

## Chapter 2

### Life & Times of J. M. Coetzee

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#### Introduction: The Nobel Prize and the Autobiographical Self

Picture the scene: the expectant hum as J. M. Coetzee stood marionette-like at the lectern, preparing to deliver his much-anticipated Nobel lecture. It was 7 December 2003, and in three days' time, he would be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature – the pinnacle of any writer's career. No doubt the assembled guests were hoping for a real literary treat: nuggets about the distinguished literary life of a writer known to resist such outings and who notoriously did not show up to either of his two Booker Prize ceremonies, in 1983 for *Life & Times of Michael K* and in 1999 for *Disgrace*. Following the 1999 Booker announcement, Coetzee commented that '[c]elebrity status is something I have managed to dodge quite successfully all my life.'<sup>1</sup>

Instead of offering a lecture in his own voice, the Nobel lecture, entitled 'He and His Man', returned Coetzee to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), a narrative that has fascinated Coetzee from childhood and to which many of his fictions allude. *Foe* is explicitly a rewriting of Defoe's best-known work, yet the Robinsonade permeates his oeuvre. In Coetzee's second published book, the novel *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), for instance, the existentially isolated Magda reflects, '[w]e are castaways of God as we are castaways of history'.<sup>2</sup> In Coetzee's notebooks in the Harry Ransom Center (HRC) at the University of Texas in Austin, where Coetzee studied from 1965-9 for his PhD (a stylistic analysis of Samuel Beckett's fiction), he describes a period in the early 1970s when he felt 'unpolitical' and 'more detached'. He identified with Crusoe's sense of existential isolation when he confided his 'resigned bewilderment about [the] place one finds oneself in. Am I in the opening of [Beckett's] *Molloy*? Or on the other hand is this *Robinson Crusoe* I am in?'<sup>3</sup>

Aside from the sense of isolation and isolationism indexed by the Robinsonade motif, Coetzee has also been fascinated by its unsettling of the author function. In his introduction to the 1999 World Classics edition of *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee writes that Defoe's novels are 'fake autobiographies' bearing a 'personal and even confessional level of meaning.' He wonders what game Defoe is playing when he claims that Crusoe is a 'living person', 'what, beyond maintaining the by now *tired autobiographical charade*, might he mean?'<sup>4</sup> This question might be applied to Coetzee, too, not only 'He and His Man', but also *Scenes of Provincial Life*, the trilogy of *autrebiographies* – *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002), *Summertime* (2009) – collected in a single volume in 2012. In his 1985 essay 'Confession and Double Thoughts', developed from his inaugural professorial lecture, 'Truth in Autobiography', given at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 1984, Coetzee reflects on truth-telling in the confessional writing of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Rousseau.<sup>5</sup> His insights may resonate for the reader trying to make sense of a writer who famously has said that '[a]ll autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography'.<sup>6</sup> In an interview with Joanna Scott, Coetzee distinguishes between lived experience and its retelling: *Boyhood* portrays 'the childhood *I have constructed for myself in retrospect*'.<sup>7</sup> This is the difference between autobiography and *autrebiography*, which registers the plasticity of identity as it is shaped and reshaped in writing.<sup>8</sup>

The HRC archives, which David Attwell describes as ‘remarkably complete,’<sup>9</sup> are fascinating terrain for the Coetzee scholar, giving insights into the life of a writer drawn apparently reluctantly into the public sphere. They include Coetzee’s meticulously kept notebooks charting the genesis of the novels and memoirs, as well as the manuscripts from *Dusklands* to *Elizabeth Costello* (after that Coetzee worked with computer printouts), and private correspondence, for instance, with writer friends and colleagues, publishers, universities, visa offices. Yet rather than treat the archives as hard evidence, Jan Wilm argues, they might also constitute a ‘counter-oeuvre’ that will not readily ‘provide answers to the novels’, nor indeed to the writer’s life.<sup>10</sup> Andrew Dean, too, probes the relationship between the archives and the oeuvre; ‘the very excessiveness of Coetzee’s self-archiving suggests that ... they serve some independent function for him.’<sup>11</sup>

Coetzee has participated in only two biographies, neither authorised.<sup>12</sup> The more recent is Attwell’s, *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face-to-Face with Time* (2015), an account of five weeks spent in the HRC archives that proved ‘both unsettling and illuminating’ (xviii). Attwell also edited *Doubling the Point*, a collection of Coetzee’s “*Essays and Interviews*” (1992), which Attwell describes as Coetzee’s ‘intellectual autobiography’ and which includes a set of interviews (conducted in writing) in which Attwell probes Coetzee’s critical thinking as a scholar and intellectual.<sup>13</sup> The heftier *J. M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing* (2012) by Afrikaans-language literary historian J. C. Kannemeyer, translated by Michiel Heyns, was completed after Kannemeyer’s death in 2011, with Attwell’s participation.<sup>14</sup> Elleke Boehmer notes its ‘monumentalist’ qualities, and Kannemeyer’s endeavour to set Coetzee on a ‘national pedestal’, claiming him as an Afrikaner writer. Yet ‘both [biographies] approach the question of how the autofiction, or “everything [Coetzee] writes”, has written him’, Boehmer suggests.<sup>15</sup> Both volumes grapple to different degrees with the extent to which the memoirs correlate with Coetzee’s life. It is to the story of that life that I turn now.

