

Unmanned Signatures

UNMANNED SIGNATURES? In addition to its more common significations, “unmanned” is used also in the ‘sport’ of falconry, where it means “not broken in”; the term will in falconry be applied to a hawk or kestrel not (yet?) broken into obedience. “Unwomanned” is similarly linked to deviation from control and controlled norms, but is more likely to appear as a reflexive verb (“to unwoman [herself]”) than as an adjective, and is more likely to be tightly tied in gendered fashion to ‘degeneracy.’ As phrase, title and incipit, “Unmanned Signatures” is in all sorts of ways an oddly descended, perhaps even a degenerate, beginning. But then again it might indeed be the case, as Heidegger contends, that “Concealed within itself, the beginning contains already the end” (“Origin” 48). If this is so, beginnings might regularly be implicated in a genealogical process of compositional or biological *generation*, an issue of signature, that is to say, and so potentially also an occasion for some sort of testing for linkage and separation, some sort of archigraph, I’ll call it: a writing and delineation of the beginning insofar as a beginning can be determined by genealogical tracing, usually but not only a straightforwardly backwards tracing.

*This essay will connect and fail to connect Composition with Competition, Narrative Game with Sporting Event. It will connect by way of analogues predicated on sorting and similitude, and fail to connect inasmuch as it models the extent to which the general in analogue is never sufficient to accommodate without remainder the radical particularity of individual text-events and life-events through which analogue sorts—under the ineluctable sign of death and potential sterility always hovering over the joy of biological life. The remainders left behind after analogy has conducted its sorting into genders, genres, games, orthographies, notes, keys, and numbers are here represented by textual-, texture-, and auto-elements from J.M. Coetzee’s *Summertime*, and by some life-details from athletic competitors including Coetzee’s compatriot-performers, Olympic track-athletes Caster Semenya and Oscar Pistorius.*

The constant constraint in this radically various array of heterogeneous elements is the body, itself so diverse in its manifestations, even in its linguistic manifestations that range from body-urge and other semantically sexualized instances to the more neutrally natural and to the corpse even, and on so to the body of a text and corpus or oeuvre of written work or music, say: all the way back to the human and textual body as resonant with the resonating chamber of a musical instrument. Music, that close relative of the mathematical, needs mention here especially insofar as it becomes crucially important thematically and compositionally to the later-articulated members of the Coetzee corpus, at least from *Age of Iron* onwards, in which the dying Mrs Curren with suffering body struggles to play the first (C major) fugue from Book One of J.S. Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*. “The sound was muddy, the lines blurred, but every now and again, for a few bars, the real thing emerged, the real music, the music that does not die, confident, serene” (21). Music as operatic theme and structural device again becomes especially important in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, as is widely recognized; I too have pursued the *Disgrace* sound track in “Entr’acte,” and try in the following pages (again) fugally to follow Coetzee’s music, to listen and to see where it leads.

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Before young Coetzee was trained as a mathematician at university, the child-Coetzee taught himself to play Bach on the piano: in response, it would appear, to an epiphanic moment much later detailed by lecture in 1991 and printed in *Stranger Shores*, a collection of essays and reviews following after an earlier Coetzee text of essays and interviews, *Doubling the Point*. In the lecture, J.M. Coetzee addresses “the question of the classic” by way of J.S. Bach, whose music Coetzee remembers as having a profound affect on his fifteen-year-old self when “One Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1955” he and his ears in a Cape Town garden registered Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* speaking to him “as music had never spoken to me before” (*Stranger* 8-9).

More than half a century later, himself by this time certified as a classic of some sort inasmuch as the Nobel prize certifies such a thing, Coetzee has his diary-writing character JC from *Diary of a Bad Year* call Bach’s music “The best proof we have that life is good,” and has him express a desire to speak to Bach, “dead now these many years.” JC would like to let Bach know “how we in the twenty-first century still play your music, how we revere and love it, how we are absorbed and moved and fortified and made joyful by it” (211). And he wonders if, in naming Bach, he names the “father I would elect, if, from all the living and the dead, one were allowed to elect one’s father” (222), while his own father, who shares with Coetzee’s father the initials “ZC,” and who is dead now also, for some thirty years already, materially remains to him only in “a small cardboard box” of odds and ends, mementoes mostly from World War Two, from Egypt and Italy, where JC’s father served with the South African armed forces. The box contains also some miscellaneous papers from the end of his life including these terrible words “scrawled on a torn-off scrap of newspaper: ‘can something be done Im dying’” (165). “[P]itiful little box of keepsakes” for which JC now serves as “ageing guardian.” Another pair of questions, signature questions of descent: “Who will save them once I am gone? What will become of them” (166)?

By archigraph linkage and separation of various voices and the various “C”s beginning to accumulate—JMC, JC, ZC, and the C who speaks in the memoirs—a chord is established. The protagonist-narrator of Coetzee’s most overtly autobiographical memoir *Boyhood* also speaks of having an abstract detachment from his own father. As a very young child, and before his father’s return from the war, he had decided that “he does not want to have a father, or at least does not want a father who stays in the same house” (43).

Down here the bass begins with the conceit that, like Mr Vincent in Coetzee’s *Summertime*, Mr Attwell, who conducts the interviews in Coetzee’s essay-collection *Doubling the Point*, is also being played by the music the interviews and essays together make. As though Attwell, like Vincent, were also an instrument. Here’s how the analogy plays out in a particular but telling instance: in *Doubling* Coetzee resists the way Attwell would have that brief Coetzee essay, “A Note on Writing,” resonate. Positioning the “Note” primarily in relation to its locally ‘outside’ environment (the conventionality of “mainstream forms of liberal positivism” and changes in “the political ambiance of realism in South Africa”), Attwell diminishes the *internal* import of the essay, muting its relevance to autobiography, its autobiographical resonance (63).

