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## **Later criticism and correspondence**

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## Chapter 18

### Later Criticism and Correspondence

Nick Mulgrew

“There remains the matter of getting past Coetzee.”

– *Dusklands*, 14–15

Once, in my second-favourite Indian restaurant in Cape Town, I overheard a solo diner holding forth to the waiters about J. M. Coetzee. Coetzee, apparently, used to frequent its sister restaurant near the University of Cape Town, where this diner worked. The wait-staff were not privy to this information, nor did they appear to care very much about it. I can still hear the diner: “Jay Em – John *Maxwell* – Coetzee, the greatest novelist of his generation – *in the world!* – used to come to your restaurant in Rondebosch. I saw him there many a time.” He had claimed to have known his favourite dish. I wish I could remember what it was.

Episodes on this theme – South Africans seeking personal closeness to Coetzee – veer toward the comical. Wamuwi Mbaio writes excruciatingly well on the clingy, sycophantic reception Coetzee receives at his rare public appearances in South Africa. There’s one where past attendees of his classes, once-friends of his late journalist brother, and even his childhood babysitter litter a crowd that drops “bon mots and choice observations drawn from the novels with savage knowingness.”<sup>1</sup> Hedley Twidle, in an award-winning essay, relates his somewhat amusing failure to complete a career-defining article on Coetzee for a major London review: “I found myself obsessed by minor details on the outskirts of his work”, he writes, such as Coetzee’s attempts “to emulate the Mediterranean diet of Ford Madox Ford” by frying fish fingers in olive oil. For a writer so spare, so economical, “these finer points of domestic economy seemed laden with meaning.”<sup>2</sup>

Apart from being a cautionary tale against a certain kind of literary biography, Twidle’s essay also hints at an attitude specifically held about Coetzee, namely – as per Mbao – that Coetzee “does not deal in explanations.” He is inscrutable. The studied, deliberate economy of his writing is echoed in a similar economy of the self. (“Economy”: a good word for this – from the Greek *oikonomia*, household management.) As is often the case, I suspect there is a journalist to blame for this perception. This journalist, who I will not name because it would give him too much pleasure, once made a song and dance of Coetzee’s method of answering questions during an interview, pondering and scribbling down his answers before giving them, and only then as if they were riddles. Which is to say: the journalist had a weird interview. All journalists have weird interviews. Very few, though, make the interview the story itself, and even then it has to be for good reason.

Although the interview took place in the 1990s, the journalist only related this anecdote in a popular international magazine after Coetzee had won the Nobel Prize in 2003. In the meantime (and since), these perceptions of Coetzee – of a rigorously self-crafted, hard-to-pin-down intellectual – have become orthodoxy, which is strange because, over the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Coetzee has given over more of himself to the scrutiny of readers than they might have expected. During this time, in addition to the second and third of his trilogy of auto-fictional novels, *Youth* (2002) and *Summertime* (2009), and the fictional essays that make up the bulk of *Diary of A Bad Year* (2007), Coetzee has published two books of literary criticism and two of personal correspondence; four works that are, in sum, not only revealing of their subjects, but also of their writer – of John. It is on these works that I shall focus.

\* \* \*

*Inner Workings* (2007) and *Late Essays* (2017) collect 21 and 23 critical essays respectively. None of the 44 pieces is original to either collection: most were reviews, appearing first, sometimes in an earlier version, in the *New York Review of Books*; the remainder, save for two, appeared as introductions to translated or scholarly works. The essays range from four to 23 pages in length, and most concern a single work or writer, or a translation of their oeuvre. Five essays in total focus on Samuel Beckett; there are two each on Philip Roth, Robert Walser, and Patrick White.

While it is difficult to categorise all the writers Coetzee writes about, if only because many of them were born into countries and eras defined by warfare, colonialism, exodus or other catalysts of societal re-definition, one sees in these later essays a broadening of Coetzee's gaze away from the predominantly southern African concerns of the earlier non-fiction.<sup>3</sup> One fact is immediately apparent, though: with the exceptions of Irène Némirovsky and Nadine Gordimer, these writers are all men. As fellow South African-Australian author Ceridwen Dovey writes, many of Coetzee's novels, from *In the Heart of the Country* to *Elizabeth Costello*, focus on the internal and intellectual lives of their woman protagonists who are in Dovey's opinion "among the most intelligent [characters] I've encountered on the page".<sup>4</sup> Hence, this relative lack of representation of women writers may come as a disappointment. Readers attuned to anti- or post-colonial discourse will note that, with the exceptions of V.S. Naipaul and Hendrik Witbooi, the writers are of predominantly European heritage. That said, a large proportion of these writers are of Jewish descent, and as such reflect Coetzee's continuing interest in artists and art made by those on the receiving end of atrocity, and his interest in writers producing "minor literatures", that is to say, writing within a major language but somewhat estranged from it and certainly not identifying with it in any simple nationalist sense. Readers might be tempted to view these essays as a personal canon of sorts – a mapping of influences, in the way that the essays map out the influences of

their subjects and the genealogies of their text. But despite Coetzee's assertion, very early on in his career, that he reads "mostly the stuff that, crudely speaking, [he] can cannibalise",<sup>5</sup> there is no indication by Coetzee that this tendency still holds decades later, or that it applies in any way to the texts he writes about.

