

J. M. Coetzee, the Craftsman

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Attwell, David. *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face-to-Face with Time*. New York: Viking, 2015. xxiii + 248 pages. ISBN 978-0-525-42961-6. Pbk. \$27.95.

David Attwell undoubtedly counts as one of the best-known Coetzee-scholars. He edited *Doubling the Point* (1992), a collection of essays and interviews on J. M. Coetzee, which, even today, is regarded as one of the most significant books about the author, despite its relatively early publication date. Attwell graduated at the University of Natal in Durban, South Africa, and completed his M.A. in African literary theory and criticism at the University of Cape Town, where his supervisor was J. M. Coetzee himself. Attwell's most recent book on him is of invaluable significance, a must-read to everyone interested in the astonishing and revealing process of how Coetzee's novels were written and how they reached their final, published form. *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* is an account of Attwell's reading of Coetzee's manuscripts for his novels, made available to the public in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. As the title suggests, the book is a critical biography on Coetzee's authorship, the purpose of which is to read the life and work of Coetzee together. Nevertheless, it is not a biography in the conventional sense (like John Kannemayer's much-acclaimed one), being concerned not with the life of Coetzee, but his life as a writer, his life as it appears and surfaces in the novels and through the manuscripts. This time, Attwell looks not at the finished works but at the creative process, the transformations and various versions the texts went through, thus providing the reader with the unsettling and intimate experience of learning about Coetzee's work-style, his laborious process of drafting, correcting, and rewriting.

Coetzee's manuscripts are meticulously dated, we learn from Attwell, making it easy to follow their development. The drafts are primarily in search of the voice, the plot being the least stable element, always subservient to the voice and being continually revised. Contrary to the widely held assumption that Coetzee's novels emerge from quotations drawn from literary theory, the allusions to other writers, theorists or philosophers are introduced only after the works have found their own legs (xx). Twelve, thirteen, fourteen versions of a work are not unusual. Looking at the manuscripts one encounters a "more human, less Olympian" Coetzee (1), struggling with the immense labor

invested in the writing process. Attwell uses a quote from *Michael K* to describe Coetzee's habit and method of writing: "like an ant boring its way through a rock" (2). The metaphor is suggestive for Coetzee's authorship, Attwell suggests. The question rightly emerges: if he started *here*, how on earth did he get *there*?

Attwell recounts how Coetzee in interviews offered the date 1 January 1970 as the starting point of his writing career. On that date, shortly before he turned thirty, he carried out a New Year's resolution of writing a thousand words daily: "Every morning since 1 Jan 1970 I have set down to write. I HATE it" (Coetzee qtd. in Attwell 25). The date is not reliable, of course; he had written and published poetry long before that date, and he also, though briefly, experimented with prose. This is, however, when he actually started working on his first novel, *Dusklands*, which, Attwell argues, marks the beginning of his fictionalized autobiography (and not *Boyhood*, where the genre is explicitly taken up). Coetzee's remark is also an open comment on the toils of writing.

Attwell pursues the development of Coetzee's novels with careful attention and utmost respect. From the manuscripts we learn that the writing of *In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and *Life and Times of Michael K*—his most astonishing novels, in my view—was an exhausting process. He planned *Barbarians* to be a drama of consciousness like *In the Heart of the Country*, but he could not face "the prospect of writing again at that hysterical intensity" (88). He was struggling with the plans of *Barbarians* until, while working on the drafts, Steve Biko's death convulsed South Africa. The inquest into the Black Consciousness leader's death was covered in great detail by the liberal press. This incident, this political catastrophe provided the "habitation for desire" for Coetzee's novel (89). He followed the press closely about Biko's torture and death, keeping press clippings among his manuscripts. Coetzee was wrestling with finding the form of the book. He planned to create a "credible beloved you," but found it impossible in a third-person narrative. We learn (and regret) that sexuality and sexual scenes (of "compulsive, despairing sex") are far more explicit in the drafts than in the final published text (87, 100). The text is endlessly rewritten, with drafts abandoned, serving as tokens of Coetzee's belief in the creative process: if the text is found inadequate, he presses on.