Already eclipsed by his sons at the time of his death, by 1800 Bach was “completely” forgotten; (not “out of date,” but “merely too *difficult*,” writes Theodor Adorno: “The forgetting of Bach is bound up with bourgeois leisure time, entertainment, and so on” (*Beethoven* 75). But despite the obscurity into which his music fell, so to persist for almost a century, Bach still speaks to us through that music; in no small measure, as Coetzee puts it, through the mysterious clarity of its composition:

In Bach nothing is obscure, no single step is so miraculous as to surpass imitation. Yet when the chain of sounds is realized in time, the building process ceases at a certain moment to be the mere linking of units; the units cohere as a higher-order object in a way that I can only describe by analogy as the incarnation of ideas of exposition, complication, and resolution that are more general than music. Bach thinks in music. Music thinks itself in Bach. (*Stranger* 9)

Coetzee’s lecture, staged around this 1955 auto-moment with Bach and articulated “by analogy,” has its counterparts in another dialectical play of thought about music and language: two essays by Adorno, “The Relationship of Philosophy and Music” (1953), and “Music, Language, and Composition” (1956), compelling engagements both with what was once commonly called a doctrine of the similar.

Coleridge confidently writes in his *Biographia Literaria* that “we can *know* that only which is true” (150), and this by way of an expansive, non-mechanical sense of what the true embraces, a sense accessible to the poet who “*fuses*” together (179) those seemingly disparate elements out of which, in Heidegger’s version, poetry builds its dwelling (*Poetry* 211).

But fusing together is neither easy nor always possible. Underlying any attempt at fusion is an initial process of sorting, not so much of subject to object or fiction to fact, but of fact and fiction or ficto-fact and idea to value, all historically-conditioned terms, even value, though value retains as remainder something autonomous: its ability to speak that truth it authoritatively signs, truth partially reached by way of analogy or paradigm. These sorts of issues, for Derrida matters of oto- and auto-biography, prompt a call in *The Ear of the Other* for a theory of the signature which Derrida elaborates throughout his corpus, a call to which Agamben also responds in the *Signature of All Things*, sketching there his sense of the archeology and genealogy of signature.

This is an odd muting of the autobiographical paraph on Attwell’s part, given that the essay originally appeared as the inaugural entry to a 1984 collection in which various South African writers discuss writing from personal perspectives (Daymond, ed.): a series of auto-statements which Coetzee’s note literally prefigures but from which it distinguishes itself in the seeming impersonality of its incipiently technical performance.

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These essays on music and language are dense in typical Adorno fashion, but overlap one another and strikingly complement the economy of Coetzee's concern to think—dialectically—the relationship between art's autonomy and its historical contingency, in general and in specific terms, aligning but also distinguishing music with and from language and thought, with and from attendant acts of compositional generation and embodied performance, thus complementing *Diary* and its engagement with narrative, music, and number across discourses given over also to politics, athletics, competition, and the body, to name but a few of the topics *Diary* engages.

Agamben begins his “Theory of Signatures” with Paracelsus, for whom “Nothing is without a sign,” and for whom the study of signatures is both a science and an art, engagement in either case with the marking of identity by sign and language everywhere, thus also in what Coetzee calls “the two most complex forms of play,” namely, “sport and the arts” (*Doubling* 125): in the insignia exhibited by and on athletes in international competition, say, but also in the autograph of artists (including authors) whose name can under some circumstances articulate value. (*Signare* can mean “to coin” and thus to certify the worth of an exchange-object reminds Agamben [33-38]). A sign can serve also as mark attributing authority to a person, perhaps by title, less commonly by name, though this latter instance was indeed the case for Paracelsus, who abandoned his birth name to auto-adopt the pseudonym Paracelsus—alongside Celsus—aligning himself thus with the great first-century medical writer, Aulus Cornelius Celsus.

Such auto-acts of reinvention do not always end well, as the examples of grossly fabricated ‘memoirs’ like those of James Frey (*A Million Little Pieces*) and the ‘auto’ life-writing of ontologically non-existent JT Leroy tend to demonstrate. Much can be said about such reinventions; for now it might suffice to say that these putatively autobiographical endeavors just-mentioned, later to be revisited, will not achieve classic status in any sense other than perhaps as ‘a classic hoax’; for it is the case that, as Wittgenstein—a more skeptical authority than Coleridge—more pessimistically than Coleridge would have it: “You cannot write anything about yourself that is more truthful than you yourself are” (33e).

The immediately obvious point here, for above and for below, for the pages before and after, is that in its self-constitutive politics the signature always exceeds the sign, moving semiology to “a new network of pragmatic and hermeneutic relations”; or, as the mystic Jakob Böhme puts it in *his De signature rerum*, also building on Paracelsus: the sign is mute, like an unplayed lute (Böhme's figure), until moved into intelligibility by the musician (Agamben 40-42).

Attwell seeks to have Coetzee concede that the essay's “political aspect” has now surely been rendered anachronistic. Without deigning to say that the essay constitutes a “major” work (it is a very short note), Coetzee does say he has “no desire to distance myself” from it, thus substantiating its valence to the autos (63-64), a sounding reconfirmed by the essay's bearing on the most recent of Coetzee's auto-novels, *Summertime* (2009).

Alongside or even analogously to the multiplicity of topics announced by *Diary's* "Strong Opinions"—which JC identifies as belonging to the genre of "miscellany"—are the miscellaneous mandates so far summoned by this, my beginning. These are mandates in the first instance for sorting through the imbricated categories of identity that govern sorting and signing: gender and genre, foremost, offset from one another mostly or only by the number of categories through which they sort—sexual and linguistic first: male, female, neuter—quickly becoming more numerous as the scope of sorting extends to embrace further instances of identity, thought, and media where discrimination becomes more complicated—intersexed bio-identities, language, music, philosophy, representation, cognition, and so on—instances, from gender onwards, all troubled by degrees of fictionality, of factuality, and of truths in between, including those engendered by writing.

The second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists "kind, sort, class" as the first (now obsolete) set of denotations for "gender" as a noun. (The third edition [2011; online version 2012] resorts its definitions.) The listing continues with what then becomes the first still-current use of the word: as a grammatical term to distinguish between or among two or three distinctions of sex or the absence of sex—feminine, masculine, and sometimes neuter—into which language-systems sort their nouns and inflect those other parts of speech which might be affected by such nominal sorting.

I have previously written on the significance of the middle voice to Coetzee's writing. Without rehearsing all those details, what follows here is only an outline sketching the pertinence of middle-voice writing to autobiography and to the Coetzee novels, including *Summertime*, this time emphasizing the overlap between middle-voice writing and autobiography as a confrontation with loss and the passage of time inexorably headed towards death, a passage within which particular instances of death are already always interpolated. In the presence of loss, middle-voice enunciation—and the autobiography it authorizes—provides a way of attempting to position self-presence even in the face of death, performs a language of self with which to struggle against the difficulty of writing despite particular deaths, to struggle against the impossibility of writing the unique singularity of one's own death, or—at the very least—presents a tool with which to struggle against those inevitable complicities and betrayals that come with being alive, that attend the joy of life.