Either way, these are two disconnected collections, by which I mean that, as books, they have no internal logic, thematic spine, or overarching sequence. They are composed of discrete critical essays, many of them reviews, collected for convenience's sake and grouped loosely by geographical region or subject. Having been written, presumably, on commission and for inclusion in other publications, they have jarring moments and sometimes seem to end abruptly. Certain aspects have also changed from their initial appearances, such as their titles, and – in the case of essays from the *New York Review of Books* – the names or lists of books that mark out the essay's subjects at the outset. For example, an essay on five books by Paul Celan titled "In the Midst of Losses" in the *New York Review of Books*, is titled "Paul Celan and his translators" in *Inner Workings*.<sup>6</sup> All of the essays have similarly austere titles: generally either a writer's name and the text or period at hand ("Robert Musil, *The Confusions of Young Törless*", "Late Patrick White"), a writer's name and a short identification ("Hugo Claus, poet", "Irène Némirovsky, Jewish Writer"), or even simply a writer's name ("Walt Whitman"). By condensing all of the essays' paratextual information into their titles, Coetzee strips down the textual form and presentation of the essay into its most essential components.

This is a typically Coetzean rhetorical strategy, one that is not accessible to most other writers. It is not borne simply of Coetzee's economy or sense of aesthetics, nor of a desire to make the essays vague, and their inquiries and aims therefore liable to being second-guessed. The play here is simple: as reviews and introductions to other texts, these are texts to guide or enrich reading; to provide perspective, context, and understanding. To do this,

Coetzee has to create a strong, in-built sense of textual authority; in other words, a sense of assured argument from the outset, built not just by what he writes, but *how* he writes, and how he presents that writing. Other writers, even an earlier Coetzee, might have to build up sufficient authority – usually by means of rhetorical strategies or peritextual manipulation (such as making a show of their knowledge of their subject matter, or having an impressive author biography running alongside their text) – in order to make the reader believe, accept, or otherwise think valid, their argument. But Coetzee does not have to do this, by sole virtue of his being — and being seen to write like — J. M. Coetzee.

As such, Coetzee adopts an elevated, magisterial tone in these essays. Most notably this applies to his discussions of translation, given that it is the central subject of many of the longer pieces in each collection. Within the essays there are explications of certain texts' translation histories, in particular the works of Robert Walser and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, while some (Paul Celan and Friedrich Hölderlin) are entirely given over to analysing the task of translation, and evaluating the efforts of those who have taken on that challenge.

Given the mimetic stakes – in addition to his interest in linguistics and own bilinguality – it is not surprising that Coetzee is an involved, productive, and at times severe critic of translated texts. Indeed, while he admits perfect translation between cultures and periods of time can be “an unattainable ideal” (LE, 61), there are standards to keep if literature is to bear witness. All of his points taken in sum, one might put together a guide for translative best practice. It is, for example, “questionable professional practice” – even “unacceptable” – to translate a work from an already existing translation (*IW*, 109; *LE*, 60). Likewise, do not imitate the translator of Italo Svevo who “simply elides or synopsis passages” for economy’s sake (*IW*, 8); nor the translator of Bruno Schulz, who “universalises” culturally specific idioms and allusions (*IW*, 69). Avoid using one language’s

conventions to transliterate another's (IW, 87), and certainly do not seek to "improve" bad writing (IW, 92).

Even putting aside its meditations on the limits of translation, the essay on Celan is one of the most intriguing, detailing the hardships and suspicions, mostly borne out of anti-Semitism, that Celan worked under, as well as his treatment by a woman who was convinced that he was plagiarising her dead husband (IW, 115). Coetzee's larger project here is to find a single answer for a number of questions; in other words, a locus for a number of inquiries. Discussing a poem about the murder of Rosa Luxemburg, as well as Celan's famously elusive Holocaust poem "Death Fugue", Coetzee ponders whether it is a failure of poetics or mimesis if a reader requires prior information about a poem's subject in order to understand the work. If not, is there a limit to the demands a poem may put on its reader? "Is it possible to respond to poetry", he asks, and "even to translate it, without fully understanding it"? (IW, 117). Can literature "offer a kind of knowledge different from that offered by history, and demand a different kind of receptivity" (IW, 117) and, if so, then does one approach the difficult task of translating various, sometimes intangible, layers of meaning, many of which are tied up in a writer's "wrestling" with the very substrate of one particular language (IW, 131)? In comparison to the complex questions he asks, Coetzee's dedication to precise language is necessary and welcome throughout.

