



Coetzee's Postcolonial Diaspora

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My subject is the poetics of place but more particularly, the ways in which place comes to define what is possible for the subject-of-writing. I'll begin with that hazardous expedient of Coetzee criticism: the quotation from an interview. This one is taken from the Stockholm newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* of 7th December, 2003, shortly before the Nobel ceremony. The tone here is, at first, parodic, but the historical diagnosis is reliably Coetzeean:

I am a late representative of the vast movement of European expansion that took place from the sixteenth century to the mid-twentieth century of the Christian era, a movement that more or less achieved its purpose of conquest and settlement in the Americas and Australasia, but failed totally in Asia and almost totally in Africa. . . . I am also a representative of the generation in South Africa for whom apartheid was created, the generation that was meant to benefit most from it.

The sweeping temporal and spatial gestures express a characteristic resistance to being positioned, as if to say, if historical positionality is at issue, then let's have the entire frame out in the open. The tone is less defensive in the second sentence where the referent is apartheid. I will come back to the trials of positionality in Coetzee's writing, but for the moment let me acknowledge the tone and move on to the substance.

Nowhere, Coetzee says, have four centuries of European expansion been an unequivocal success. It "more or less achieved its purpose of conquest and settlement in the Americas and Australasia, but failed totally in Asia and almost totally in Africa." The histories of conquest and settlement are not discussed in national-cultural terms—Lusophone, Hispanic, Dutch,

Francophone, British—but as arising from a broadly singular situation—Europe—which meets with different outcomes. Whether these outcomes are the result of internal factors in the colonizing cultures, whether they are a function of varying degrees and kinds of resistance, or both of these factors, is not specified; instead, the postcolonial world is arranged in degrees of success.

This is one measure of the significance of Coetzee's relocation from South Africa to Australia and its influence on his work: he has moved from a part of the world where conquest and settlement have almost totally failed, to one where they have more or less achieved their purpose. To put this narrative in literary-historical terms: if modernism and its legacies are in some measure an enactment of the violence of modernity then Coetzee's (post)modernism is an enactment of that violence; more trenchantly, however, it is an enactment of South Africa's violence and his writing has yet to be touched by anything equivalent in Australian history. As Elizabeth Costello puts it,

We're not a country of extremes—I'd say we're rather pacific—but we are a country of extremities. We have lived our extremities because there hasn't been a great deal of resistance in any direction. If you begin to fall, there isn't much to stop you. (15)

And:

You have to realize how vast Australia is. We are only fleas on Australia's backside, we late settlers. (29)

It is the geography of Australia that has made its mark on Coetzee, not its history (or rather, it is the idea of Australian geography that has influenced him rather than its particularity) whereas in South Africa, as the essays on land and landscape of *White Writing* reveal, geography and history are, in a certain sense, indistinguishable.

Just as significant as the spatial frame in the comments from *Dagens Nyheter* is the temporal: European expansion may have been in retreat for some time in different regions of the globe but it ended, he says, in the mid-twentieth century; in other words, it is the experience of his particular generation of settler-colonials to live out the end of Empire and decolonization ("live out" is his verb—later in the interview he says he has lived out this history in his writing as much as in his day-to-day life).

To Coetzee's generation, decolonization is a form of profound disembedding—a term used by Anthony Giddens in a different context

to account for the consequences of modernity (21–28). Decolonization produces a post-imperial disembedding, just as much as it enables some national cultures to acquire self-definition. The disembedding to which Coetzee alludes is a function of decolonization and it begins to acquire self-consciousness when settler-colonial diasporas arise from what Coetzee calls failed or failing settlements which take people back to the metropolises or on to more successful colonizing cultures. Caribbean and post-Ugandan-Asian Britons were pioneering communities in this process of self-definition, and although their circumstances are politically quite different, the descendants of white settlers, whom we might call re-settlers, will follow their example. Famously, metropolitan France referred to its returned Algerian settlers as *pied-noire*, reflecting a racism about Africa that not only remained unreconstructed after the Algerian war but was no doubt reconstituted by it. In the colloquial self-identification of this community, one hears of being *lá-bat*, with a gesture over the Mediterranean, *je suis un lá-bat*. As Robert Young has demonstrated, this sense of being other-within, in the metropole, produced in Jacques Derrida and others some of the most profound internal displacements within European intellectual life of the late twentieth century (411–26).