Says Coetzee's Dostoevsky to his dead son: "We do not write out of plenty [...] we write out of anguish, out of lack. Surely in your heart you must know that" (*Master of Petersburg* 152).

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For Paul de Man, “literature is fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge ‘reality,’ but because it is not *a priori* certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are *like* those, of the phenomenal world” (11). For Coetzee, the sporting event “promises to give meaning to a stretch of time (in this it is like narrative)” (*Doubling* 123). For Adorno, “music is not language,” but it is *like* language: “Its similarity to language points to its innermost nature, but also toward something vague.” Music is like language “in that it is a temporal succession of articulated sounds that are more than just sound”; its sounds speak, that is to say: its sounds “say something, often something humane” (*Essays* 113).

“Bach’s music,” adds Wittgenstein, “is more like language than Mozart’s or Haydn’s” (34e).

In its final listing for this sorting-word before turning to combined performances which the word helps sign, the *OED* enumerates what we might have anticipated as the first sense of gender, a sense the dictionary explicitly identifies as a modern and “esp[ecially] feminist” trope, a *euphemism*: “In mod. (esp. feminist) use, a euphemism for the sex of a human being, often intended to emphasize the social and cultural, as opposed to the biological, distinctions between the sexes” (Second Edition).

And so the combinations: gender-bender (one who deliberately cultivates an androgynous appearance) and gender-gap (the difference in especially political attitudes between men and women). Hence too the sorting of gender as verb (in transitive use a now-archaic form of beget, in the intransitive, a now-obsolete form of copulate), and the recasting of the verb into its modern form: to engender.

In “A Note on Writing” Coetzee elliptically expresses his interest in the middle voice, a “category of thought” Aristotle refers to as *keisthai* or positionality and which Émile Benveniste transposes into a linguistic category indicating the state of being placed [*être en posture* or *être disposé* (Benveniste 66; 70)]. “Though modern Indo-European languages retain morphologically distinct forms for only the active-passive opposition,” Coetzee tells us, following the Roland Barthes of “To Write” on this, “the phantom presence of a *middle voice* (a voice still morphologically present in Ancient Greek and Sanskrit) can be felt in some senses of modern verbs if one is alert to the possibility of the threefold opposition active-middle-passive. ‘To write’ is one of these verbs”:

To write (active) is to carry out the action without reference to the self, perhaps, though not necessarily, on behalf of someone else. To write (middle) is to carry out the action (or better, to do-writing) with reference to the self. (“Note” 94)

If it ever had morphological signs to signal middle-voice utterance, English has long since lost such signing markers; but middle-voice writing still perhaps takes place in English.

“Writing,” writes Roland Barthes of the peculiar position in which writers find themselves placed—he could have included composers of music—“begins at the point where speech becomes *impossible* (a word that can be understood in the sense it has when applied to a child)” (“Writers” 190). Perhaps, as Coetzee’s David Lurie suspects, “the origins of speech lie in song” (*Disgrace* 4); or perhaps, as in writing, music also might begin where speech becomes *impossible*, or inadequate for some occasion. This is not so surprising a step, given that even as it journeys beyond the linguistic, music still resembles writing and language in structure: “The traditional doctrine of musical forms has its sentence, phrase, period, and punctuation,” and, “in all of this, the gesture of music is borrowed from the speaking voice” (Adorno, *Essays* 113).

What we have here then are various sorts of epistemological struggle concerning the possibilities of an impossible grammar, along with various ways to relate and to distinguish play from sports (Coetzee does so by borrowing “from Chomsky’s distinction between innate grammar-constituting mechanisms and grammars themselves” [*Doubling* 104]). And, most crucially for now, the difficult resemblance of music to language and vice versa, even the tantalizing prospect of attempting to make language behave and sign itself as though it were fugal music, the impossible chance of getting language to take (middle-voice) place in perpendicular simultaneity. But also: the problem of texts already alluded to, texts produced by hyperbolically commercial and ethically disturbing lie—the ostensibly auto tales of child prostitution and cruel abuse published under the signature of young JT LeRoy, for instance, celebrity male teenager who came into existence “in the flesh” (breasts bound for the occasion it later transpired) only after the writing fact: writing fact supplied by the not-so-young Laura Albert, public performance courtesy of impersonation by Albert’s much younger half-sister-in-common-law, Savannah Knoop (Beachy; Vernon).

Summertime is implicated in such sorts of undertaking. *Summertime* is a musical instance of middle voice experiment playfully predicated on the “impossible” death of John Coetzee, an experiment engendered from a place not entirely dissimilar from the JT LeRoy project: a place of criss-crossing genres and cross-dressing genders.

In English, middle-voice utterance is a grammatically impossible articulation placed by loss. One can only sign or speak this “unmanned” or empty voice—this morphologically non-existent voice—figuratively, by way of the presence its specular phantom presents to the self that speculates, the self with reference to which it carries out the action of writing in a way quite distinct from the usual procedures of active voice. Middle-voice writing takes place as though it were poetry, occupying rather than filling the page into which it cannot simply be poured.

Even in the absence of morphological markers, however, it remains possible to think and so to write in the middle voice, a voice not only and obviously distinguished from its passive counterpart, but also and less obviously so from its active counterpart—conceptually by refusing absolute boundaries between subject, verb, and object by fusing or re-fusing these entities all-together in an event that says: writing takes place here.

