

## J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*: Ethical and Novelistic Awareness

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In a recent study of J.M. Coetzee's works entitled *Old Myths—Modern Empires*, Michela Canepari-Labib makes reference to the strong inclination that Coetzee has for “rethinking the same issues in different ways” (2005: 18). This tendency is most evident in his latest work, *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), which contains many of the topics recurrent in his previous fiction and essays, and emphasizes a few which his present circumstances probably help magnify. A conventional novelistic structure would not have enabled Coetzee to have included such a large number of topics and ideas that seem crucially important for him at this moment. Instead, the design of *Diary of a Bad Year* renders a book that is paradigmatic and all embracing. In this book, we find J.M. Coetzee the novelist, the intellectual, the critic and the human being in a kind of synthesis of the multi-faceted figure Coetzee.

At this point we remember another prominent contemporary writer, Salman Rushdie, who in his novel *Midnight's Children* reflects: “To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world” (1981: 109). Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* may be seen as an attempt to ‘swallow the world’. The author establishes a correspondence between the macrocosm —the world at large, and the microcosm— the life of the aging protagonist, the writer Señor C. In this way, Coetzee's critical thoughts, his personal reflections and his literary creativity are interconnected within a frame of fictional experimentation with rewarding results. Kathryn Harrison says:

In his most recent “novel”, we are deliberately manipulated by a form that is coy as well as playful, and it’s hard not to conclude Coetzee is more invested in his relationship with his readers than in his characters’ credibility and interactions with one another. (2007: 3)

In conversation with Richard Begam, Coetzee manifested, in 1992, his awareness of the fact that with the type of novels that he was writing then, he could be “cutting himself off” from his contemporary readership. Still, Coetzee was convinced of the propriety of what he was doing. He said: “What I am engaged in doing is more important than maintaining that contact” (Begam 1992: 430). Peter D. McDonald comments on that point:

To Coetzee it looked at that time as if his particular literary project was imperilled by two very different and especially intrusive kinds of reader: the judgmental, wholly unliterary censor, on the one hand; and the appropriative, politicised literary critic, on the other. (2006: 56)

It is my contention that, although the literary continues to be ‘the site of struggle’ for Coetzee (McDonald, 2006: 58), at this moment he knows that he has gathered a large number of almost unconditional readers who follow him precisely to appreciate the vitality of the novel as such in his literary experimentation. Coetzee, like Rushdie, assumes that the risk of any artist is “in pushing the work to the limits of what is possible” (Rushdie 1991: 15). In *Diary of a Bad Year*, the author creates new spaces for his imagination, his intellect and his ethical commitment —and expands on the relationship between the ethical and the novelistic discourses.

*Diary of a Bad Year* is an example of non-sequential writing. It offers three texts visually separated on the pages, but with a dynamic organization of the topics. This device has elicited different responses among critics. For example, Boyd Tonkin refers to the three levels as “hypertextual polyphony” (2007: 2); Kathryn Harrison says that the page “looks like a highbrow alternative to split-screen TV” (2007: 2). The novelist Maggie Gee calls attention to the fact that “the personal stories are made more interesting by their extended, Bach-like counterpoint with the essay” (2007: 2) while for Jennifer Rutherford it is “melancholy” which is offered as “the counterpoint of rational discourse” (2009: 176). Indeed, the device of the split page is powerful in itself, but Coetzee’s mastery is shown not only in the way the texts relate, but also in the way they are finally integrated.

Coetzee has always shown interest in narrative and textual issues as well as in the shape and significance of the novel. Back in 1987 in a public address with the title of “The Novel Today”, after having made reference to “the higher truth of fiction” (1988: 2), Coetzee asserted that: “Storytelling is not a way of making messages more ‘effective’. Storytelling is another, an other mode of thinking” (1988: 4). His challenge as a novelist has been to reflect his historical reality within the mode of

the novel, while that 'reality' gives shape to a world of fiction. Coetzee is deeply concerned with our global world and in a global world, of course, historical reality cannot but be broad and varied.