## **The Cape**

John Maxwell Coetzee was born in Cape Town in 1940 to parents Jack (Zacharias) Coetzee, an attorney of Afrikaner heritage, and Vera, née Wehmeyer, a schoolteacher whose parents were from the Uniondale district of the Cape. Born in the United States, Coetzee’s maternal grandmother Louisa was the daughter of German-speaking missionaries originating from an area of what is now Poland. She had nurtured ‘a strong dislike of Afrikaners,’ gave her children English names, and raised them speaking English.<sup>16</sup> Coetzee’s maternal grandfather, Piet Wehmeyer, by contrast, was a founder of the National Party.<sup>17</sup> Coetzee and Vera lived an ‘exceptionally nomadic existence’ at this time, moving between Cape Town’s suburbs, the Northern and Western Cape, and Johannesburg.<sup>18</sup> Family fortunes tracked the vicissitudes of Jack’s career; he was struck off the roll of practising attorneys on two occasions for mishandling trust funds, which necessitated relocating the family and temporary career changes, and precipitated Jack’s alcoholism.

Coetzee’s birth came eight years before the National Party’s 1948 election victory and the introduction of apartheid (Afrikaans for ‘separateness’). But South Africa was already an egregiously unequal, racially divided society with a long, complex history of racial discrimination and segregation.<sup>19</sup> The archives, interviews and (increasingly fictionalised)

memoirs reveal Coetzee's sense of liminality, positioned somewhere in the gap between two supposedly distinct white South African cultures, English and Afrikaner: between the mores, the language, the literatures and the mythologies obtaining to each. Dependent on boundary-making, as in all nationalist mythologies, such categories, however, are far more porous and complex in terms of ethnicity, heritage, and ideological loyalties, than they are made to appear by those claiming a stake in them. Attwell writes about the greater flexibility, pre-apartheid, between Afrikaners identifying as culturally English and those as culturally Afrikaner, marked by differing allegiances to place, language, and religious denomination.<sup>20</sup>

Often portrayed in the criticism as an outsider, Coetzee's relationship to the Afrikaans language and to (white) Afrikanerdom is a source of critical debate. He describes becoming part of that contingency of South Africans who 'have joined a pool of no recognizable ethnos whose language of exchange is English.'<sup>21</sup> As a child, he spoke mostly English at home, describing 'com[ing] from a mixed background; mixed in various ways', and, 'though we really only spoke English at home, very often we were speaking Afrikaans in our public life.'<sup>22</sup> His maternal grandmother, Louisa, 'favoured English' over Afrikaans,<sup>23</sup> and his father, an Afrikaans speaker whose parents were 'Afrikaans-speaking anglophiles',<sup>24</sup> was posted overseas during World War II, from 1942-45, meaning Afrikaans was further displaced at home. Whilst 'Afrikaans', Coetzee comments, is a 'purely linguistic term' with 'linguistic and cultural overtones', 'Afrikaner' bears 'quite heavy political and ideological content.'<sup>25</sup> In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee explains, the term has 'since the 1880s [...] been a word hijacked by a political movement, first primarily anti-British, later primarily antiblack, calling itself Afrikaner Nationalism.'<sup>26</sup> Rita Barnard argues that Coetzee quite deliberately 'translates'— or mistranslates—his Afrikaner identity through his writing. In *Boyhood*, she suggests, Coetzee turned his back on the Afrikaner man he could have become in order to self-fashion himself as 'cosmopolitan writer and intellectual'; this was a 'subject position *consciously* refused'.<sup>27</sup> Yet after the Nobel, when he was asked in an email by historian Hermann Giliomee if it was true, as the Afrikaans press was claiming, that Coetzee was an Afrikaner, Coetzee replied: 'If they want me, they can have me.'<sup>28</sup> This raises the question, why did Coetzee allow Kannemeyer, an Afrikaans-literature specialist, to write a biography, and one in Afrikaans? Reflecting on the influences on Coetzee of 'Afrikaans-language literature', Andrew van der Vlies notes that interest in Coetzee's oeuvre as world literature has tended to obscure this indebtedness to or conversations with Afrikaans literary traditions that have been inaccessible to wider audiences because of their 'minor' status.<sup>29</sup>