Elsewhere Coetzee is particularly judicious when discussing form and genre. In *Inner Workings* he works to categorise and evaluate texts by his subjects' metrics, as well as —less successfully — by his own. He interrogates, to give only a few examples, the sufficiency of the term "stories" to describe what are in fact collected fragments of larger works (86); whether travel writing can pass muster if it is not based on personal observation (101); and how historical fiction may be written about an imagined or alternate history (240-242, passim). It is not that Coetzee has set or is setting criteria on what genre and form are, but

rather that he is attempting to understand the logic behind a text being called, considered, or read as a particular genre or form, especially if such a text “occupie[s] uneasy ground” between two genres or forms (216). This pre-occupation with definition, however, does result in some strange assertions, such as that, “despite its length”, Nadine Gordimer’s novel *The Pickup* should be considered a novella simply because of its “narrower [thematic] range” compared with some of her earlier works (250). Coetzee offers no other justification or precedent for this opinion.<sup>7</sup>

When he does quote from other critics, they are seldom his contemporaries. The critics he tends to refer to are other prominent writers in the English-language canon, or critics contemporaneous with the subject. —Writing on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*, for example, he appeals to Henry James and Edgar Allan Poe (*LE*, 17-18). While most of the essays begin with lucid summations of texts or some kind of immersive, biographical note about their authors, Coetzee often gives no indication of sources: for example, in writing on *Madame Bovary*, he relates that Gustave Flaubert “said or is claimed to have said” that “Madame Bovary, c’est moi [Madame Bovary is me]”; Coetzee does not indicate where he encountered the claim of the utterance (*LE*, 107).

These features, in sum, are claims to authority, latent suggestions that these are the kinds of facts that are so rote to Coetzee that they might as well be general knowledge. He, for instance, criticises the critical edition of Walter Benjamin’s *Selected Works*, the notes of which contain information that is “sometimes out of date [...] or incorrect” (*IW*, 62), and that, he argues, make errors in their treatment of Greek, Latin and French. Likewise he has a habit of saying “of course” about facts that many readers approaching his essays will in fact not know: in an overview of Benjamin’s Arcades Project, he says that the story of the author’s flight from Nazi-occupied France “is by now so well known what it barely needs to be retold” (*IW*, 2, 40). Mercifully he retells it for anyone in the back rows.



\* \* \*

In his introduction to *Inner Workings*, the scholar Derek Attridge argues that the essays show Coetzee “speak[ing] in his own voice” (ix). Yet Coetzee very seldom engages the first person, even if he does sometimes slip in under the guise of a “reader” (*IW*, 264). Such aloofness probably has to do with the essays’ original places of publication: is his register a function of his own conception of himself, or the expectations of the editorial team of the *New York Review of Books*?<sup>8</sup> With that in mind, his pointed, chiding essays on storied U.S. American writers seem less mean than humanising. Take, for example, the pair of essays in *Inner Workings* on Walt Whitman and William (Coetzee calls him “Billy”) Faulkner (*IW*, 189). Writing for a U.S. publication, Coetzee lingers on the more comical and hubristic aspects of Whitman’s personality: he was, after all, a writer who published his phrenological profile in early advertisements for *Leaves of Grass* (176), and who, despite giving the “impression that he witnessed the assassination of Abraham Lincoln [,] was not in fact there” (175).<sup>9</sup> Likewise, while Coetzee is generous to Faulkner, he also seems keen to paint him as an “overdramatising” poseur (198), the kind who, during two months in Paris, “bought a beret, grew a beard, [and] began work on a novel [...] about a painter with a war wound who goes to Paris” (192).

The essays that were written as introductions or otherwise not as reviews are much more supple, and lighter in tone. There are two standouts in this regard. The first is the last of a series of four pieces in *Late Essays* on Samuel Beckett, a sequence that lays bare the construction of these collections as a retrospective assemblage of discrete writing jobs. Facts are repeated between them, paths retrodden. The last of them, however, titled “Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett”, is fresh and malleable, tracking Coetzee’s encounters with Beckett via a number of philosophical inquiries and thought experiments. Here Coetzee

grapples with certain Beckettian mysteries, in particular his “existential homelessness” (203), casting light onto certain issues of embodiment touched upon in both writers’ oeuvres. Coetzee is not afraid to inhabit (or ventriloquise) Beckett’s voice, even entertaining an alternate history in which young Beckett’s application for a lecturing position at UCT is accepted: “Should we smile at the thought of Samuel Barclay Beckett, BA, MA, Professor of Romance Languages, University of Cape Town?” (217). It is about as close to playful as Coetzee gets, as close to an homage as he allows.

