Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life (1997), Youth (2002), and Summertime (2009) form a sequel of memoirs in which Coetzee presents fictionalized versions of his younger self in different stages of his life. The action of Boyhood spans the years 1950–53, in which John, the child, is between the ages of ten and thirteen. For the most part, the action takes place in the South African town of Worcester, although, towards the end of the text, John and his family move to Cape Town. Youth focuses on the period of John’s life beginning in 1959, when he is nineteen and a student at the University of Cape Town. Moved by his literary ambitions and desirous of escaping the South African scene of political turmoil, he moves to London, where he works as a computer programmer, while writing his MA thesis on Ford Madox Ford. The period of Coetzee’s life dealt with in Summertime corresponds to the early and mid-1970s, when he was struggling to find his way as a writer, after returning to South Africa from the USA. He is depicted in a solitary and single state, living with his father in a shabby house, engaged in part-time, low-level teaching, and unable to have meaningful relationships with women.

Compared with other works by Coetzee, both Boyhood and Youth have received few critical responses, and attention has been almost exclusively directed at their autobiographical character, in particular to the peculiar effects of the third-person, present-tense narration in relation to the overall confessional tone.1 With the exception of Barnard, Dooley, and Easton, who have pointed

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to the importance of the politics of place in these two works, critics have tended to overlook this dimension, whereas I would argue that the perception of the European as visitor in the South African land, which is central to Coetzee’s fictional production, is also fundamental for John the child and John the young adult. The child is able to adopt an ethical stance towards the family farm that implies a radical subversion of the Afrikaner pastoral tradition and its “proprietal consciousness.” John, the embryo novelist, is caught in an ambivalent state between a deep attachment to his homeland, however unwilling he is to accept it, and his desire to embrace the exiled condition of his modernist masters. This displacement is reinforced by his feeling that he is an illegitimate visitor both in South Africa (owing to his European ancestry) and in England (owing to his immigrant status). In both the child and the young adult, the tension between location and dislocation, belonging and unbelonging, is an essential feature of their identity and of their development throughout the respective memoirs.

The narrative technique of Summertime differs considerably from that of the previous memoirs. The initial section, entitled “Notebooks 1972–1975,” is made up of passages, presented as diary entries, which, as in Boyhood and Youth, are told in a present-tense, third-person voice but which are interrupted by italicized notes pointing to the issues “to be expanded on” (6, 8) or “to be explored” (9). After a few pages, however, we find what is going to constitute the main narrative mode of the memoir: a series of interviews conducted by Mr Vincent, an English academic who is writing a biography of the late writer J.M. Coetzee. The last brief section, “Notebooks: undated fragments,” returns to present-tense, third-person narration, ostensibly attributable to John Coetzee. In the different versions of John Coetzee produced by different people who got to know him during the 1970s, location and habitation – in relation to the private space of the house he shares with his father, to the family farm, or to the wider social space that is South Africa itself – and belonging and allegiance – particularly with regard to the Afrikaner community – keep coming