If language is central to Coetzee's cultural identity, so too was his early identification with the land. *Boyhood* grapples with John's conflicted attachment to the rugged landscape of the semi-desert Karoo, and to Voëlfontein, his paternal grandfather's farm, where John holidayed. In South Africa, this attachment is always already racialized, though in *Boyhood* this is largely implied, as the book only makes fleeting reference to the politics of which John is as yet dimly aware – the 1948 elections and the 'Nats' victory over the United Party; Black people being represented at the bottom of the racial hierarchy, which John readily assimilates as truth.<sup>30</sup> In *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988), Coetzee addresses both European and Afrikaner mythologies of the land. Analysing the work of early European travellers to the Cape including nineteenth-century natural historian William Burchell, Coetzee notes that 'the European eye will be disappointed in Africa only as long as

it seeks in African landscapes European tones and shades.<sup>31</sup> The Afrikaans-language *plaasroman*, or farm novel, props up the myth of the (white) Afrikaner founding fathers, reifying in the process the *volk*'s supposed natural right to the land. Such mythologizing, as Barnard shows, not only supports a 'history of settlement' but masks 'one of *displacement*' of South Africa's Black and indigenous peoples.<sup>32</sup> In Coetzee's anti-farm novels, *In the Heart of the Country*, *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) and *Disgrace* (1999), identity is refracted through a historically fraught relation to the land, figured in a tension between an imagined, longed-for pastoral idyll, and a landscape with which this idyll does not correspond and to which each protagonist must learn to accustom themselves in order to survive. Coetzee's rewritings thus expose the fraught relationship between the idea of land ownership and settler colonialism. His engagement with the politics of land reveals the gestation of an intellect ahead of its time, conscious of the ideological inflections of the farm; as he writes of the young John in *Boyhood*, '[t]he secret and sacred word that binds him to the farm is *belong*' (95-6), and yet '[t]he farm is not his home; he will never be more than a guest, an uneasy guest' (79).

Coetzee describes the formative role reading played in his development in a 2018 lecture entitled 'Growing Up with *The Children's Encyclopedia*', which he calls 'an essay in autobiography, specifically, an essay on [his] formation, between the ages of about 3 and 10, under the influence of reading and re-reading' this ten-volume series. He comes to the realisation, 'aged about 10', that its editor, Arthur Mee, did not, when preparing the *Encyclopedia*, have children like him, those living on the cultural peripheries of Europe, in sub-Saharan Africa, in mind. In *Boyhood*, John turns to *The Encyclopaedia* as a kind of life manual, but it only serves to alienate him further. 'Childhood is a time of innocent joy, to be spent amongst the meadows amid buttercups and bunny-rabbits or at the hearthside absorbed in a storybook,' John reads. Yet this 'is a vision of childhood utterly alien to him[;]' in reality, childhood is nothing 'but a time of gritting the teeth and enduring' (14). John is not happy at school, which provides nothing more than 'a shrunken little world, a more or less benign prison' (139).

### **London and the US**

In the intervening years between his schooling and an interlude in London, Coetzee studied at UCT, graduating in 1961 with Bachelors degrees in mathematics and English. 1955 had presented a formative moment in his intellectual development when he overheard Bach's *Wohltemperierte Klavier* issuing from his neighbour's house, an experience he describes in 'What is a Classic?', the title a nod to T. S. Eliot's essay, later anthologised in *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays, 1986-1999* (2001). Coetzee reflects on Eliot's essay as 'one of the most spectacular that occur to me of a writer attempting to make a new identity.'<sup>33</sup>

In 1962, Coetzee moved to London. Back home in South Africa, this was the year of the arrest of Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela, and other leaders of uMkhonto weSizwe (Xhosa for 'Spear of the Nation'), the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC). It was a mere two years after the Sharpeville massacre in which police had shot dead 69 people peacefully protesting the notorious Pass Laws, seriously injuring a further 180. Whilst *Youth* does not explicitly mention the 1964 Rivonia trial at which Mandela and comrades were sentenced, John does comment on Sharpeville from London, and reflects on the tightening of

the Pass Laws ‘to which Africans and Africans alone are subjected’: ‘In the Transvaal the police fire shots into a crowd, then, in their mad way, go on firing into the backs of fleeing men, women and children’ (37). It seems for John as if the move to London has ushered in a more mature consciousness, one less oblivious of the ‘turmoil’ of South Africa, yet he still seems determined to escape it. He tries his hand at writing a short story but is unsettled that ‘he is still writing about South Africa’: ‘He would prefer to leave his South African self behind as he left South Africa itself behind’ (62). Implicitly eliding language with ideology, John is conscious that, in the UK, ‘[s]peaking Afrikaans [...] is like speaking Nazi’, yet when his cousin visits him in London their use of Afrikaans feels like ‘sliding into a warm bath’ (127).

In London, Coetzee worked as a computer programmer for IBM and then ICT, its UK competitor from 1964. But he discovered that ICT, through the Cambridge Mathematical Laboratory, had links to the nuclear arms industry at Aldermaston. As this realisation dawns on him in *Youth*, John believes ‘he has lent himself to evil’ (164). At ICT, John meets a fellow programmer from India, who sows the idea of relocating to the States, saying that ‘[w]e are all wasting our time’ in the UK (151). *Youth* does not detail Coetzee’s brief return to Cape Town in 1963 to finish his MA thesis, nor his re-acquaintance with student friend, Philippa Jubber, whom he would marry that year in Johannesburg. At this time, Coetzee began making enquiries about studying for a PhD at institutions in the US, eventually settling upon the University of Texas at Austin, where he enrolled with a Fulbright Scholarship. Relocating to Austin with Philippa in 1966, they soon welcomed their first child, Nicholas, and, two years later, Gisela, yet neither Philippa nor the children appear in *Youth* or *Summertime*.