Also notable in the same volume is a short defence of Juan Ramón Jiménez’s *Platero and I*, as well as its eponymous subject, the narrator’s beloved silvery donkey. A prose poem, *Platero and I* “is usually thought of a children’s book” but in fact holds “much that is beyond the range of interest of children”, such as the “mutual bond between man and beast”, and the often hypocritical and superficial attachments human form to certain species of animals over others (130-131). But what Coetzee extols most here is the “love” humans can (and must) have for animals, as well as the “hard lessons” that such an emotional connection entails (132-133). This is a fitting coda to a long-running engagement with animal rights, such as in *The Lives of Animals* (which, stripped of the metafictional “reflections” and academic responses to its two constituent stories by Peter Singer, Marjorie Garber, Wendy Doniger, and Barbara Smuts, forms part of *Elizabeth Costello*). The topic of cruelty to animals also surfaces in Coetzee’s appraisal of Arthur Miller’s *The Misfits*, the only film to be discussed in either collection of essays. In particular, Coetzee considers the film’s use of actual wild horses in scenes in which they are chased and wrangled: the horses’ “exhaustion and pain and terror” are not only evident but “real”, and as such, Coetzee argues, these scenes bring one “close to the heart of film as a representational medium” (*IW*, 225).

In many respects, there is much in these essays about Coetzee that readers familiar with his work will already know. There is evidence of Coetzee’s distaste for Soviet

communism and political centrism (*IW*, 44-45 and 107), as well as his fascination with writers, like Irene Némirovsky and Antonio di Benedetto, who lived under the shadow of atrocity and brutality (*LE*, 113-118, *passim*, and 150). Some readers, however, will find Coetzee awkward in his discussions of sex, sexual assault, and rape. It is not that he avoids these topics, rather that his engagement is limited or uneven. While he deftly considers, for example, the narrative and ethical implications of the “medico-legal orthodoxy” of early nineteenth-century Germany, in which it was argued that acts that resulted in conception could not be considered rape (*LE*, 92), there are instances where Coetzee’s regular discursive rigour is lacking. Most troubling in this regard is a description of the action of Gabriel García Márquez’s *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*. Here, Coetzee is too caught up with the “brave” mission of the novel – its exploration of a “continuity between sexual desire and the passion of veneration”, and its attempts to “show that paedophilia need not be a dead end for either lover or beloved” – to identify a scene where a man fondles a sleeping girl as sexual assault (*IW*, 264). Indeed, for a writer of such exactitude, he might be thought to be remiss in not describing sexual violence as sexual violence, whether it is the acts of Willie Chandran in V.S. Naipaul’s *Half a Life* (“Soon he begins to visit African prostitutes, many of them, by Western standards, children” (*IW*, 283)), or “a novel by Kawabata about ageing men who pay money to spend nights with drugged, sleeping girls” (*IW*, 268). These are euphemisms for acts of rape; acts that one might expect would demand Coetzee’s interest in the ethical implications of depicting (or not depicting) atrocity. Perhaps Coetzee expects the immorality and horror of such acts to be implicit in their description, but it is still notable that he demurs from identifying sexual and gender-based violence as such, and chooses not to explore the ethics of the representation of these sexually violent acts. Coetzee writes, with regard to García Márquez, that “to demand unequivocal answers [...] is to mistake the nature of the storyteller's art,” (*IW*, 264). Perhaps, for a writer whose approaches to sexual desire and

violence – from *Waiting for the Barbarians* to *Disgrace* – are manifest and complicated, the argument might also apply to his own work and speak for itself. Then again, when compared to the rigour with which he discusses representations of the Holocaust or questions of animal cruelty, readers may still be left wanting here.

\* \* \*

When I think of Coetzee, I often think of a joke made at his expense. At the Adelaide Writers' Week in March 2010, Coetzee hosted a "Meet the Author" session with the English writer Geoff Dyer. Introduced—perhaps a bit dryly—by Coetzee, Dyer took to the lectern. "Thank you, John," Dyer said. "What an honour. If someone had told me twenty years ago that I'd be here in Australia and I'd be introduced by a Booker Prize-winning, South African, Nobel Prize-winning novelist, I don't know what I'd have said." Cue applause. "Well, what would I have said?" Dyer continued, after a moment's pause. "I'd've probably said, well that's incredible – Nadine Gordimer is my favourite writer."

Some might think this joke mean; others might regard Coetzee's response – there is not even a hint of recognition at Dyer's attempt at collegial humour – and conclude that he didn't care anyway. Of course, it is impossible to know what Coetzee thought in this specific situation, or in any of the other strange professional situations a writer encounters throughout their career: feuds, negative reviews, clingy readers, treacherous publishers, unethical journalists. That said, two collections of Coetzee's correspondence, one with the American writer Paul Auster and the British therapist Arabella Kurtz, can shine light on the experience of being J.M. Coetzee – or, rather, as he signs off his letters, John.