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Music even has its own equivalents of “concept,” “intention,” and “judgement,” though these do not sign themselves in quite the same way as they do in what Adorno calls “signifying language,” from which music distinguishes itself by virtue of its “theological aspect” (113-114):

What music says is a proposition at once distinct and concealed. Its idea is the form [Gestalt] of the name of God. It is demythologized prayer, freed from the magic of making anything happen, the human attempt, futile, as always, to name the name itself, not to communicate meanings. (114)

This gender- and genre-fluid place is no longer JT LeRoy’s celebrity spot in California, but—for the John Coetzee of *Summertime*—the more arid and more (or less) anonymous, more (and less) nuanced Karoo, where the recently-returned-from-America John Coetzee strikes cousin Margot as “sexless” (118), strikes cousin Carol as “thirty-something years old with no prospects” (127), one rumored to write poetry no less (in a place, Margot reminds us “where poetry is not a manly activity, but the province of [a-sexual] children and *oujongnooiens* [spinsters]—*oujongnooiens* of both sexes” [129-30]), where the sexuality of cousin John appears a little ‘dubious’ (as in almost all the interviews Vincent conducts), where John is conceived of as a “*slapgat*,” a flaccid specimen of unmanned malehood (115-116): not quite “a *moffie*” [‘fairy’ or ‘queer,’ in the derogatory sense of these words], but just perhaps “a eunuch” (114) of sorts (in Afrikaans a *gesnedene*, an *ontmande* [one who has been cut, unmanned]). Or, perhaps better yet, not exactly a eunuch, cut and unmanned for political purposes (to limit dynastic temptations among civil servants, say), but a castrato, belatedly cut, auto-cut even, in a wager for art’s sake (as the castrati were once cut before the onset of puberty to preserve the notational range and the pre-pubescent timbre of their voices).

Coetzee offers a “paradigm sentence” dressed in active voice: “I | am writing | a note,” in which the bars illustrate separation between subject, verb, and object. Here subject is “prior to, independent of, and untouched by the verb”; here the transitivity of the verb is emphasized by bar between verb and object; here subject and object are disconnected; and so forth. The middle voice version takes place by *losing* the bars: “I am writing a note (middle)” (95) re-connects the three elements, re-fusing their absolute separation. Situating itself between active and passive voice, mobilizing its verbs as neither obviously transitive nor yet obviously intransitive, middle voice writing signs its desire to articulate what in English is only *grammatically* impossible but full still of possibilities: writing is taking place, writing me as I write it (cf. *Doubling* 17-18). The middle voice figures the *impossible* situation in which the always self-conscious Coetzee finds himself, and in which his auto-fictive namesake is positioned in *Summertime*: as an ‘early’ but now also dead John Coetzee at the onset of his fiction-writing career, a Coetzee about whom Mr Vincent, who has never met Coetzee “*in the flesh*” (34), hopes to produce a biography concentrating on the period “*when he was still finding his feet as a writer*” (225).

Music, for Adorno a “secularly preserved form of prayer” (141), nevertheless remains “a means of cognition,” albeit “veiled” and possessed by the “specifically enigmatic character” which makes it behave as though it were a riddle (117; 138; 122): a riddle only possible to solve through performance by “one who plays it correctly, as something whole” (139).

This all resembles the signature similitude between at least some sorts of music and some sorts of language: those sorts which present themselves as sign systems transformed by performative signature. The resemblance suggests also those periodically-articulated, often spiritual similarities between music and counting: Leibniz’s contention that music constitutes itself “in the harmonies of numbers and in a calculation that we are not aware of, but which the soul nevertheless carries out,” for instance (212); or Stravinsky’s sense of composition as a field of “balance and calculation through which the breath of the speculative spirit blows” (50).

In this ficto-linguistic domain that resembles the phenomenal world without ever becoming identical to it, it can be difficult to disentangle play from organized game, game-playing from rule-formation, and art from politics. The example of sports is again instructive, because the tensions in sport-playing are easier to distinguish. Coetzee puts it this way: “In the creative arts, the artist both composes his game and plays it. He thus asserts an omnipotence that the player of sports yields up. This helps to explain why sports are so easily captured and used by political authority, while the arts remain slippery, resistant, undependable as moral training grounds for the young” (*Doubling* 125).

The artist is under less obligation to play by the rules, which she is indeed often expected to break. Not so for athletes, as international track and field competition clearly shows in anti-doping legislation and in the rules mandating that female competitors, since and mostly as a result of the cold war, have had to resign themselves to the indignities of official ‘gender verification’ more scandalous in its depraved exercise and inconclusive methodologies—humiliating on both counts—than the occasional intersexual genetic anomalies the testing has or might have managed to record as evidence—not of fraud, not once—but of the genetic diversity of humankind, the variously distinctive paraphs of its bio-physical signatures: offensive testing in the ‘wholesome’ name of ensuring a ‘fair playing field’ in the global arena.

In other words, words that acknowledge the engagement with self and otherness that Coetzee’s writing undertakes, middle voice writing and the ghostly locutions it makes available to the ‘impossible’ task of autobiography figures Coetzee’s search for elusive possibilities in unlikely places, and does so in a distinctive signature whose paraph-syntax ranges widely across paradigms of thought and practice involving language, music, number, sport, politics, and even dreams: like those JC has of his own death (59), from one of which he wakes with an “intriguing idea: to write a novel from the perspective of a man who has died” (158; this is the *Summertime* situation, more or less and roughly speaking).

Like number and counting, which share characteristics with signifying language without thereby becoming identical to language, music presents to composer and to performer a field and a system “at once independent of and open to the [composing or performing] subject,” thus constituting an intelligible idiom and articulated tradition even as it retains within itself something of its “pre-rational, magical, and mimetic” origins (Adorno, *Essays* 145). Music’s mixed origins and content—as mixed as those that engendered the novel and the miscellany—supply some of the qualifications that for Adorno relate music to language, and resonate in particular with some of the characteristics of autobiography previously suggested: “like signifying language, [music] is sent, failing, on a wandering journey of endless mediation to bring home the impossible” (116). Music—for Schoenberg contrapuntal music in particular—belongs to the enunciation of its unfolding: its becoming, Adorno would say; but for Schoenberg its unfolding [*abwicklung*], an event prepared for by its beginning (Schoenberg 104; 113; 282).

‘Gender verification’ was and is prompted by competitive complaint, rumor, and media exploitation of and about record-breaking athletes like Stanisława Walasiewicz—also known as Stella Walsh and, eventually, courtesy of the press, as “Stella the Fella”—who excelled in the 1932 Olympics and was by chance much later shot to death during a robbery in Cleveland, Ohio; the autopsy revealed ambiguous genitalia and atypical sex chromosomes (Richie *et. al.* 396, who mislocate the fatal shooting to Los Angeles; even the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* appears to have trouble with ‘facts’).