It was at Austin that Coetzee stumbled across Beckett’s manuscripts, and this led to work on a stylistic analysis of Beckett’s fiction for his PhD, finished in 1969. Before completion, Coetzee took an assistant professorship in English at the State University of New York at Buffalo, in 1969. There he began work on *Dusklands*, which he has described, perhaps regretfully, as ‘a product of the passionate politics of 1965-71.’<sup>34</sup> During the later 1960s, the United States was embroiled in the Vietnam War, with students at universities across the country protesting the conflict. *Dusklands*’ two distinct narratives capture two forms of nationalist mythology: ‘The Vietnam Project’ portrays the propaganda machine of the US state during the war, whilst ‘The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee’ depicts the partially fictionalised sojourns of Afrikaner Jacobus Coetzee in eighteenth-century South Africa. In 1969, with his visa due to expire, Coetzee enquired about gaining permanent residency in the US and expressed being fearful about the effects on his children, who were US citizens, of exposure ‘to the racial climate of the Republic of South Africa,’ including segregation in schools.<sup>35</sup> He also claimed that the South African government would categorise him a communist for his belief in universal suffrage, and that he was thus at risk of being banned (having restrictions placed on one’s movement, association and speech). Coetzee’s application and initial appeals were turned down.

Events took a dramatic turn when, on 15 March 1970, Coetzee and 44 fellow academics were arrested for participating in a sit-in at the university, protesting the acting President’s handling of campus protests. While all were found on appeal not guilty of criminal contempt and unlawful entry, the initial conviction was disastrous for Coetzee’s

family as it led to his visa extension being refused.<sup>36</sup> Coetzee returned reluctantly to South Africa in 1971, and, though he held numerous visiting professorships in the US and made many overseas visits in the ensuing years, he did not leave South Africa on a permanent basis until his emigration to Australia in 2002.

### **University of Cape Town**

On his return to South Africa from the US and after a brief period living in a remote farmhouse in the Karoo, Coetzee took up a position as a lecturer in English at UCT, from 1972. After several promotions, he was appointed Professor of General Literature in 1984. It was at UCT that he would write some of his best-known works, establishing a local and subsequently international reputation, both as a novelist and essayist. In 1980, he divorced Philippa, who moved to Johannesburg, while Coetzee raised their young children in Cape Town. Remaining on friendly terms until Philippa's untimely death from cancer in 1990, Coetzee would begin a relationship with Dorothy Driver, who subsequently taught in the English Department at UCT, becoming one of the country's leading authorities on women's literature and literary feminism in southern Africa. It was with Driver that Coetzee forged a new life in Australia from 2002.

Coetzee initially tried to get 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' published separately, but it was rejected by international publishers. In a 1994 lecture he explained that he began the 'companion piece' because it did not really work on its own. The full manuscript of the book was also rejected by local and international publishers, until Ravan Press agreed to publish it.<sup>37</sup> Leading Afrikaans novelist André Brink praised it as 'an inescapable statement about South Africa and the world today',<sup>38</sup> but if *Dusklands* received mixed reviews and *In the Heart of the Country*, though greeted enthusiastically reached only a small readership, *Waiting for the Barbarians* secured Coetzee's international reputation, winning three major awards: South Africa's CNA Prize, and, in the UK, both the James Tait Black and the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prizes. Some South African critics were frustrated by the novel's apparently indeterminate, seemingly universalised setting, but it was quickly accepted for publication by Secker in the UK, with Tom Rosenthal describing it as 'a novel of quite devastating power.'<sup>39</sup>

Coetzee had returned to South Africa at a time when local protests and resistance to apartheid were gathering momentum. In the 1970s, Black Consciousness was gaining traction under the leadership of student activist Steve Biko and an effective boycott movement against apartheid was underway internationally. In 1976, dissent mounted amongst school and college children in Soweto, a township complex south of Johannesburg, at Afrikaans being imposed as the language of instruction in schools, culminating in an uprising in June. Police opened fire on student protestors, killing more than 600, and precipitating a wave of departures of young leaders into exile as well as a new phase of violent resistance to apartheid inside South Africa. The archives reveal that the torture scenes in *Waiting for the Barbarians* were drawn from reports of the 1977 murder of Biko in police custody that emerged during a public inquest into his death, and in Coetzee's 1986 essay, 'Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State', the author himself describes *Barbarians* as 'a novel about the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience.'<sup>40</sup> Coetzee writes in notebooks from the period: 'I must make ... the inspiration of the story by

the Biko affair, clear. End it with a massive trial scene in which the accusers get put in the dock.’<sup>41</sup> The trial of Joll never takes place, but the Magistrate repeatedly invokes the law in his defence against Empire, a regime that, like late-apartheid South Africa’s, is beginning to implode, hence the title’s allusion to Constantine Cavafy’s 1902 poem of the same name, which Coetzee possibly encountered via South African writers Mike Nichols’s post-Soweto, ‘After Cavafy’, published in the late 1970s.