*Here and Now, Letters: 2008–2011* (2013) tracks a budding friendship between Coetzee and Auster (and to a lesser extent their partners), bringing certain fragments of

Coetzee's personal life – relatively unfiltered in comparison to his auto-fiction – into the body of his own oeuvre. From bouts of the flu to the “purgatory” of jet lag (17, 186), Coetzee offers insights into an extraordinary existence that to him (as well as to the other ultra-successful writer he is in conversation with) is quotidian.

The volume is unexpectedly direct, attempting to mimic the verisimilitude of their correspondence as they (presumably) experienced it. There is no introduction to the volume, only the first letter, one from Coetzee telling Auster that he has been “thinking about friendships” (1), a septuagenarian's twist on the first-day-of-school tactic of asking the person closest to you if they want to be your friend. The letters are likewise of a considered tone and composition, as if the writers are themselves convinced of their import. Some are written over a number of days, with smaller notes sometimes dashed off to each other in the midst of composing a longer missive. Some letters never reach their destination, and are not replied to. The sequence is not always chronological: replies are sometimes staggered, owing to their mode of correspondence: Coetzee generally faxes his letters from Adelaide to Auster in New York (with a couple sent via e-mail, care of Auster's wife, the writer Siri Hustvedt), while Auster opts to post Coetzee typewritten pages.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the tools of their trade, they write to each other about problems and occurrences they think the other will find interesting. The ways in which Coetzee and Auster write to each other – the latter even offers a numbered list of “possible points to discuss”! (15) – is as much evidence of a self-awareness on their parts that their correspondence will be pored over at some point, as it is of sometimes awkward beginnings of discussions.<sup>11</sup> Auster is generally more forthcoming with sharing his experiences, while textual intimacies are mutually restrained.<sup>12</sup> Responding to one of Auster's many, often entertaining stories about bad reviews and unwanted public interactions, Coetzee confesses a paradox at the heart of his writing life: while he possesses a professional “incapacity to get upset by what other people

say about me”, he is otherwise “thin-skinned” in his “everyday dealings” (126). Where the professional and personal overlap is the trouble, as evidenced by one of the central happenings of *Here and Now*: a letter written to Coetzee by a reader in England, accusing him of anti-Semitism on the basis that one of the characters in *Slow Man* speaks in a derogative manner about Jewish people. Despairingly he forwards the letter to Auster with a clipped note, seeking counsel: “Paul, See below. What does one do? John” (94).

Here they discourse on one of the aspects of literature (and art in general) that causes the most misunderstandings: the degree of separation between author and narrator, the creator and their creation. Auster offers comfort in labelling the sort of accusation Coetzee received “absurd [and] idiotic”, and yet “a part of the world we live in” (95), a coded warning, perhaps, to readers not to make the same mistake. But Coetzee, having muddied many waters throughout his career, complicates matters further. Yes, he writes, “one can write back explaining that characters in novels have a degree of independence from their authors”, but there can be no expectation that this will be the final word. “As a writer of a certain prominence,” he relates, “I must expect to get all kinds of mail from readers”, and this includes readers who do not have “a sophisticated understanding of what fiction is or does” (96). Therefore, he argues, the “real question”

is not whose hands are clean and whose are not. The real question arises out of the moment of being thrown onto the defensive, and out of the sinking feeling that comes next, the feeling that the goodwill between reader and writer has evaporated, the goodwill without which reading loses its joy and writing begins to feel like an unwanted, burdensome exercise. What does one do after that? Why go on, when one’s words are being picked over for covert slights and heresies? It’s like being back among the Puritans. (96-97)

The ethical gaze is turned back on himself, and he then reflects it onto the world. This is an experience few writers will encounter, and perhaps a level of exasperation that few will ever feel. To have built up a career in as oppressive and censorial a regime as apartheid South Africa, to have given significant portions of a career – particularly in writing *Giving Offence* and in his work with centres of PEN International – to understanding and interacting with issues of censorship and injurious speech, and still, at the end of it all, to be unable to escape this problem. Through a reading of a fiction, the reader claims to have seen “John” for who he really is, when what they have actually seen is more akin to him playing shadow puppets. (Yet he knows he is the one making the shapes with his hands.) Given his life experiences, it is perhaps not surprising that Coetzee is hyper-aware of, and constantly shifting, his approach to constructions of a narrative self.