Walasiewicz defended her title in “Hitler’s Olympics” of 1936, an event already stained by the host nation’s official attitude towards Jewish competitors, where she lost to teen-aged Helen Stephens, whom Walasiewicz accused of being male, prompting the International Olympic Committee to perform a physical inspection of Stephens’s external genitalia, subsequently deemed sufficiently female for the occasion.

“How do we count?” asks JC, “How do we learn to count? Is what we do when we count the same as what we do when we learn to count?” Such questions require consideration of the way in which counting and learning to count constitute an engagement between subject and system; or, to use more mathematical terms, between subject, number, and a wholly- or partially-ordered set. As in the case of autobiography, the engagement calls for reflection on the Möbius borderline between the system and the subjects of the system. Learning to count, or teaching a child to count, involves an exergatic procedure—repetition for change—whereby we relate the counting subject to countable items strategically and medially placed between the counting subject and the system of numbering, as though in middle voice demonstration. The procedure is repeated “*until the child gets the idea*” that “the list is ordered and has a system” whose internally constituent parts are externally observable (*Diary* 87-88).

Like any temporal art, and so like autobiography, a musical performance earns its fullest intelligibility after the event of its duration: in a retrospective recognition of its forward movement. Music is not so different in this respect from athletic competition. Schoenberg, as if with the performing and potentially excelling athletic body in mind, defines a “piece of music” as “an articulated organism whose organs, members, carry out specific functions in regard to both their own external effect and their mutual relations” (104). The full effect of such collaboration can completely be discerned only after the event.

Dismissing any facile sense of “the timeless essence of music,” as Coetzee does also in his account of the classic, Adorno looks to an historically-sensitive dialectic that recognizes the “dignity of the greatest music, that of the late periods of Bach and Beethoven,” in which “music transcended its own character as language, in a manner comparable, say, to the way the poetry of the very late Hölderlin aims at a demolition of the sphere of linguistic meaning” (*Essays* 147). Adorno points in this regard also to Schoenberg, singling out in particular the latter’s *Survivor from Warsaw* as proffering testimony that dignity is still possible, despite Auschwitz. Likening the *Survivor from Warsaw* to Picasso’s *Guernica*, Adorno says of the former that in its execution “Schoenberg made the impossible possible, standing up [‘in art’] to the contemporary horror in its most extreme form, the murder of the Jews” (149-50): the innumerably murdered.

Out of this same Olympics comes also the even more difficult and more misreported saga of another teenager, Dora Ratjen, who replaced the best-performing high-jumper on the German women’s team, Gretel Bergmann, a Jew. Although Ratjen ‘only’ placed fourth in the Olympic event (the event that day was won by Ibolya Csák, a Hungarian Jew), she did go on to set a new world record in the European Athletics Championships of 1938. Days thereafter she was arrested at a train station on suspicion of fraud (fraud “against the Reich,” the police report stipulates).

The police had been summoned by a ticket inspector who took her to be a cross-dressing him. Police examination ruled Ratjen male, but noted some unusual anatomical details. While most reporting on this incident (to this day) seems satisfied with representing Ratjen as a male (presenting “him” as willingly serving Hitler’s desire for Aryan supremacy in the Olympics, as in the 2009 film, *Berlin 36*), the documents collected by the Department for Sexual Medicine at Kiel University Hospital tell another story: the story of a child born with ambiguous genitalia, baptized and raised as a girl; no sign here of collaboration in any Nazi plot (Berg).

Here then, and not for the last time, we run into a politically perverse discourse on the anomalous but not unnatural body; on what basis would it be unnatural?

Auschwitz is a site where intolerable difficulty in counting intersects with the political. In his opening essay from *Diary*, JC asks “Why is it so hard to say anything about politics from outside politics,” implying alongside Adorno that the effort is possible albeit difficult.

The similitude between signifying language and music, including the latter's participation in a cognitive activity into which it cannot be divided without remainder, has to be witnessed in particular works—in Schoenberg's *Survivor from Warsaw*, say—and this in turn leads Adorno to make inverse reference also to the sometimes analogous performance of some sorts of literary language, from Kafka in particular, another of Coetzee's direct antecedents: Kafka "treated the meaningful contents of spoken, signifying language as if they were the meanings of music, broken-off parables—this in the most extreme contrast to the 'musical' language of Swinburne or Rilke, which [merely] imitates musical effects" (*Essays* 115). When Walter Benjamin writes of the "mimetic faculty" he too has some such central and fundamental sense of similarity in mind, something itself similar to that theory of signatures earlier presented, as the two overlapping documents—"Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty"—clearly illustrate.

After the war, and with increasing use of performance-enhancing drugs among athletes, concern and complaint quickly began to reflect cold-war tensions, focusing for some time on the two Ukrainian sisters, Irina and Tamara Press, who dominated track and field events for the Soviet Union during the 'fifties and 'sixties. Such circumstances led, under pressure from the US, to the 1966 institution of compulsory gender verification tests for female athletes: initially administered as crude physical inspections, and later as a no less definitive but at least less intrusive series of chromosomal examinations. For any number of possible reasons, the Press sisters never submitted themselves to testing, retiring instead.

The difficulty of saying anything that counts about politics from outside politics is further complicated by the very next sentence of this inaugural essay: "Why can there be no discourse about politics that is not itself political?" (9). *Diary* is and is not a body of such discourse.

How are deaths to be counted?

Learning to count is a dialectical procedure in which the system and its sequence (including the proper names of numbers) is registered as preceding the one who counts but also as always subject to the agency of the one who counts by following systematic rule, an agency that enables the counting one to "effectively construct [numbers] out of thin air, one after another, without end" (91). This way of thinking about counting de-emphasizes the process as an activity directed towards some particular (JC might say "political") end, and thereby resists or counters the instrumental attitude of Alan, Anya's domestic partner and JC's dialectical counterpart in *Diary*, who dismisses JC's reflections on number as "mathematico-mysticism" and so also as "bullshit." Alan, one assumes, would steadfastly refuse all this ('bullshit') talk about signatures—that is the signature role he plays in this novel—though he himself is quick to sign similitudes. Says Alan: "Mathematics is not some arcane mumbo-jumbo about the nature of the number one versus the nature of the number two," but "a goal-directed activity, like running" (104).