As with *In the Heart of the Country*, *Barbarians* was submitted to the Directorate of Publications, South Africa’s censorship body, but eventually adjudged, in the Directorate’s turn of phrase, ‘not undesirable’. *Dusklands* had eluded the censors altogether.<sup>42</sup> Archival material reveals the circuitous lengths to which Coetzee and his publishers (Ravan Press in Johannesburg, and Secker & Warburg in the UK) went to have his work passed by the censors. As Andrew van der Vlies describes, Coetzee wrote to Secker to ask if they would cede South African rights to Ravan to *In the Heart of the Country* (1976) if the British edition were to be banned in South Africa.<sup>43</sup> Coetzee suggested to Ravan’s Randall blanking out three of the numbered passages in the novel most likely to give offence, including one in which the black servant, Hendrik, apparently rapes Magda. Coetzee proposed that Ravan should publish a bilingual edition, with dialogue – as Coetzee had intended – in Afrikaans. *In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K* were all assessed by the censors, and editions arriving in the country from abroad placed under embargo until this process was completed. But none received what Coetzee described in a 1990 interview as the ‘badge of honour’ censorship bestows. ‘This honour,’ Coetzee declared, ‘I have never achieved nor, to be frank, merited.’ The apartheid censors conceded there were elements in each book that could be deemed ‘undesirable’, especially references to inter-racial sex, which violated codes on ‘indecent or obscene or offensive or harmful to public morals,’ and critiqued the architecture of apartheid. All were passed either because they were not set in present-day South Africa, or were regarded as too universalising to warrant concern.<sup>44</sup>

While *Dusklands* was in press, Coetzee was busy in 1973 with an ‘unrealised’ novel on censorship, ‘The Burning of the Books’. He was unconvinced by the sense of place in the manuscript, however, feeling it lacked clear shape and plot.<sup>45</sup> In what might come as a shock to some contemporary readers, Coetzee’s letters reveal that in 1974 he applied, unsuccessfully, to become a censor. In much later correspondence with Peter D. McDonald, Coetzee claimed he did so to play the censors at their own game, but Attwell is ‘not entirely convince[d]’ by this explanation, hypothesising instead that working as a censor might get the unfinished novel off the ground. In 1981, Coetzee agreed to the Directorate’s request to evaluate William Burroughs’s novel *Cities of the Red Night* (1981), and recommended it as ‘not undesirable’.<sup>46</sup>

The notebooks also record Coetzee’s sense of personal hurt resulting from Gordimer’s caustic 1984 review of *Life & Times of Michael K* that had received much scholarly attention. Whilst admiring of the novel’s style, Gordimer was scathing of its failure to register Black agency in sustained, organised efforts to resist apartheid. Attwell records that ‘two decades later Coetzee still felt the smart of this criticism, ... noting ... that Gordimer had accused him of lacking political courage.’<sup>47</sup> Coetzee commented that his ‘fidelity is ultimately to [Mrs. Curren and Michael K] and for their unique plights, not to any grand historical trajectory they

may be seen as belonging to.’<sup>48</sup> Then, in 1987, Coetzee delivered a talk, ‘The Novel Today’, at the *Weekly Mail* Book Week at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town, in which he reflected on the ways fiction can engage critically with – the word he chooses is ‘rivals’ – the *discourse* of history, rather than simply append, or ‘supplement’, history.<sup>49</sup> Was this a riposte to Gordimer? The following year, in 1988, he and Gordimer were again apparently at loggerheads, this time over an invitation extended to Salman Rushdie to attend the same literary festival, organised by the *Weekly Mail* with the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW). Rushdie’s controversial *The Satanic Verses* had appeared earlier that year, attracting protests from Muslim countries, organisations and communities for its representation of the Prophet Mohammed and the Qur’an, which many regarded as blasphemous. Rushdie was to be the ‘star’ guest at the festival, again at UCT’s Baxter Theatre, themed ‘Censorship under the State of Emergency’. The programme invoked Heinrich Heine: ‘Wherever they burn books, they will also in the end burn people.’<sup>50</sup>

COSAW decided to withdraw the invitation to Rushdie to protect him and avoid civil unrest, but also to avoid offending the local Muslim community. At the festival Coetzee declared his wish to ‘register publicly my protest against the silencing of Mr Rushdie’s voice’, and condemned religious fundamentalism in all its forms.<sup>51</sup> A member of COSAW reported that Gordimer was looking ‘shell-shocked’<sup>52</sup> by Coetzee’s attack on the organisation, of which she was a member.<sup>53</sup> Coetzee later conceded that Gordimer and COSAW had probably been right and there followed a friendly exchange between the two that contradicts accounts of the ‘bitter’ feud fanned by the local press.<sup>54</sup> As Van der Vlies records, the letters show that, in Gordimer’s words, she ‘resented very much’ that the spat had been exaggerated. She goes on: ‘It wasn’t so. But what can one do with journalists when they want to invent a good story? ... They’re not going to make enemies out of us, believe me.’ The letter is signed ‘Affectionately’, and Coetzee’s response a few months later closes ‘with warmest affection’, and the commendation that Gordimer, if ever she doubted herself for losing touch with fellow whites, has ‘travelled so much farther down the [intellectual] road’ than them. Shortly after the event, in 1989, Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini imposed a *fatwā* on Rushdie.<sup>55</sup>