The second volume of correspondence, *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* (2015), is more revealing on this subject. Coetzee and Kurtz’s conversation, occurring over roughly the same period as *Here and Now*, is more formal; this is in effect a book-length interview broken into chapters and introduced by an authors’ note, which explains that the exchange is “premised on the idea that something is to be gained by a therapist exploring their practice in the company of [...] a sympathetically disposed writer and literary critic” (v). The other, unspoken point of the book, is to delineate different forms of storytelling, to compare and differentiate the functions, benefits and limits of fiction and therapy – in other words, the goal of the writer, and the goal of the therapist. They both deal with stories, of course, but to different ends. Coetzee worries about the “serious real-world consequences” of life-stories (4), while Kurtz works with life-stories other than her own – the

one is concerned with the ethical and aesthetic dimensions, the other the practical and medical.

Kurtz is an able and candid interlocutor, her contributions to the book a balm to Coetzee's more chafing examination. Together the two explore notions of truth and selfhood in the work of Sophocles, Dostoyevsky, Cervantes, Marx, Eugene Marais, Melanie Klein and W. G. Sebald, as well as making forays into psychoanalytic theory and the psychology of groups, in particular societal "silence" and revisionism among the white populations of South Africa, the United States and Australia (96). Some of the exchange is interesting only for those interested in philosophical semantics, vis-a-vis psychotherapy and ontology. Likewise significant portions are given over to fancies born from Coetzee's dogged belief that he, a self-confessed "amateur", "may possibly have a contribution to make" to the field of group psychology (131): he states at one point that there is almost "nothing worth building on" in the work of Gustave Le Bon, and substitutes in for it stories from his childhood of being in a gang of small boys and from his life as a teacher at universities (143-144, 164).

For Coetzee critics, the core question of the exchange, from which the many other topics radiate, is whether or not the narratives one tells or understands about oneself are necessarily fiction. Although he is driven by a childhood "nostalgia for the one and only truth" (68), Coetzee believes that thinking "of a life-story as a compendium of memories which one is free to interpret" is "characteristic of a writer's way of thinking", in contrast to how "many people" see the story of their lives, "as a history that is forever fixed" (13). Regardless of how one conceives of their life's story, and regardless of whether one is a writer or not, the stories we tell about ourselves are all to "serve our own interests, or what we imagine are our interests" (60). For Coetzee, every seemingly autobiographical story is modified by the "allure of self-invention" (1), and is thus as much a fiction (in other words, a subjective fantasy) as any other narrative "construction" (3). In fact, he writes,



I don't have much respect for reality. I think of myself as using rather than reflecting reality in my fiction. If the world of my fictions is a recognisable world, that is because (I say to myself) it is easier to use the world at hand than to make up a new one. (69)

Here, out of a mixture of differences in outlook, as well as professional necessity, the two butt heads. Kurtz understands that “the stories we tell about our lives may not be an accurate reflection of what really happened, and in fact “may be more remarkable for their inaccuracies than anything else”, but are nevertheless “all we have to work with” in attempting to understand ourselves (63). For a therapist, Kurtz explains, the point isn't whether or not someone's life-story is an objective factual account, but rather how their story reflects both “subjective” and “intersubjective” truth, both individual and interpersonally recognisable experience; how the story can then be reflected back at the patient, who, one should not forget, is someone who is in treatment for “subjective distress” (70).

This is an interesting discussion in part because it is obvious from the outset that the two can never possibly see eye-to-eye on the topic. As much as they are attempting to see what understandings or contributions one can receive from the other, their professional aims are irreconcilable. Coetzee is concerned that writers modify and possibly compromise the ‘truth’ of stories by attempting to satisfy “autonomous aesthetic criteria”, instead using “poetic tricks and devices” to persuade the reader that the compromised truth is still a truth (8). Kurtz is concerned not whether a story is *a* truth, but whether it is to its teller *the* truth. This is a subtle difference, which Coetzee himself hints at but does not resolve when at one point he reminds himself to “take to heart [Kurtz's] reminder” that a patient “wants sympathy and understanding, not a disquisition on the difference between fictional truths and fictional

fictions” (142). For all of their grappling with the subject, Coetzee and Kurtz discourse about two different areas of ‘truth’, or more accurately, two different layers of truth. Coetzee is primarily concerned with what we might call factuality, whether or not a narrative *is* factual or non-factual; Kurtz with what we might call fictionality, whether a narrative *is intended* to be factual or non-factual.

This exchange is certainly not a therapy session in book form: Coetzee is not apparently in distress, and private details are few. It can nevertheless be read as Coetzee’s managed and public attempt to understand his own view of the world, terminally self-aware of his own subjectivity, and given his interest in psychotherapy as a discourse. Although he is “properly wary of using myself as an example” (21), he does so anyway. *The Good Story* explains in part why Coetzee does not write about himself identifiably as himself – in the first person or otherwise – and why he is at pains to keep an authorial distance from his work. It isn’t for obfuscation, or trickery, nor entirely to avoid occupational hazards like the ones he relates to Auster. Rather it is an unerring philosophical position, which he glosses from Gabriel Garcia Marquez: “The I who tells the story will be no less a constructed figure than the actors in it” (*LE*, 263). [surely this insight comes from Freudian psychoanalysis?]