In *Diary of a Bad Year* the theme of writing is present in each of its three texts. But, while the debate that the book probably generates among readers is whether it can be considered a novel, Señor C reflects on whether he himself is actually a novelist in the first place. He wonders whether those who say that he is a "pedant who dabbles in fiction" are not right, and whether all the time he thought that he was "going about in disguise", he was in fact "naked" (191). The standards for a serious novelist are clear, though difficult to reach, according to Señor C. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky are the masters. To them, he dedicates the last paragraph of his 'opinions':

By their example one becomes a better artist; and by better I do not mean more skilful but ethically better. They annihilate one's impurer pretensions; they clear one's eyesight; they fortify one's arm. (227)

A related question in the book is whether the novelist as such has a role in society at the present time. Señor C thinks that society no longer values novelists for their creativity —instead, it exhibits them as if they were a trophy. He, like Coetzee, despises and dreads the prospect of becoming a "distinguished figure". He expresses it in this way: "One of these days some state official or other will pin a ribbon on my shrunken chest and my reassimilation into society will be complete" (191). We remember that Coetzee has always wanted to remain independent and use his freedom to say what he wants to say about any subject and do it in the way he considers most appropriate.

The first of Señor C's 'strong opinions' entitled "On the origins of the state", according to Brian Worsfold, gives us a wide referential frame for the analysis of the book as a whole. Worsfold also thinks that this section gives important keys to the followers of Coetzee's works for a better understanding of everything that he had written up to that moment (2008: 169). This critic asserts explicitly that "[t]he relationship between the individual and the state constitutes a powerful thread present in all the writings of J.M. Coetzee" (Worsfold 2008: 172).<sup>1</sup> The historical perspective that we have now, thirty-five years after the publication of his first novel, has made us aware of the relevance of Coetzee as a writer and committed intellectual who has developed his own strategies to maintain his independence. We are also cognizant of the large number of critics who have made reference to his aloofness when discussing and analysing his works.<sup>2</sup>

It is well known now that from the moment of the publication of his first novels up to the year 2003 when he was awarded the Nobel Prize, Coetzee was

persistently accused of lack of political commitment.<sup>3</sup> After the publication of his first twenty-first century novel, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003),<sup>4</sup> David Attwell, still in the wake of that debate, said: “She [Elizabeth Costello] enables Coetzee to fictionalise the writer-as-public-intellectual more directly” and then added:

There is also a kind of hubris: the game is, in a sense, to absorb the public domain into the codes of fiction, as a form of *reprisal* [...]. The narrative contract Coetzee creates in these stories is simply the latest in a series of efforts to give to fictionality an authority to challenge the demand for public accountability. (2006: 33–34)

Coetzee has always tried to reflect historical reality within the mode of the novel, but how does Coetzee at this moment address the insistence of some critics on his becoming more of a public figure? In *Diary of a Bad Year*, in the section “On the origins of the state”, which can almost be seen as a soliloquy, Señor C, after his analysis of the lack of freedom that the citizen has vis-à-vis the state, adds this corollary:

Why is it so hard to say anything about politics from outside politics? Why can there be no discourse about politics that is not itself political? To Aristotle the answer is that politics is built into human nature, that is, is part of our fate, as monarchy is the fate of bees. To strive for a systematic supra-political discourse about politics is futile”. (9)

