only by revealing again that what counts, what matters, cannot always be counted in the usual way. My telephone number is unlikely to be a final digit larger or smaller than the number in use by my immediate neighbour — except once upon a real time when I was indeed connected to a party line.

What JC and EC (and JMC no doubt) resist from within their fictive domain is precisely the sort of number-driven thought-experiment conducted by Jeff McMahan (after Peter Singer), which for all its intellectual sophistication relies on crude enumeration to justify this and that:

Suppose that a woman who wants to be a single parent becomes impregnated via artificial insemination, but dies during childbirth. She has no close friends and no family — no one to claim the child. The newborn infant is healthy and so is an ideal candidate for adoption. But suppose that, in the same hospital in which the infant is born, there are three other children, all five years old, who will soon die if they do not receive organ transplants. The newly orphaned infant turns out to have exactly the right tissue type: if it were killed, its organs could be used to save the three ailing children. According to the view I have developed, it ought to be permissible, if other things are equal, to sacrifice the newborn orphaned infant in order to save the other three children. (McMahan 356; Mulhall discusses this thought-experiment at some length: 24-33)

My woodsellers might price their wood otherwise than yours. For various reasons, counting can fail or appear to fail; when it does, it perhaps reminds that much in life is not subject to ‘strict’ measurement *as usual*, though surely remaining subject to the *whole life* of those who count.

Yes can be proffered as an auto-element in the Joycean fugue inherited and inhabited by Coetzee: “the *I* of *I sign* says *yes* and says *yes* to itself” writes Derrida (“Ulysses” 298). And this will *audibly* be the case in writing that aspires by design and by chance towards a musicality it hunts as a *yes* which *says*, “but says nothing in itself, if by saying we mean designating, showing, describing some thing to be found outside language, outside marking” (297): marking writ not only by writing, but also by reading. Here then, from inside (perhaps from inside exile, from a pressing sense of things being out of place), begins the reach towards the articulate and exterior performance of ethics (as apposed to a discourse *about* ethics). In this regard *yes* can be thought of as *being* — as being a mark of itself — more than as *meaning*, though Derrida himself was carefully suspicious, elsewhere suggesting that an “ontological analytic of the *yes* can only be fictive or fabulous”, can only be “quasi-ontological” (“Number” 238, 235).

Locke had entertained “an impossible language” in which “each stone, each bird and each branch, would have its own name”. Funes “projected an analogous language, but discarded it because it seemed too general to him, too ambiguous.” Funes’s problem, a parody of the possibility or the impossibility of ethics, is that he remembers “not only every leaf of every tree of every wood,” each of which would in ethical recognition of alterity require a separate signifier, but “also every one of the times he had perceived or imagined” each of these entities. Confronted by a massive multiplication of unique and particular terms which he is loath to generalize, being incapable thereof, Funes considers a mathematical solution (to limit “each of his past days to some seventy thousand memories, which would then be defined by means of ciphers”) but eventually surrenders under the weight of the double-realization that “the task was interminable” and “useless”, since “by the hour of his death he would not even have finished classifying all the memories of his childhood” (93).

All writing, including this sort of ‘ciphering’, is autobiographical, threatened by what most threatens autobiography: impossibility, difficulty, and death.

JC asks if killing two people is worse than killing one; and if so, how much worse? “Questions like these”, writes JC, “are not merely scholastic. They must exercise the minds of judges every day” (204). With this set of ideas, and despite its mathematical abstraction so different from the “literal cast of mind” Elizabeth Costello acknowledges of herself, JC reveals his partial proximity to Costello, who in *Lives* finds herself surrounded on all sides and at several levels, as if in a partially ordered set, by numerous thinkers inside, at the periphery of, and even outside the text in which she tries to meet her mostly self-imposed obligation to address “the industrialization of animal lives and the commodification of animal flesh” (61); to speak, that is, as a novelist, an artist, in a speaking occasion attended mostly by philosophers of the ethical, to whom she, the aging Costello, addresses herself.

Hunting what Stravinsky — also an exile — calls the “*synchronization*” of “general principles with particular facts” (18), the generalization of the preceding pages has associated *yes* with musical composition and with bodily performance. *Yes*, in other words, has been linked to those possibilities of note and tone that a composer, says Stravinsky, searches out “the way an animal grubs about” in “expectation of our pleasure, guided by our scent” (55), sniffing out those musical propositions freed, as Adorno puts it, from the obligation of “communicat[ing] meanings” while still working via a musically “articulated tradition” that retains within itself something of the “pre-rational, magical, and mimetic” gestures of its immediacy “lost to all human knowledge” (*Music* 114, 145, 140). These sorts of gestures are themselves linked — as Cixous once imagined it — to a (for her) femininely-sung linguistic coupling; here an analogously embodied but especially musical language of the humanimal, a language attentive to its incarnation in an aging, chiasmic, cross-gendered humanimality capable of ethical response.