Near the outset of *The Good Story*, Kurtz submits that we might only “know and understand ourselves fully through others, through the way we experience others and ourselves in relation to others, and the way others experience us”: “This,” she concludes, “is what I read your book *Summertime* to be about” (11). In addition to its critical clarity, this is notable for being one of only a few explicit mentions of a book written by Coetzee in another book (co-)written by Coetzee.<sup>13</sup> It is also a key to unlocking Coetzee’s authorial stance. This is his (co-authored) book, so he had the power to erase Kurtz’s reading of the novel, the third of his trilogy of auto-fictions. The author-subject, John Coetzee, is dead in *Summertime*; the book is a collection of voices and opinions about the dead man, compiled by a fictitious

biographer. But this is not a traditional death-of-the-author situation, nor is it a straightforward comment on “the malleability of memory”, of which Coetzee admits his sense is “simply too strong” (21). Coetzee is inarguably writing about himself in his auto-fiction, as well as in many passages of his other books. To repurpose a passage from *Inner Workings* about Philip Roth’s fiction about a child called Philip Roth (*IW*, 233): if the author John Coetzee had meant to write about a fictive person whose sole existence is between the pages of a novel, he would not have called that character John Coetzee. In some sense the John Coetzee whose life we read continues his life in the life of the John Coetzee who some years later not only exists in the novel, but writes it too.

Coetzee writes to Kurtz that he believes “most exchanges between human beings to be exchanges between projected fictions” (50) and that he himself is “as divided, undecided and confused as can be” (69). *Summertime* textually embodies these beliefs (as do the other auto-fictions), a writing about oneself from the perspective of “the only ending one can seriously believe in”: “What an irony,” Coetzee writes, “that to anchor oneself in a sea of fictions one should have to rely on death!” (69)

So: John is dead, long live John? Not quite – or, perhaps, not all. For here is Coetzee’s “notion of [...] an ideal society”:

one in which, for each of us, our fiction (our fantasy) of ourself goes unchallenged; and where some grand Leibnizian presiding force sees to it that all the billions of personal fictions interlock seamlessly, so that none of us need stay awake at night wondering anxiously whether the world we inhabit is real. (177)

In *Here and Now*, the reader learns that Coetzee does not, in fact, sleep very much. He gets only about four hours a night (227).

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What else may be gained from Coetzee's later criticism? For one, novelists, translators and critics can find all sorts of writerly tips and tricks. Some may be taken from Coetzee's professional experience. A successful novel, in his opinion, is one that, like psychoanalysis, "exposes" the fantasies the characters hold about themselves, and "that our seeming lives are not our real lives" (*TGS*, 191). Yet "The novelist [still] has a duty to supply plausible psychological motives for the actions of his characters" (*LE*, 156). He finds "too much self-aggrandisement in the idea – conjured up by artists themselves - of the artist as diagnostician of the age" (*TGS*, 60). The unspeakably atrocious may still, however, be written about "by sideways motion," by narrative gestures through which "the greater story somehow gets told" (*IW*, 143). Other insights come from his study of the practice of other writers. From Roth, Coetzee notes that a seasoned novelist "knows that the stories we set about writing sometimes begin to write themselves, after which [our] declarations of authorial intent carry no weight" (*IW*, 229). From Walser, he understands how the very act of writing, of pen to paper or finger to keyboard, can bring about "a frame of mind in which reverie, composition, and the flow of the writing tool became the same thing" (*IW*, 22-23).

The auto-fiction aside, there are also some other insightful glimpses into Coetzee's work. For instance, we learn Michael K is named as such in an unsuccessful attempt "to reclaim the letter of the alphabet that Kafka had annexed" (*H&N*, 78), or that he will not put mobile phones or the internet into his work (only reluctantly a telephone) because he believes

such technology weakens the interpersonal, illocutionary acts that give dialogue its texture (*H&N* 219, 227). Most revealingly, he reveals that he has “a pretty paltry visual imagination”: he does not see anything in his mind’s eye when he reads, but rather an “aura or tonality” (*H&N*, 201). Likewise, the place in which he imagines his fiction taking place is “pretty bare” – “an empty cube, in fact” – in which items are only visualised if they are to figure in the narrative (*H&N*, 193). He also does not imagine the lives of his characters outside of the bounds of the narratives he composes. In sum, these volumes are far more interesting than any promotional interview could ever be. Perhaps that is because, as Coetzee says to Auster,

I have often felt oppressive boredom as I listen to myself mouthing off to interviewers. To my way of thinking, real talk only occurs when there is some kind of current running between the interlocutors. And such a current rarely runs during interviews. (110)