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For Coetzee, insisting on the difficulties that writers have in dealing with political systems or power structures is not futile. By questioning premises generally accepted and by inviting readers to reflect upon new possible considerations, he continues to keep his independence as a writer despite his books being placed at the centre of public controversy. *Diary of a Bad Year* shows that he continues his creative process from the same liminal position that has allowed him to be both in and outside a given situation, both close to and far away from his characters. Such a position, up to the moment of writing his last book, had given him the opportunity to express himself as a committed intellectual and a free creative writer. However, we can say that *Diary of a Bad Year* represents a further step in Coetzee’s strategy because on this occasion he allows readers to take his writing as confession. For Brian Worsfold it is a “late confession” because it says things that Coetzee “had wanted to say for a long time” (2008: 181).<sup>5</sup> The character-author of the controversial opinions, Señor C, is much closer to the writer Coetzee than the character-author Elizabeth Costello, though in both books political issues are dealt with inside a work of fiction. We can thus conclude that Coetzee definitely disregards warnings such as this: “If intellectuals [do] not want to be political they should stay out of the public sphere” (Jean Genet, qtd. in Attwell 2006: 34). Coetzee has been striving to achieve “a systematic, supra-political discourse about politics” (BY: 9), and in this book as in others has succeeded notably.

In his collection of “Strong Opinions”, Señor C is committed to giving a response to “the present in which he finds himself” (67). He feels compelled to comment on what is wrong with today’s world (21). This is in itself a “titanic” duty whose painful process is qualified by Señor C as “a dark passage” (161). He assumes the premise that he is irremissibly caught in and contaminated by his historical period, a period that he describes as “shameful” (101).<sup>6</sup> This dark perception of the present is recurrent in Coetzee’s work. For instance, in *Age of Iron* we read, “When madness climbs the throne, who in the land escapes contagion?” (1998: 97), in *The Master of Petersburg*, Ivanov says: “Tragedy has become the way of the world” (1994: 87), and in *In the Heart of the Country*, its protagonist thinks that “We are all falling apart” (1977: 99). Canepari-Labib says that in most of Coetzee’s novels, one gets the impression “that it is already too late for our society to reach the future, as the threat of extinction is too imminent to leave room for hope. Yet, this hope is a possibility” (2005: 273).

Señor C, in his conversations with Anya, the typist of his ‘opinions’, has the chance to talk about, expand and even defend some of his most controversial comments. Señor C, like Coetzee, does not approve of being identified with his writings.<sup>7</sup> He warns Anya of the danger of jumping to conclusions about him when reading his ‘opinions’ and gives her advice: “Tread carefully [...]. You may be seeing less of my inmost depths than you believe. The opinions you happen to be typing do not necessarily come from my inmost depths” (91). In an attempt to distance himself from the content of his opinions, and foreseeing controversy, Señor C adds: “What interests the reader more, anyhow, is the quality of the opinions themselves—their variety, their power to startle, the ways in which they match or do not match the reputation of their authors” (132–133). Anyhow, Anya’s judgement does not cause him to change his position, though it contributes significantly to his being able to understand ‘the other’ better, and Señor C says: “What has begun to change since I moved into the orbit of Anya is not my opinions themselves so much as my opinion of my opinions” (136).

Should writers trust or even pay attention to the opinions of critics and readers? Coetzee seems to favour a validation of this writing at the hands of the ordinary genuine reader. Anya, the first reader of the writer’s ‘opinions’, at some moments reacts almost as a censor, at other moments, as an ordinary reader, but she always shows that “critical independence” is a part of her nature (Eder 2008: 3). Anya has the privilege not only of reading the opinions first, but also of confronting the author directly and frankly. At one moment she tells him: “OK. This may sound brutal, but it isn’t meant that way. There is a tone—I don’t know the best word to describe it—a tone that really turns people off. A know-it-all tone. Everything is cut and dried” (70). Anya finds the set of opinions boring, especially those related to politics, and wonders why the writer, already a famous novelist, does not stick

to that genre. The downcast answer of the author matches the state of mind of the unhealthy seventy-two-year-old Señor C, but we cannot say whether or not it expresses Coetzee's thoughts:

A novel? No. I don't have the endurance any more. To write a novel you have to be like Atlas, holding up the whole world on your shoulders and supporting it there for months and years while its affairs work themselves out. It is too much for me as I am today [...]. I could do that when I was younger. I could wait patiently for months on end. Nowadays I get tired. My attention wanders. (54–55)

In conversation with Alan, the third character of the narrative and Anya's partner, Señor C, using the terminology of a military strategist, reiterates that he has no plans for a new book: "I am calling a halt to operations for the time being, to regroup. Then I will see what might be possible in the future" (166).