In a struggle not entirely unlike those confronting Funes, Derrida, JC, and Costello, Levinas (whose thought constitutes what Abi Doukhan calls “a Philosophy of Exile”) pursues, with joy, an ontologically-derived description of the ethical (in *Totality and Infinity*) but also the more difficult attempt orthographically to *perform* or embody the ethical (in *Otherwise than Being*).

In a much more modest fashion, I too have engaged in a performance of sorts — inconclusive as it may so far have been and, yes, may always be.

Despite various difficulties and qualms, and thinking of the perfume that pervades *Ulysses*, Derrida — like Ulysses in exile from his native land — associates *yes* with “transcendental adverbiality”, a *yes* “still very close to the inarticulate cry, a preconceptual vocalization, the perfume of discourse” (297): something we can all more or less smell and hear. Something Other to which we can respond (surely the very beginning of any ethical opportunity).

And so, agreeing here and there sometimes, being here and there sometimes (in and out of exile) and aging also (always), we have acquired a rough sense of the tumblers or numbers and number of tumblers falling across the subjects at hand and falling also across *The Lives of Animals* as if in some complicated locking mechanism or some telephone exchange, both tropes reminiscent of a partial order, in which, by definition, not every included pair of elements (numbers, tumblers) is necessarily related.

And so also, J.M. Coetzee, aging and since 2007 ailing too, is invited to deliver the 1997-98 Tanner Lectures sponsored by Princeton University, to which invitation Coetzee says “yes” some fortnight of years after Derrida says “yes” to the James Joyce Association, and a couple of years before Derrida is awarded the Adorno Prize in Frankfurt. But Coetzee ends up speaking at Princeton through the telephone-exchange operating voice of Elizabeth Costello, aging Australian ficto-fabrication. Coetzee and Costello speak to (and listen in on) one another — and to the philosophers — as if on an old-fashioned telephone party line.

Coetzee and Costello do not speak of novel writing, as might have been expected, but instead of the conundrums attending speech on animal life and of the circumstances under which livestock in particular can be said to live (*Lives* 32, 61).

I remember, from when I was young, telephonic party lines being also called “farm lines”. But, as though by Shandean obligation, more — that is to say some of, if not all the rest — will have to wait for its continuation in “Track One, Point Two”, whose entry is exiled from the current pages by page-length limits.

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Muzimatematica fugii banda unu, punctul unu: J.M. Coetzee, etica, și contrapunctul joycean

Acest eseu multipartit urmărește ca set de relații contrapunctice anumite zone de contact, de suprapunere sau de sincronie între diferite voci învecinate: cea literară, cea lingvistică, muzicală, autobiografică, matematică și etică. Tehnica sa de control e noțiunea – inevitabil abstractă și generală – de fugă, mai precis axată în sensul etimologic al fugii derivat din *fugere* și *fugare* – a fugi și a urmări. Ceea ce urmărește așadar eseu de față, cu ajutorul unei tehnici asemănătoare chemării și răspunsului din timpul vânătorii, caracteristice texturii fugii, e mai exact: o lectură a modului în care, în ficțiunea sa recentă, emigrantul nomad J. M. Coetzee îi urmează în exil exercițiului fugii din cântecul de sirenă joycean; pentru început, va fi vorba mai ales de aranjamentul contrapunctic din *Diary of a Bad Year*.

Migrând de-a lungul rândurilor de pe pagină și de asemenea migrând către și dinspre diversele segmente ale acestui eseu multipartit, lectura mea articulează o performanță întotdeauna cel puțin dublă: o lectură și o scriere în cheia fugii, care mai întâi imită practica lingvistică a lui Coetzee aflat în urmărirea lui Joyce dar care, de asemenea, – cum se întâmplă și la Coetzee – încearcă apoi să și bulverseze Similaritatea perfectă a imitației prin surpriza contrapunctică ce însoțește survenirea mereu unică a exilului individual, a expatrierii, sau sosirea neașteptată a Celuilalt – toate indicii posibile ale eticului. Pentru a-și urmări prada, acest eseu a ales el însuși exilul, fugind de domeniul nobil al argumentării convenționale și riscând aproape inadmisibilul: ca formă, el evită sistemul de citare Chicago Style deși se conformează în alte privințe protocolului stilistic al revistei *Word and Text*.