English-speaking communities of displaced settler-colonials frequently behave like diasporic subjects, notably at sports events—those South African patriots with their green-and-gold painted faces in Perth—but there is little evidence as yet of a general willingness to articulate this position culturally. We might speculate about this silence: like all diasporic subjects, this new generation of anglophone diasporic settler-colonials experience separation, loss, longing, and nostalgia, but they seldom declare it, narrate it, or self-consciously build identities around it. Why the demurrer? There could be several reasons: they might be anxious to put the identity breast-beating behind them because the cultures they have left are so full of it; or they might be anxious to absorb the reflexes of their adoptive cultures, where the rule of whiteness, let us be frank, is unwelcoming to such gestures. Whatever the explanation, the unwillingness actively to embrace a diasporic identity speaks of what I would like to call, for the purposes of this paper, post-historicity. Note that this condition is not post-historical in any objective sense; it is only lived as such. It is an afterlife of sorts: one's formative experiences lie elsewhere and one enters a realm of private accommodations.

Paul Rayment's condition in *Slow Man* is post-historical in this sense, although strictly speaking he is not anglophone: his English is essentially functional, his "word-box" diminished in the discourse of affect. The events of the novel, the accident and the amputation of his leg, leaving

him with the stump that he christens *le jambon*, render him a “man not wholly a man . . . an after-man, like an after-image, the ghost of a man looking back in regret on time not well used” (34), but these events could actually be taken as metaphoric because they strike him in the midst of a life he is *already* living as post-historical. His real life was the one he lived in France as a child. Somewhat implausibly, in fact, Rayment is unable to overcome a family migration that took place when he was *six*, and he has grown up an unhappy child, feeling displaced, a situation a return visit to France in his late youth did nothing to assuage. The condition of which the text speaks goes well beyond its narrative pretext.

What is true of Rayment is also true of JC in *Diary of a Bad Year*. It might be asked in what sense are his opinions post-historical when they respond so directly—unusually directly, in Coetzee’s oeuvre—to his times? They are post-historical in that they diagnose a global condition (of which Australia is often taken to be representative) in terms that are deeply marked by the South Africa of Coetzee’s formation.¹ In JC’s “Second Diary,” there is an entry on hearing Antjie Krog on Australian radio. Her subject is “historical experience in the South Africa of her lifetime” (199). Krog’s poems read in English translation by the author herself reach JC from a place and a past he understands and for which he has a literary analogy. “The phenomenon of Antjie Krog strikes me as quite Russian. In South Africa, as in Russia, life may be wretched; but how the brave spirit leaps to respond!” Here the historical momentarily interrupts the post-historical, breaking through JC’s ironic poise.

Dostoevsky haunts much of Coetzee’s fiction, a haunting which is given rein in *The Master of Petersburg*. Coetzee responds not only to Dostoevsky but to Russia, or the spirit of Russia as it manifests itself in Dostoevsky’s fiction.² This intensity speaks of Coetzee’s relation to South Africa, an intensity which simply could not have arisen from his relationship with Australia, and it would be unwise to expect or wish that it could be otherwise. Logically we need to ask therefore in what forms has the wide brown land surfaced in Coetzee’s writing? To get to the point quickly, it seems to me that the light-touch quality of Coetzee’s relation to Australia—which is another way of describing the post-historical—facilitates a further turning inward to the preoccupation with authorship itself. That preoccupation has been present in the metafictional treatment Coetzee gives to all his material, but in the Australian writing it becomes more thoroughly allegorized. The allegories of authorship in the Austra-

lian fiction have to do with the relationships between the existential and the representational and the tensions and connections between biography, autobiography, and the transformations effected by narrative art.

The overriding explanation for the animus around positionality that informs much of Coetzee's South African writing of the early part of his career—an animus clarified in the essay, "The Novel Today"—is the culture's relentless political instrumentalism. Coetzee developed a *metier* out of finding forms of resistance to it: in metafictional displacements, unexpected turns, parody, alterities that are not easily reducible to the political. A brief but effective theoretical intervention and circumvention of this instrumentalism was his excursus on the semantics of the middle voice, in a meditation on Roland Barthes's essay, "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" The middle voice is positioned midway between active and passive voices. It is a verbal construction that suspends transitivity, such that the activity expressed in the verb becomes primary, rather than the subject or product. Subjectivity emerges as a function of the verb, not as an expression of the prior existence of the agent. "To write (active) is to carry out the action without reference to the self. . . . To write (middle) is to carry out the action (or better, to do-writing) with reference to the self" (94), says Coetzee. In Barthes's terms, "to write today is to make oneself the centre of the action of speech, it is to effect writing by affecting oneself, . . . [it] is to leave the *scriptor* inside the writing—not as a psychological subject. . . but as agent of the action" (18).