A reader expecting overt candour from Coetzee, even in his correspondence, would be disappointed. That said, these letters show that the perceptions of Coetzee as a calculated and possibly distant man are both true and not true. The level tone, the exacting intellectual inquiry? It’s no show – that’s just the way he is as a person. He is as abstracting and critical of his own interests – sport, particularly cricket and previously chess (*H&N* 11, 30, 51, 162-163 *passim*) – as he is about the causes of the 2008 financial crisis, the factual basis of his English being called “sud-africaine” by his French publishers, or the phenomenological basis of reading (*H&N*, 19, 72; *TGS*, 179). He worries that his thinking on certain subjects is “airy-fairy”, and he is “embarrassed” to converse on topics over which he does not have mastery (*TGS*, 12).

The letters to Auster and Kurtz solve a mystery that Coetzee's readers have pondered over throughout his career. Namely, he has no façade. He is as revealing and confessional a writer as any other, his difference being that he has entirely internalised the constructedness of the world, and has a compulsion to polish all of his output "to a sheen well past the standard for publication" (*H&N*, 192). This is a quality most jobbing writers reserve only for their masterworks, which, perhaps ironically, might push Coetzee's readers to second-guess his intentions. There is no misdirection with regard to his intentions, only a complication, or at most an overlapping. Is *Here and Now* a sincere exchange of letters between friends? Yes, because they *are* friends, and that's what friends do. Is it also something of a self-aware meta-treatise on how correspondence between writers may be treated? Also yes, because they are writers, and that is what *writers* do. They discourse within *Here and Now* about the publication of the correspondence of Samuel Beckett, a writer close to both their hearts (29, 32, 48). As such, it would be terminally naive to think they wouldn't have considered the aesthetics of their own correspondence. Likewise it would be naive to think Coetzee doesn't deeply consider his own constructions of himself within his work, fiction or non, critical or correspondence. It doesn't mean, though, that the constructions he creates aren't also him.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mbao, "J.M. Coetzee is tired", online.

<sup>2</sup> Twidle, "Getting past Coetzee", \*\*.

<sup>3</sup> To list, there are six Germans (Walter Benjamin, Günter Grass, W.G. Sebald, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Hölderlin, Heinrich von Kleist), two German-speaking Austrians (Robert Musil, Joseph Roth) and one German-speaking Swiss (Robert Walser); five U.S. Americans (Walt Whitman, William Faulkner, Arthur Miller, Philip Roth, Nathaniel Hawthorn), and one U.S. American-Canadian (Saul Bellow); three Englishmen (Graham Greene, Daniel Defoe, Ford Madox Ford) and one British-Trinidadian and Tobagoan (V. S. Naipaul); three Australians (Patrick White, Les Murray, Gerald Murnane); two Poles (Bruno Schulz, Zbigniew Herbert); and one writer each from Italy (Italo Svevo), Hungary (Sándor Márai), Romania (Paul Celan), Belgium (Hugo Claus), Spain (Juan Ramón Jiménez), France (Gustave Flaubert), France-via-Ukraine (Irene Némirovsky), Russia (Leo Tolstoy), Argentina (Antonio di Benedetto), Colombia (Gabriel García Marquez), modern-day Namibia (Hendrik Witbooi), and South Africa (Nadine Gordimer).

<sup>4</sup> Dovey, *On J.M. Coetzee*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Watson, "Speaking: J. M. Coetzee," 24, in Dovey, *On Coetzee*, 43.

<sup>6</sup> Coetzee, "In the Midst of Losses", \*\*.

<sup>7</sup> He is somewhat less inexact when discussing Philip Roth's *Nemesis*, of which he says, "Despite its length (280 pages) it has the *feel* of a novella" (*LE*, 48; my emphasis).

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<sup>8</sup> And in this context, his relative lack of references would not be so problematic, with fact claims double-checked by the publication's editorial board.

<sup>9</sup> Coetzee nevertheless does allow Whitman's belief that "he enjoyed a special relationship with Lincoln": "Both men were tall" (175).

<sup>10</sup> Auster moans at one point – in the year 2009 – about how "Paris hotel rooms are not equipped with typewriters" (35).

<sup>11</sup> Auster contrasts his openness with Coetzee with "perhaps the closest male friend of [his] adulthood", whose mind is nevertheless almost inaccessible to Auster (4).

<sup>12</sup> John usually wishes Paul a variation on 'All the best', while Paul graduates over the course of two years from offering a "handshake", to giving "Gramps" and his partner a pair of "big hugs" (14, 182, 198).

<sup>13</sup> Others being references in *Here and Now* by Auster to the film adaptation of *Disgrace*, and a self-critical remark by Coetzee about *Giving Offence* as part of the conversation precipitated by the English reader's letter.