Possibly, Coetzee does not consider himself a novelist with brimming fantasy in the style of Gabriel García Márquez. In this book Señor C says: "Once or twice in a lifetime I have known the flight of the soul that García Márquez describes" (192). Rather, Coetzee writes from an ethical and intellectual position, which has given a sombre tone to most of his novels. Jane Poyner states: "The ethical responsibilities of the writer are what preoccupies Coetzee in all his novels" (2006: 3). Adam Kirsch considers that intellectually and spiritually, Coetzee has been shaped by "the stringent, self-interrogating moralism of his Calvinist ancestors, and by the intolerable political dilemmas of apartheid South Africa" (2007: 2). In *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee makes unambiguous reference to that 'shameful' background. Señor C says: "The generation of white South Africans to which I belong, and the next generation, and perhaps the generation after that too, will go bowed under the shame of crimes that were committed in their name" (44). However, his concern with the suffering of living creatures and with the situations of injustice is not restricted to one geographical area or period, but rather it encompasses many different parts of the world in different moments of history.

The direct consequence of the situation of abuse on the part of Western countries/governments is the 'shame' that many citizens feel at this time. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, shame is especially associated with "the citizens of the countries that attacked Iraq and subscribed to Guantanamo Bay" (Gee 2007: 2). Coetzee denounces the situation of those "men in orange suits, shackled and hooded, shuffling about like zombies behind the barbed wire of Guantanamo Bay" (BY: 140) and also the less well-known situation of Australia's refugees in Baxter detention Centre (113). His 'strong opinions' on the state, on democracy, on terrorism, or on politics, elicit interest because in fact, Coetzee's facet as a critic has always attracted great attention. That interest may in part be an attempt, by readers, to discover more about his personality and his role as a novelist, since

Coetzee is not inclined to talk about himself or defend his opinions. Jane Poyner in her Introduction to the book *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual* says:

The apparently paradoxical nature of Coetzee's work —his insistence on fleshing out debates about the role of the intellectual while at the same time refusing to make his politics explicitly or publicly known— constitutes his scrupulously orchestrated ethical position. (2006: 5)

His move to Australia in 2002 has opened new possibilities for his writing, as Coetzee himself categorically confirmed in an interview published in 2006 (Poyner 2006: 24). Although his interests have not changed, his way of dealing with his topics and the frame within which he presents and develops them have varied. His evolution as a novelist can be seen in line with the idea expressed by Salman Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands*. There, Rushdie said that literature “is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality” (1991: 15). According to Peter Craven, Coetzee “has divested himself of much of the narrative and dramatic resource of the novels that made him famous” in Australia (2007: 1). Coetzee's work, Craven (2007: 1) adds, has become “minimalist, self-reflective and concerned with the micro-dramas of a novelistic sensibility with an intimate resemblance to his own”.

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Indeed, in *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee moves on two different planes. Señor C, as the writer of ‘Strong Opinions’, revises and broods over many of the conflicts of the world of today, but as a protagonist of the narrative, he appears as an ordinary old man concerned with his increasing limitations and facing an uncertain future. At the personal level what is most important for him is the feeling he now has of being redundant. He poses this question: “Are old men with doddering intellect and poor eyesight and arthritic hands allowed on the trading floor, or will we just get in the way of the young?” (144). That is a question that Coetzee may have been tempted to pose to himself, but in spite of the doubts that Coetzee, as an aging human being, may have, his self-imposed duty as a writer outstrips them. Once more Coetzee shows his moral strength by writing.