Comments on writers’ groups in a 2019 interview with McDonald prove revealing on Coetzee’s politics. In the interview, he distances himself both from the largely white, liberal PEN South Africa, established in 1927, and the more radical COSAW, established in 1987. Whilst the former was ‘too Anglo and too tame’ – it presented itself as ‘guardian of polite literature’<sup>56</sup> – ‘COSAW conceived of itself as an arm of the Struggle’, and, Coetzee said, ‘I was not part of the Struggle.’<sup>57</sup> Yet from 2006 he served as Vice President of PEN International, an organisation proactive in defending writers’ freedom internationally. In 1996, the same year in which state censorship officially ended in South Africa, Coetzee published *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*, perhaps not surprisingly, given his own engagement with the censors, claiming that ‘the polemics of writers against censors seldom do the profession credit.’<sup>58</sup> In an essay on Renaissance humanist Desiderius Erasmus, first published in 1992, Coetzee grapples with the role of the intellectual in the authoritarian state who risks becoming the state’s rivalrous ‘twin’, being absorbed within the same imaginative economy. For Coetzee, as for Erasmus, carving a meticulous position of ‘*nonposition*’ is the only effective means of standing outside the state’s regime of terror.<sup>59</sup>



Whilst South Africa was progressing through a period of tumultuous political change, Coetzee's private life was riven by loss. Within a five-year period, from 1985 to 1990, his mother, father, son Nicholas, and ex-wife Philippa all died. Nicholas' death at the age of 23 in 1989 was especially tragic: he had fallen 11 floors from his Johannesburg apartment in what appears to have been an accident. This personal tragedy is evoked in Coetzee's 1994 novel *The Master of Petersburg*, a book that raises issues of self-censorship by reimagining the suppressed 'At Tihons' chapter from Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*. In Coetzee's reworking, Dostoevsky's son Pavel falls to his death from a tower.

Bagging a second Booker Prize in 1999, his first post-apartheid novel *Disgrace* confirmed Coetzee's position as one of the world's most influential contemporary writers. *Disgrace* is set in Cape Town and the Eastern Cape in mid to late 1997, in the immediate present of the 'new South Africa'. (The novel provides certain hints at the dating of the story, for example, that Lurie is 52 and was born in 1945.<sup>60</sup>) Texturing this novel are allusions to current affairs: the TRC, land reform and redistribution, South Africa's catastrophic levels of sexual violence, and, globally, the rationalisation of higher education. Rewriting the *plaastroman*, it casts a backwards glance at the historico-ideological inflections of the land, whilst signalling a sense of resignation at the lack of substantial systemic change upon which the foundations of the fragile new democracy are laid.

The notebooks reveal that the TRC hearings provided the contextual canvas upon which the story of Lurie's sexual misconduct case was painted,<sup>61</sup> even though Coetzee had begun drafting *Disgrace* before the Commission was inaugurated. The notebooks dispel well-circulated myths, too, such as that Coetzee's move to Australia in 2002 was a consequence of negative local reception of *Disgrace*.<sup>62</sup> Coetzee and his partner Driver made regular trips to the country in the 1990s, and in 1995 Coetzee contacted the immigration office in Canberra.<sup>63</sup> (He secured Australian citizenship in 2006.) In 2000, *Disgrace* featured in an ANC submission to the South African Human Rights Commission Inquiry into Racism in the Media, for illustrating the persistence of racism within South Africa. But there has been critical division on the ANC's use of *Disgrace* as a case study. Attwell argues that the ANC was treading a careful line between avoiding accusing Coetzee of racism, whilst showing how the book reflected prevailing attitudes amongst whites,<sup>64</sup> in the same issue of *Interventions*, McDonald suggests that the phrasing of the ANC's submission cast doubt on whom the criticism was directed towards, characters, novel or even author.<sup>65</sup>

Nonetheless, five years later, the ANC government paid tribute to Coetzee by awarding him the Order of Mapungubwe in Gold for 'putting South Africa on the world stage.'<sup>66</sup> By now he was holding regular visiting professorships in the US, including with the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago (1998-2003), with which he had built a close working relationship. He terminated this relationship in 2003, in his words in a 2004 letter to his Serbian translator, because of the 'political setup' in the US under George W. Bush. Coetzee had previously voiced his concern at the infringement of human rights by the US during this period when it was advancing its 'war on terror'. Bush, Tony Blair, and Australia's John Howard would all be critiqued in the 'Strong Opinions' section of *Diary of a Bad Year* (2006), through another surrogate writer-persona referred to only as 'J.C.'