Benjamin writes in the first of these fragments that “Insight into the realms of the ‘similar’” is “gained less by demonstrating found similarities than by replicating the processes which generate such similarities” (694): performative processes of sensuous (perceptual) and non-sensuous (linguistic) correspondence, precisely the achievement of *Diary’s* hybrid mix of musical composition, narrative, and essay collection or “miscellany,” a genre-designation JC applies to his opinions in part to distinguish them from “stories,” which, unlike opinions, “tell themselves” (54-55).

That the gender testing processes become increasingly ‘scientific,’ ‘objective,’ and ‘instrumentalized’ in their measurement endeavors merely confirms a general trend of competition articulated by JC’s opinions “On competition” in athletic events and the political beyond: a trend whereby, for example, the referee’s authority gives way to that of the camera, free amusement-spectacle gives way to bankrolled business-entertainment, nations enter competitively into commercial production with one another, and so on; a common denominator in all this is capital investment and desire for financial return. The more sporting events commit to commerce (the more what “used to be play has now become work” [75]), the more sporting play distances itself from its similarity to fiction.

The latter is itself of course not untouched by commercial considerations, and not only in the case of James Frey or JT Leroy.

Using cricket as an example, JC puts the sport-fiction similarity this way: “the understanding used to be that when the umpire said that something had happened—the ball had touched the bat, for example—then for the purposes of the game it had indeed happened. Such understandings were in accord with the somewhat fictive character accorded to sporting contests: sport is not life; what ‘really’ happens in sport does not really matter; what matters instead is what we agree has happened” (74).

“Running doesn’t have a nature,” says Alan, “Running is what you do when you want to get from A to B in a hurry” (104-05).

An “investment consultant” JC calls a “broker-man” (47; 143), Alan has installed spyware on JC’s computer. He knows about JC’s finances, including all details of a three-million dollar savings account (presumably Nobel-prize money). For Alan, who has digital designs on this money, “numbers are just numbers,” disconnected “nuts and bolts, the nuts and bolts of mathematics [...] what we utilize [telling use of “utilize” instead of “use”] when we work with mathematics in the real world” (111).

Alan and JC are not talking about the same mathematics; nor about the same “real world.”

Such sorting produces gestures quite germane to understanding the fraught similarities between music and some kinds of writing, particularly some kinds of autobiographical writing—Coetzee’s, to begin with—in which, as previously mentioned and as in music, “what is at stake is not [in the first instance] meaning, but gestures” (Adorno, *Essays* 139). In other words: more than that money JC wryly writes of as “being the measure of all things” (109), more than that money whose acquisition for Alan is “not a game” (134), what counts here are those less-obviously instrumental gestures of enunciation, of performance, and of signature: “To the extent that music is language, it is, like notation in music history, a language sedimented from gestures” writes Adorno. This is a language and not-language with which music itself gestures towards that act of “pure naming, the absolute unity of object and sign, which in its immediacy is lost to all human knowledge”:

In the utopian and at the same time hopeless attempts at naming is located music’s relation to philosophy, to which for this very reason, it is incomparably closer, in its idea, than any other art. (140)

Such passages suggest that competition is pervasive, among the arts even.

Although mandatory sex testing ceased in 2000, ‘dubiously-sexed’ competitors are still subject to ‘requests’ for inspection. The IOC is devising new protocols for the 2012 Olympics. In the interim, the latest victim of verification is the teenaged holder of the women’s eight-hundred metre record for 2009, Caster Semenya, from rural Limpopo Province in South Africa, who was subject to a year-long process of testing begun without her informed consent, testing whose onset was reported by the media before she even obtained her gold medal in that same stadium over which Hitler presided in 1936.

Unperturbed by issues of confidentiality and responsibility, the Australian *Daily Telegraph* reported ten months before an official ruling what it claimed were the test results under the headline “Caster Semenya has male sex organs and no womb or ovaries.” In July 2010, Semenya was cleared for future competition in women’s events. In the 2011 World Championships, she narrowly lost her title. At this same event, her countryman Oscar Pistorius attracted more attention. Despite having been eliminated from the semi-finals of his event, Pistorius is in some quarters considered to enjoy unfair advantage from the carbon fiber prosthetic blades on which he runs, having had as an infant both legs amputated below the knee.

Yet another sense of the mathematical emerges from a much younger J.M. Coetzee, who—not yet Alan-aged (Alan is forty-two [100])—once, as a young bull armed with computer, engaged “in mathematical approach” the textual world of Samuel Beckett to determine the rules of phrasing by means of which “the second 60” sentences of Beckett’s *Lessness* “repeat the first 60 in a new order” (195-96); all writing is autobiographical. And competition runs deep, as Alan is pragmatically aware; JC recognizes this also at the peculiar level of speculative competition in a “strategic game” similar to chess, as hypothetically played between humans and viruses (69).

“In favour of the arts” however, opines JC, “it can at least be said that, while every artist strives for the best, attempts to cast the sphere of the arts as a competitive jungle have had little success.” Although business “likes to finance competitions in the arts, as it is even readier to pour money into competitive sport,” and although business proffers itself as a model for academic institutions, “The eyes of the artist are, finally, not on the competition but on the true, the good, and the beautiful.” This latter pronouncement calls, of course, in auto-competition, for a politico-confessional gloss, which is exactly what it gets: “(Interesting how the march of mercenary individualism drives one into the corner of reactionary idealism)” (119-20).

Meanwhile, on field and track, real and figurative, even thus on the field of “human rights” where, according to Alan, JC’s “track record is not so hot,” is instead empty, unmanned, “virtually blank” (197), records and stories keep accumulating: stories of triumphant excellence, narrow defeats, disappointing performances. Stories of first-time achievement: by running the men’s 4 x 400 relay heats in the 2011 Championships, Pistorius becomes the first double amputee to win a medal in able-bodied competition. Stories also, no doubt, of loneliness too. All the stories that go all the way back to the mysterious moment of birth and consequent gender-decisions, the birth and decision that is always and every time a unique miracle of identity and non-identity despite its every-several-second repeated occurrence across the globe.