Coetzee asks whether "Barthes's essay is best thought of as a piece of speculative linguistics or as academic propaganda for a post-modernist practice of writing" (94). Coetzee is clearly a more cautious linguist than Barthes, but he does share some of his polemic. What he deduces from Barthes is that the middle voice can be construed as speaking "a word of caution about constructions that we often run across in literary criticism in South Africa" (95), and he lists several examples, each of which reflects a prevailing instrumentalism: "to use language / to write a book / to create characters / to express thought / to communicate a message." Such discourse may not be political in the first instance, but in conjunction with the political it becomes a formidable *habitus* which Coetzee sought to disrupt. It would have been difficult for Coetzee to follow Barthes all the way, when Barthes says in the same essay,

modern literature is trying, by various experiments, to establish a new position for the agent of writing in writing itself. The meaning or the goal of this effort is to substitute the instance of discourse for the instance of reality (or of the referent), that mythic alibi which has dominated—still dominates—the idea of literature. The field of the writer is only writing itself, not as pure “form,” conceived by an aesthetic of art for art’s sake, but much more radically as the only possible space [*espace*] of the one who writes. (20)

Coetzee’s reflections on Barthes’s essay demur to some degree, suggesting that to argue wholeheartedly for the suspension of the referent in the South Africa of the early 1980s would have been a tall order (although he allows himself to do this explicitly on one occasion, in “The Novel Today,” with defiant and somewhat embattled resolve). Instead, Coetzee allows himself the following remark on the passive voice: “One might also want to think,” he says, “of A is-written-by X (passive) as a linguistic metaphor for a particular kind of writing, writing in stereotyped forms and genres and characterological systems and narrative orderings, where the machine runs the operator” (95). There can be little doubt that despite JC’s saying in *Diary of a Bad Year* that the dust has settled on Barthes’s critique of realism and the death of the author, Barthesian thinking was congenial to Coetzee in the 1980s.

In a rather tangled exchange in *Doubling the Point* where the subject of discussion is the social meaning of Michael K’s resistance to being classified and interpreted, Coetzee appears to literalize Barthes’s field [*espace*] of writing:

The experience of writing a novel is, above all, lengthy. The novel becomes less a thing than a place where one goes every day for several hours a day for years on end. What happens in that place has less and less discernible relation to the daily life one lives or the lives of people living around one. Other forces, another dynamic, take over. . . . In contrast, as I talk to you today, I have no sense of going anywhere for my answers. What I say here is continuous with the rest of the daily life of a writer-academic like myself. While I hope what I say has some integrity, I see no reason to have any particular respect for it. True or false, it

is simply my utterance, continuous with me; whereas what I am doing when I am writing a novel either isn't me or is me in a deeper sense than the words I am now speaking are me. (205)

The shift this paragraph enacts is from a transitive notion of writing defined by the text as product—"thing"—to a performative conception emphasizing the activity itself: the middle rather than the active or passive voices. He articulates the shift as being fundamental to writing but finds himself up against a culture that he feels inhibits his making it, constantly reeling him back. It was an impossible position, but it was also the limitation he set out to conquer. There is a turn, towards the end of this passage, that has acquired more significance in hindsight: the space of writing to which he seeks to surrender himself has *some* connection with an *autobiographical* subject: "what I am doing when I am writing a novel either isn't me or is me in a deeper sense than the words I am now speaking are me." After the memoirs, *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*, and the allegories of authorship in the Nobel lecture and *Slow Man*, these clauses acquire new and existential significance.

In this particular respect, Barthes would not have been helpful to Coetzee. Here is Barthes from the same essay, obliterating the existential subject:

Man does not exist prior to language, either as a species or as an individual. We never encounter a state where man is separated from language, which he then elaborates in order to "express" what is happening within him: it is language which teaches the definition of man, not the contrary." (13)

In Barthes, philology eclipses ontology. There is much in Coetzee that would encourage one to draw the same conclusion, but it is not wholly the case. Coetzee's poststructuralism accommodates an autobiographical subject, a "me" which still lies somewhere beneath the writing even though it remains obscure, a subject which "either isn't me or is me in a deeper sense."

If we step back from Coetzee's meditation on Barthes and return to the fiction, it is clearer that there is a problem with the middle voice as Barthes polemicizes it. If it is language that teaches the definition of man and not the reverse, how do we account for the power of affect, for Paul Rayment's "unsuitable passion" for Marijana, which is the axis around

which *Slow Man* turns, marking the entry of Elizabeth Costello (the philological turn, in a sense) after which the novel becomes a struggle for control over the story of that passion and its moral entanglements; as if philology were a pull, a tendency, and not the whole story. What Coetzee does in *Slow Man* is return to a theme developed in *Foe*, where Susan Barton and Foe wrestle for control over the meaning of Barton's narrative, especially the role of the daughter in it. The question is therefore not entirely new but Coetzee returns to it with more elaboration in *Slow Man*, focusing the colloquies between Costello and Rayment on the relationship between writing and acting (or being) with particular intensity.