## Australia

One might have expected that a new life of semi-retirement in Adelaide, South Australia, from 2002, as a research fellow at the University of Adelaide, would usher in a quieter period for Coetzee. It has certainly provided opportunities for him to pursue his love of cycling and walking. Of Australia, he has described feeling ‘a strong pull toward the land and the landscape’ and found Adelaide in particular ‘very attractive, very civilized, with a strong artistic community’. His commitment to animal rights led to an invitation to become President of the UK RSPCA, but he turned this request down.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, on occasion he turned down honorary positions and invitations to speak. But Coetzee continues to make regular appearances at conferences and seminars both in his new country of residence, and elsewhere. In his 80<sup>th</sup> year, 2020, his work was celebrated formally at the University of Adelaide and Amazwi, the South African Museum of Literature in Makhanda, Eastern Cape.

A shift in style and location was signalled from the 1990s with the series of Elizabeth Costello lectures Coetzee first delivered at venues around the world. Some are fictions about Costello, a (fictional) aging and opinionated Australian novelist; others embed within fictional narratives the lectures Costello delivers – on animal rights, representing evil, and so on. These were republished as ‘lessons’ in the novel *Elizabeth Costello* in 2003. Some reviewers were unforgiving about Coetzee’s increasing literary abstruseness. Justin Cartwright describes the apparent use of Costello as a mouthpiece as ‘something of a cop-out’, while Hermione Lee wondered whether ‘this difficult and unforgiving book’ signalled Coetzee was on the brink of giving up fiction writing ‘to focus on the philosophical essay instead.’<sup>68</sup> Adam Mars-Jones asks whether Coetzee was ‘simply hamstrung by the hybrid status of his inventions.’<sup>69</sup>

*Slow Man* (2005) was Coetzee’s first Antipodean novel proper and begins with the aftermath of a cycling accident—in Adelaide—in which the protagonist, Paul Rayment, is disabled. We follow his interactions with his carer, a Croatian migrant, and her son. Costello makes an unlikely appearance as an ironic guardian angel. *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), highly self-referential and experimental, is set in Sydney. Rebecca Walkowitz argues this novel ‘imitate[es] the visual format of interlineal and facing-page translation’ by offsetting the ‘Strong Opinions’ of an elderly, South African-born writer referred to only as J. C., with his everyday thoughts, and with his amanuensis Anya’s commentary, in distinct narrative strands arranged in bands across each page.<sup>70</sup>

In 2009, Coetzee published the third of his *autrebiographies*, *Summertime*, which takes us up to the point in John’s life at which the writing of *Dusklands* began.<sup>71</sup> The memoir’s truth contract with the reader is stretched here to its limit because the noted novelist character John Coetzee dies before its present occasion of narrative begins. *Summertime* turns on the conceit of five transcribed and edited interviews, as Walkowitz argues, collected by a fictional biographer, Mr Vincent, ‘of which at least two and possibly three have been translated into English.’ The text is book-ended by extracts from the late author’s notebooks, detailing events that dovetail very neatly with what is known about Coetzee’s own life in this period.

The Jesus trilogy is Coetzee’s latest series. *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016) and *The Death of Jesus* (2020) present a Kafkaesque world curiously detached, not unlike *Waiting for the Barbarians*, from any identifiable geopolitical locale. Walkowitz reads the first of the series (though the analysis seems useful for all three)

as a work that ‘emphasize[s] Coetzee’s focus on the novel’s elasticity as a genre, its history as a medium of national collectivity, and its function, in translation, as a source of collectivities both smaller and larger than the nation.’<sup>72</sup>

It is clear from this brief account that Coetzee’s life of writing, including the archives, is in part characterised by the ways in which he stretches genres, confirming that this life of writing and the story of his life and times do not neatly correspond. Certain questions, Barnard argues, drive the Nobel lecture, the memoirs, and his essay on Dutch writer Achterberg: ‘Is the distance [between author and character] constant? [I]s the notion of identity it embodies more complex and fluid?’<sup>73</sup> These underpin the later works too, probing in self-conscious ways the relationship between the author and (auto)biographical self, or character. In turn, under the guise of the *autre*biographical conceit, this has helped Coetzee to protect his private life and avoid being positioned politically, instead enabling his meticulously crafted nonposition. Yet Coetzee’s reputation garnered within South Africa during the years of apartheid and then transition to democracy of resisting being publicly known, one that relentlessly still clings to his public persona in media accounts today, does not ring true. If his writing deliberately unsettles borders between public and private spheres, his nonpositionality is not equivalent to sidestepping the political sphere, as some critics claim, but allows him to trouble orthodoxies of politics and power. If Coetzee has successfully circumnavigated the celebrity status accorded twenty-first-century prize-winning novelists of his stature to ensure that his privacy remains protected, a surprising amount about his private life is available to those who care to look.

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<sup>1</sup> *Irish Times*, 'Author Shuns Limelight'.

<sup>2</sup> Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country*, 134; 147.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted with original formatting in Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee*, 82.

<sup>4</sup> Emphasis added; Coetzee, 'Introduction', v-xi, vi.

<sup>5</sup> This essay is collected in Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 251-93.

<sup>6</sup> Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 391.

<sup>7</sup> Emphasis added; Joanna Scott, 'Voice', 83.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Alexandra Effe in this volume.

<sup>9</sup> Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee*, xix.

<sup>10</sup> Wilm, 'J. M. Coetzee and the Archive,' 216.