JC and Alan, of course, are in competition with one another, as Anya observes: “The old bull and the young bull, fighting it out” to impress her, “the young cow” who is “getting bored with their antics” (109). Battles in the bullring (Coetzee circling Beckett, Alan flaring in front of JC) and around the track, where upstarts like Pistorius or Semenya easily cause a stir. (Some sorts of bodies quickly sound alarms.) On the market floor too, even in that less sanguine version of the market—less ‘optimistic,’ less bloody—under which JC matured, competition is keen and quotes proliferate: “We are all players in the global market: if we do not compete, we will perish.’ The market is where we are, where we find ourselves. [...] It is like being born into a world we have no hand in choosing, to parents unknown. We are here, that is all. Now it is our fate to compete” (118). We are born to unknown parents, sex, and medical condition, yes; as for competition as fate: it does not *have to be* like this. And so JC makes visible other systems of numeration. Even the most-other mathematical systems will always be less arbitrary than linguistic signification. This is a point JC clarifies by referring to the radically other practice Jorge Luis Borges imagines in “Funes the Memorious,” where another extraordinary teenager, the eponymous Funes, is paralyzed after being thrown from his horse. Physically paralyzed, Funes cultivates his already prodigious memory, and “constructs a counting that is not a system of counting” but a tabulation of number to word, a nomenclature (95).

We return to what can get lost (for Adorno the musical act of pure naming, “lost to all human knowledge,” for athletes most obviously a record or title) and to how, over time, despite what we retain and what we forget, despite memory in other words, and despite thought even, which generates and generalizes by forgetting details (which Funes cannot do, leading the Borges narrator to suspect of Funes that he was “not very capable of thought” [94])—despite and because of all this—loss remains: not necessarily terrible, simply inevitable; usually providing an opportunity from which to struggle on. Adorno speaks of music also as receptacle of hope: Hope “is a part of music’s very language” (*Beethoven* 174). Semenya speaks cheerfully of her 2011 silver medal, untainted as it is by the scandal of the previous gold medal (Clarey). And Semenya qualified for the 2012 Olympics in London.

JC wonders: “Why should not our every utterance come accompanied by a reminder that before too long we will have to say goodbye to this world?”—come signed, that is, “Under the sign of death”:

Conventions of discourse require that the writer’s existential situation, which like everyone else’s is a perilous one, and at every moment too, be bracketed off from what he writes. But why should we always bow to convention? Behind every paragraph the reader ought to be able to hear the music of present joy and future grief. *Insh’Alla*. (167)

Why *should* we always bow to convention?

Stories like those of Dora Ratjen, reminding just how linguistically-imbued gender identity is: a matter of pronouns in the first instance, a matter of sexually dimorphic pronouns that results in “her” being arrested as a “him” amidst all the other teenage turmoil. It does not have to be this way. Stories like those of Caster Semenya, to whose defense controversial MP Winnie Madikizela-Mandela awkwardly comes after the *Telegraph* labels Semenya an “hermaphrodite,” saying that even if the claims were true (she means, one assumes, that even if Semenya were born with some ‘Disorder of Sex Development’ [should one say “condition,” should one say “intersex variance”?]): “It is not her fault and I do not understand how anyone can blame this child for a biological problem that is not of her making” (*Daily Mail*, 11 September, 2009).

Brenna Munro has shown that defense-gestures from the ANC (Madikizela-Mandela was appointed to lead the official “task force for the protection of Semenya”), including gestures from Jacob Zuma, are complicated: to begin with, by the legal struggles and circumstances (homophobic and otherwise sexualized circumstances) in which both these senior politicians have separately been embroiled.

In contradistinction to those real-world instrumentalities it cannot deny, JC’s sense of number as simultaneously subject to system and yet also generously available to the agency of one inhabiting the system opens counting to the otherness at the edges of system-as-typically-practiced, making visible some difficulties in- and out-side typical practice: Zeno’s paradox, say, or dimorphic pronouns, or Funes’s numerical nomenclature.

Coetzee thinks here of an autobiographical signing of ineluctable death which some and sometimes feminist writers in dimorphic terms associate with a male project taking place “under the sign of death, defacement, or desire” as against a female articulation of anxiety for “future loss,” or “hope,” what Hélène Cixous calls “the very possibility of change” (Smith 162-63).

Such a return to what can get or is already lost, to what has not yet been reached or understood, calls for a more detailed inquiry into the ways in which language might approach music, vehicle of hope if Adorno is correct, and, more particularly, an inquiry into the ways in which language might approach the contrapuntal texture of the fugue, which Bach has given “its pure, authentic form” (Adorno, *Beethoven* 146)—a possibility explored by Joyce in *Ulysses*, and inherited (it’s a generation thing) by Coetzee, at least from *Disgrace* onwards. This, of course, will have to be the subject of another essay.

Enter Julius Malema, former president of the ANC Youth League and so potentially a next-generation leader, also controversial—among many reasons for publically suggesting that the woman who accused Zuma of rape had “a nice time” (because she didn’t leave early in the morning and instead stayed for breakfast)—and, like Semenya, a native speaker of Sepedi: “Hermaphrodite, what is that? Somebody tell me, what is hermaphrodite in Pedi? There’s no such thing, hermaphrodite, in Pedi. So don’t impose your hermaphrodite concepts on us” (quoted Munro 392). The paradox here, as Neville Hoad notes, “is that Malema, in ostensibly defending Semenya, implicitly invokes a fixed and dimorphic gender binary in the name of cultural variance.” Malema, as Hoad records, follows up with this sentiment: “Why should we accept concepts that are imposed on us by the imperialists? We will never agree to that concept. You are either a girl or a boy and that’s it” (400).

At root this is a problem of pronouns. As though the question were ‘whose fault am I, is she or he?’ a question not unlike the one that prompts Eugene Dawn’s hope of finding an answer to “whose fault I am” in Coetzee’s first (‘maiden’) novel, *Dusklands* (51), a question not unreasonably ‘answered’ by Samuel Beckett’s “Unnamable,” a character—if she, he, or it can so be termed—as familiar with sexual ambiguity as most inhabitants of Beckett’s pages are, who identifies him-it-herself as a problem of “pronouns and other parts of blather” (331): “all here is sin, you don’t know why, you don’t know whose, you don’t know against whom, someone says you, it’s the fault of the pronouns, there is no name, for me, no pronoun for me, all the trouble comes from that, that, it’s a kind of pronoun too” (372).