This sustained attention to the elements of authorship seems to be facilitated by the relatively freer climate of Coetzee's new circumstances. Here then, is the core of my argument: the post-historical suits the wanderlust of the middle voice. At the risk of putting it too whimsically, there is even a serendipitous connection between the Barthesian "space of writing" or *espace* and what Costello herself calls "the wide brown land" (263). On the evidence of *Slow Man*, the elements of the middle voice can be disaggregated and allegorized in the following ways:

1. It is a *dialogic* space, a space of countervoices; the self-of-writing is not unified but acts as a chorus, testing a range of positionalities rather than attempting unity (in this reading, the Nobel Lecture, "He and His Man," is embryonic of *Slow Man*).
2. It is dialogic in part because the principal functions of being/acting and writing have different relationships with *desire* (Marijana/Marianna: the former is the object of Rayment's desire, the latter represents Costello's desire for a tidy story involving the halt and the blind).
3. The authorial subject-of-writing (Costello) trades in the literary system (intertextuality, allusions, illusion) whereas the existential subject-of-writing pulls away from the literary (Rayment repudiates Costello at the end of the novel).

The decompression of post-historicity enables the disaggregation, and the play, of these elements. I began by discussing decolonization as a process of disembedding for the settler-colonial subject (or the post-settler,

postcolonial subject). I would like to end by discussing *re-embedding*. Paul Rayment's collection of Fauchery photographs and his decision to bequeath them to the State Library is an attempt to re-embed himself, that is, to achieve authenticity through the materiality of the image (in pre-digital imagery) and to achieve historicity by creating a named archive which will contribute to a narrative of Australian origins. Drago's forgery, and his insertion of his ancestor into the archive, seems to Rayment to undermine this project, as does Marijana's unwillingness to concede that such a thing as an original in photography exists. Rayment's refusal to wear a prosthesis, and his reluctance to use the recumbent bicycle the Jokics make for him, convey a similar insistence: only the *real thing* is good enough. The novel's conclusion ironizes this position, to some extent. Costello argues that the outcome of the episode involving the forgery is that it takes Rayment out to Munno Para to see the Jokics, "where you have had words in private with your beloved Marijana and got to see her husband's beekeeping outfit and the bicycle her son is building for you. That is the only outcome of the forgery that matters" (259). The surge of unexpected developments at the end of the novel, which include Rayment being overwhelmed with the Jokics' kindness, seem to confirm Costello's interpretation. There has indeed been a "moral rout" (258), as Rayment acknowledges. But then, the *force* of these developments is that Rayment has been momentarily re-embedded, not through his own manipulation of historical images but through his being re-circulated in and through a social network.

The novel's conclusion is anticipated in the theory of realism offered in the first lesson of *Elizabeth Costello*, "What is Realism?" Language no longer gives us unmediated access to a referent, says Costello. "We used to believe that when the text said, 'On the table stood a glass of water,' there was indeed a table, and a glass of water on it, and we only had to look in the word-mirror of the text to see them" (19). But now "the word-mirror is broken" and the dictionary "that used to stand beside the Bible and the works of Shakespeare above the fireplace . . . has become just one code book among many." The code book of code books, of course, was written by Barthes: *S/Z*. What Barthes didn't allow for is that although the word-mirror which we were once able to hold up to the real has been shattered, words still retain a capacity, through their dissemination and distribution, and through the narratives they fall into, to enact, allegorically, our embeddedness in life. This is the discovery realized

and enacted in the story. “Kafka,” says Costello, reflecting on that most unrealistic of stories, “Report to an Academy,”

had time to wonder where and how the poor educated ape was going to find a mate. And what it was going to be like when he was left in the dark with the bewildered, half-tamed female his keepers eventually produced for his use. Kafka’s ape is embedded in life. It is the embeddedness that is important, not the life itself. His ape is embedded as we are embedded, you in me, I in you. (32)

This theme reaches its fulfilment in the final story of the collection, “At the Gate,” where Costello, pressed finally into a confession of her beliefs (having reached the ultimate of post-historical afterlives) mustering a last-ditch effort to persuade the tribunal of her integrity by showing that she has lived fully and passionately, says that what she believes in are the frogs in the mudflats of the Dulgannon River. When the waters return at the end of the summer and “the caked mud softens, the frogs begin to dig their way out, and soon their voices resound again in joyous exultation beneath the vault of the heavens” (216). The desire for a language which enacts our embeddedness in life was already apparent in *Disgrace*, in David Lurie’s attention to the distressed dogs at the animal welfare clinic, but it finds a celebratory outlet in the imaginary geography of Coetzee’s adopted country.

Notes

1. I discuss the (South) African provenance of JC’s ideas about the State more fully in “Mastering Authority: J. M. Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year*,” *Social Dynamics* 36.1 (March 2010): 214–21.
2. See David Attwell, “Coetzee’s Estrangements,” in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 41.2–3 (2008): 229–43.

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