<sup>11</sup> Dean, 'Lives and Archives', 224.

<sup>12</sup> Attwell suggests Coetzee would not authorise *any* biography (*J. M. Coetzee*, xxii), though he did collaborate in one way or another with the Kannemeyer and Attwell volumes. Another, by Lily Saint, is in progress.

<sup>13</sup> Attwell, 'Editor's Introduction', 2.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Effe's chapter in this volume for a discussion of the biographies.

<sup>15</sup> Boehmer, 'Reading Between Life and Work', 441-2; 447.

<sup>16</sup> Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee*, 13.

<sup>17</sup> Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee*, 29. The National Party emerged as the leading white Afrikaner-nationalist entity in the 1930s, and came to power in the 1948 elections that foreshadowed the introduction of their formal *apartheid* legislative programme.

<sup>18</sup> Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee*, 34-6.

<sup>19</sup> For an account of early racial segregation in South Africa, see Dubrow, *Racial Segregation and the Origins of Apartheid in South Africa, 1919-36*; for an account of the specificities of the South African apartheid, see Posel, 'The Apartheid Project, 1948-70.'

<sup>20</sup> Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee*, 14.

<sup>21</sup> Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 342.

<sup>22</sup> Wachtel, 'J. M. Coetzee'.

<sup>23</sup> Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee*, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Wachtel, 'J. M. Coetzee'.

<sup>26</sup> Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 342.

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- <sup>27</sup> Barnard, 'Coetzee in/and Afrikaans,' 85-87, emphasis added.
- <sup>28</sup> Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee*, 557.
- <sup>29</sup> Van der Vlies, 'World Literature', 4-5.
- <sup>30</sup> Coetzee, *Boyhood*, 65-6. Further references parenthetical.
- <sup>31</sup> Coetzee, *White Writing*, 39.
- <sup>32</sup> Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond*, 32.
- <sup>33</sup> Coetzee, *Stranger Shores*, 7.
- <sup>34</sup> Qtd. in Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee*, 82.
- <sup>35</sup> Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee*, 188-9.
- <sup>36</sup> Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee*, 195; 201.
- <sup>37</sup> Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee*, 235-7.
- <sup>38</sup> Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee*, 251.
- <sup>39</sup> Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee*, 344. On *Waiting*'s South African reception see Watson, 'Colonialism,' 376-7.
- <sup>40</sup> Coetzee, *Doubling*, 363.
- <sup>41</sup> Quoted in Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee*, 93.
- <sup>42</sup> For an account of Coetzee's work and the censors, see McDonald, *The Literature Police*, 303-20.
- <sup>43</sup> For a detailed account of the complex publishing history of *In the Heart of the Country*, including this discussion about the local and self-censored versions, see Van der Vlies, *South African Textual Cultures*, 135-8; cf. Van der Vlies, 'Publics', 241; Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee*, 288.
- <sup>44</sup> McDonald, *The Literature Police*, 308; 310; 314-5.
- <sup>45</sup> Quoted in Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee*, 58; 60-1.
- <sup>46</sup> Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee*, 61; 73.d
- <sup>47</sup> Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee*, 118.
- <sup>48</sup> Scott, 'Voice', 101.
- <sup>49</sup> Coetzee, 'The Novel Today', 3.
- <sup>50</sup> Harber, 'South Africa: Clash of Booker Titans.'
- <sup>51</sup> Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee*, 418-20.
- <sup>52</sup> Harber, 'Clash'.
- <sup>53</sup> Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee*, 418-20.
- <sup>54</sup> Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee*, 76.
- <sup>55</sup> Van der Vlies, 'Writing, Politics, Position', 64.
- <sup>56</sup> McDonald, *The Literature Police*, 168.
- <sup>57</sup> McDonald, 'Writers' Groups'.
- <sup>58</sup> Coetzee, *Doubling*, 299.
- <sup>59</sup> Coetzee, *Giving Offense*, 84.
- <sup>60</sup> Van der Vlies, *J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace*, 51.
- <sup>61</sup> Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee*, 196.
- <sup>62</sup> See, for instance, Donadio, 'Out of South Africa'; Kannemeyer and Attwell dispel these myths. Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee*, 535; Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee*, 215.
- <sup>63</sup> Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee*, 215.
- <sup>64</sup> Attwell, 'Race in *Disgrace*', 334.
- <sup>65</sup> McDonald, '*Disgrace* Effects', 324.
- <sup>66</sup> As Van der Vlies suggests, Coetzee's international validation overseas, capped by the Nobel, made his oeuvre more amenable locally. See Van der Vlies, 'Publics and Personae,' 244.
- <sup>67</sup> Cartwright qtd. in Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee*, 547; 578; 536; 591.
- <sup>68</sup> Lee, 'The Rest is Silence.'
- <sup>69</sup> Mars-Jones, 'It's Very Novel.'
- <sup>70</sup> Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, 51.
- <sup>71</sup> Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee*, 154.
- <sup>72</sup> Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, 56.
- <sup>73</sup> Coetzee, *Doubling*, 69-70; Quoted in Barnard, 'Coetzee', 86.