These anomalous instances that attract JC’s attention (and that of Wittgenstein) in each case proffer an example which, writes JC so very pointedly, thinking specifically of the Borges fable, “brings it home to us that the order we see in the universe may not reside in the universe at all, but in the paradigms of thought we bring to it”:

The mathematics we have invented (in some accounts) or discovered (in others), which we believe or hope to be a key to the structure of the universe, may equally be a private language—private to human beings with human brains—in which we doodle on the walls of our cave. (96)

He who writes 'I' ("I" that is too) confesses that if he had ever had the opportunity of naming "the father I would elect, if, from all the living and the dead, one were allowed to elect one's father," he would have elected as father his own father, long dead now too, but in his life an authority—not on academic matters, he didn't finish High School, nor even on music, despite his fine baritone voice—but my author, at least in part. It's a generation thing, I say, shamed by the knowledge that I might be mistaken of instrumentally exploiting for rhetorical ends his death, my memories. But it, they, remain nevertheless: as remainder.

Coda (or Remnant)

As impossible then to disentangle art from politics as it would be to disentangle gender from pronouns, or deictic shifters from the enunciation they allow to take place, or thought from forgetting, or articulations from the authority they articulate and the authority that allows for their articulation and generation, all compounded by the act of *narration* (genre-generation), a conundrum Barthes exploits in the opening gestures of "The Death of the Author" when he cites Balzac writing in *Sarrasine* of "a castrato disguised as a woman" and quotes the Balzac sentence so full of feminine pronouns standing in for this castrated referent: "She was Woman, with her sudden fears, her inexplicable whims, her instinctive fears, her meaningless bravado, her defiance, and her delicious delicacy of feeling." Of this sentence, Barthes asks: "Who speaks in this way? Is it the hero of the tale, who would prefer not to recognize the castrato hidden beneath the 'woman'? Is it Balzac the man, whose personal experience has provided him with a philosophy of Woman? Is it Balzac the author, professing certain 'literary' ideas about femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology?" The scandal here, which Barthes relishes, is that "We can never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, every origin. Writing is that neuter, that composite, that obliquity into which our subject flees, the black-and-white where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes" (49).

JC points thus towards that private language with which we humans count and dimorphically sort human chromosomes to 'verify' the gender of female athletes, say, invading their privacy by so doing; a private language by means of which we sort through and arrange phenomena into categories, hereby managing (but also curtailing, perhaps crudely) possibilities—typically in either—this or that—case.

Jonathan Shapiro, cartoonist and creator of *Za News* (a satirical puppet-program published online), has his puppet of Julius Malema (accompanied, whenever the puppet appears, by a Sapedi dictionary) say in the inaugural internet-broadcast: "The internet? What is that? I have checked and there is no such word in the Pedi dictionary" (Fisher; the broadcast is archived on *You Tube*).

The deaths of those J[ohn] [M] Coetzee into the pages of *Summertime* is a subject that will also require further attention; for the moment, however, we—such a useful pronoun—remain with the more local scandal, local to summertime in the Karoo, that is, loosely linked by partial overlap to the scandal of John Coetzee’s sexuality as narratively recorded in *Summertime*, and thus as implicated in that text’s language and politics. Another scandal of sorts then, of resorting, that mixes again those publically phenomenal realities of an historio-political time and its linguistics with more privately invested memories and fabrications engendered by secretly invented linguistic mysteries out of a distant past.

The remaining scandal: although he has not bothered to learn any Xhosa, the still-living and soon to be symbolically hegemonic language of a South Africa still to become (“I am interested in the things we have lost, not the things we have kept,” John says: “Why should I speak Xhosa? There are millions of people who can do that already. They don’t need me” [104]), the recently re-patriated, by no means transgendered but nevertheless ‘dubiously-sexed’ John Coetzee, who, like *Age of Iron*’s Mrs Curren before him, is interested in preserving and perpetuating dead languages, has taught himself some Khoi-language, a now dead language in South Africa, “for all practical purposes” (103).

John Coetzee might even have found himself in the curious position, before his Australian death (after 2000), to be one of the few people on the planet who could actually pronounce the new iXam motto of a redesigned South African coat of arms (April 2000)—“!KE E:/XARRA//KE”—which replaces the previous Latin motto “EX UNITATE VIRES,” itself a replacement for the still earlier and still not entirely dead motto of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek, “EENDRACHT MAAKT MAGT,” and all this despite the hermeneutic ‘fact’ that all three mottos mean roughly the same thing—Strength in Unity—all this despite the supposition that, as *alleenloper* or loner (133), John Coetzee / J.M. Coetzee would no doubt have been and would still be skeptical of the sentiment expressed by all three mottos, and, more crucially still, skeptical also of this Khoi-language promotion to heraldic coat-of-arms-status, belated testament to the tongue of those first people almost entirely exterminated (by the likes of that Jacobus Coetzee depicted in *Dusklands*, among others, and among other forces).

It is far from clear how idiomatic this new motto, as engineered replacement for the sentiment expressed by its two predecessors, might indeed be, or might once have been, in the once-upon-a-time diction of its now almost entirely dead Khoi parlance.

Alongside such uncertainty it should also be said that John Coetzee has certainly not taught himself Khoi so that he can read some new motto that might one day present itself on a future coat of arms, but rather as a way of speaking to the dead, “Who otherwise,” as he puts it to Margot, “who otherwise are cast out into everlasting silence” (104); and as a way to beg forgiveness “everyday” of *Kaggen*, shape-shifting mantis god and supreme being of the Khoisan, for the shame memory makes him feel for having dismembered, as a child, a locust which Margot was left to kill for mercy’s sake (96).

Second and Final Coda

(in writing difficult—probably presumptuous—to call it an encore)

Meanwhile, in writing time, the London Olympics have successfully concluded to many compliments and congratulations, making all kinds of history, taking all kinds of firsts: for the first time women competed from every national team, including that of Saudi Arabia, where it is still illegal for women to drive automobiles; Oscar Pistorius became the first double amputee at any Olympic event ever. South Africa ended the games ranked first among African nations, winning multiple medals, gold medals also, in swimming, track, rowing, and canoeing. Carrying the flag at the opening ceremony and achieving the fastest time in the 800 metre qualifying heats, Caster Semenya took silver in the final.

Pistorius carried South Africa's flag at the closing ceremony,
and went on to win medals and to anchor a
record-breaking relay in the Paralympics.

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