Alan, who acts as Señor C's foe in the narrative, in conversation with his partner Anya, states that Señor C is physically, intellectually and ethically outdated and consequently “people like [him] have taken over the world from people like [Señor C]” (159). From the perspective of Siddhartha Deb, Alan is “the devil we all know”, that is, representative of the type of people who have contributed to developing the unfair structure of the western world (2008: 4). It is towards the end of the book that, under the effects of alcohol, Alan confronts Señor C and accuses him of being a schemer, of pretending to be what he is not. In the presence of Anya, he says:

You put yourself forward as a lone voice of conscience speaking up for human rights and so forth, but I ask myself, if he really believes in these human rights, why isn't he out in the real world fighting for them? What is his track record? (197)

That moment is the turning point in the relation between Anya and Alan and it also reinforces the respect and appreciation that Anya has gradually built up towards Señor C. She is convinced that his heart is “with the downtrodden and oppressed, with the voiceless ones, with the humble beasts” (172). After leaving Alan and moving from Sydney to Brisbane, she becomes a kind of guardian angel for Señor C. She gets in touch with one of the writer's neighbours, asking to be informed about his health. Anya is in fact ready to be at his side in his last moments, and hold his hand “as far as the gate” (226).

That is also a crucial moment in the relationship between the novel and the reader. The upper text, the essays which started as ‘strong opinions’ and in the second part become a ‘gentler set of opinions’, are in a sense fading in the mind of the reader, who now is more interested in the denouement of the story—in the fate of a weak, marginalized character who is close to his death.

Poets have made us aware of ‘twilight’ as the moment when nature speaks its truth. Other transitional moments have attracted the attention of writers like Coetzee, who, in several of his novels, tries to show how at the threshold of death human beings reach their moment of truth. It seems to be then that one's vision of the significance and value of life becomes most clear. It is interesting to notice that although the crossing of the gate is done alone, Coetzee also explores the role of the person who is by the side of the dying person. Two great subjects of literature, Love and Death, are thus united. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, Anya is perceived by Señor C as an “earthly incarnation of heavenly beauty” (190). Her relationship with Señor C begins as a frivolous flirtatious game and ends up being a disinterested, generous manifestation of love. Kathryn Harrison makes us aware that Anya is “an integrated being” who can represent salvation for Señor C, “whose split nature [mind/body] is displayed on either side of a line that literally divides the page” (2007: 2). But her emotional relationship with Señor C also achieves synthesis—Anya is both Eros and Agape. She is actually the unifying element in the denouement of the three texts of the book.

In *Diary of a Bad Year* J.M. Coetzee, once more, from an ethical angle, deals with the evils of the present world and with the basics of human existence. Throughout his work, Coetzee gives the reader the chance to question and expiate; at the same time he creates a fitting space for debate and hope in the mode of literature.



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>. All the quotations from Brian Worsfold's article have been translated by the author of this article.

<sup>2</sup>. For example, the critic Pankaj Mishra refers to Coetzee as "the most self-effacing of writers" (2005: 1).

<sup>3</sup>. The critic Dana Dragunoiu, however, states a different view by saying: "Though Coetzee has been roundly criticized for eschewing an explicit *littérature engagée*, his fiction ceaselessly explores the moral foundations of imperialism" (2006: 81).

<sup>4</sup>. His book *Youth* published in 2002 is considered fictionalized autobiography.

<sup>5</sup>. The 'bad year' could in fact be taken as a period that goes from the moment he published his first novel *Dusklands* (1974)

till the year of the publication of *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007).

<sup>6</sup>. Other twenty-first century novelists apply negative adjectives to the present period of time. For example in Paul Auster's novel *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2008), Mr. Blank says: "These are treacherous times" (49). And in Chris Abani's novel *GraceLand* (2004), the 15-year-old protagonist has trouble living in what for him are "confusing times" (155).

<sup>7</sup>. However, in the opinion of Brian Worsfold "Diaries permit, or even stimulate, subliminal readings which often betray the subconscious of the person who writes them. *Diary of a Bad Year* is not an exception" (2008: 167).

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