The same convoluted process is true of *Life and Times of Michael K*, a text which goes through a complete turn-around. The drafts start off as the story of a white intellectual, an academic, only to end up as the opposite: Michael K, as we know him, is an underclass Black suburban outlaw. The belief that behind Coetzee's Michael K lies the figure of Kafka's Josef K is partly true (he even

considered the title *The Childhood of Josef K*). Yet Attwell reveals that Heinrich von Kleist's German Romantic novel *Michael Kohlhaas* (1810) is as much behind Coetzee's novel, as becomes clear from the drafts. Nevertheless, Coetzee turned away considerably from his model: while Kohlhaas embraces violence, K does not. Kafka's "The Hunger Artist" is mentioned at a late stage of drafting the novel. Another source and possible model for the protagonist K considered by Coetzee and featuring in the manuscripts was the Kamieskroon killer—an actual murderer who went on a killing spree aimed at whites in the northern Cape Town of Kamieskroon. The idea was finally dropped because Coetzee was not able to inhabit his consciousness. The different characters and circumstances of the original manuscript are basically unrelated to the final outlaw narrative, and this narrative goes through several twists and turns before it becomes the story of the "wise simpleton or idiot-sage or holy fool" we know him to be (115). Attwell argues that the character Coetzee finally invented might in some respect be seen as a version or extension of Coetzee himself, of his temperament and inclinations (120). Indeed, the question of making himself heard and present in his narrative is of central significance in his manuscripts, despite his being famous for impersonality. The question "when am I going to enter?" recurs in the manuscripts of *Michael K* and *Foe* likewise.

Perhaps the most surprising finding of Attwell's book is the astonishing disclosure of a novel begun but never realized. Attwell discovered that between *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country* Coetzee had been working on a manuscript of a novel entitled "The Burning of Books," which he later abandoned after working on it for a year. In its focus would have been a young man working as a censor, an idea far too relevant and disturbing for Coetzee given the atmosphere of South Africa in the 1970s. In 1972, working at the University of Cape Town, upon being asked by the department head to provide a list of banned books that he would regard as essential for his research, Coetzee responded with extraordinary thoroughness. Poring over the 16,000 titles in *Jacobsen's Index of Objectionable Literature*, he provided a meticulous list of books. While his collection is the token of his profound knowledge of world literature, Coetzee's intention was to show how "our censors have impoverished our lives" (56). Though the project of the book had been abandoned—"when I think of the story of a man sitting and censoring, my heart sinks," we read in one of Coetzee's notes—the mere idea of the subject matter provides a dispiriting picture of apartheid-era lunacy. The fact that a month after abandoning the novel's manuscript Coetzee applied to be a censor himself is an extraordinary (parodic?) gesture of his showing the extent to which he could go in "arranging life to imitate art" (61). Attwell notes, however, that the unfinished book project

prepared the ground for the later novels; the incineration of books turns back in *Disgrace* as the incineration of dogs, and the torture scenes in *Waiting for the Barbarians* have their precedent in scenes of torture with electric shock in “The Burning of Books.”

Coetzee’s practice of basing his text on a canonical precedent recurs in *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg*. It is obvious that the manuscript of *Foe* is more seamless than the manuscripts of the earlier novels, the pastiche of eighteenth-century prose being congenial to Coetzee. While Attwell finds traces of Coetzee’s mother behind the protagonist of *Age of Iron*—to whom a disarming tribute had been paid in the introduction of his Nobel lecture—he, in turn, reads *Summertime* as a novel about Coetzee’s father, as a dedication to his remembrance, a look-back at and a restoration of the father-son relationship. Attwell shows how the sense of loss that surfaces in Coetzee’s writing in the late 1980s and early 1990s might be explained by the losses he experienced then: between 1987 and 1990, Coetzee was bereaved of his mother, his father, his son, and his first wife, Philippa Juber. Of all his novels, *The Master of Petersburg* is perhaps the most riskily personal novel, in which, through the character of Dostoevsky, Coetzee displaced his own grief and mourned his own son, who died under mysterious circumstances at a young age.

Attwell’s new monograph is a gripping read, an intriguing study for anyone interested in the behind-the-scenes life of an extraordinary literary craftsman. Providing an insight into the creative process behind an outstanding oeuvre, Attwell’s book shows Coetzee as an author with an utmost discipline, keen self-scrutiny, and a fascination for perfection. Looking at the manuscripts, one feels that Coetzee is possibly the most rigorous reader of himself, and this self-critical, indefatigable poise is what leads to the concise and tight lyrical fiction we admire Coetzee for. Besides its valuable scholarship, *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* is a beautifully illustrated book as well, with scans of Coetzee’s handwritten drafts of the novels and some fascinating, intimate family photographs: Coetzee as a child, portraits of his parents, the family picture from Coetzee’s young adult life with his beautiful first wife Philippa and their children around 1970, in Buffalo, New York, and a picture of his grown son Nicolas. A preliminary knowledge of Coetzee’s fiction is, however, required to fully enjoy the merits of the book.

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