

"The interviews are serious colloquies, and they illuminate the texts they discuss, but above all they give a strong impression of the author on his own view of what he is trying to do. One is left with an impression of a deeply informed mind. Coetzee is a writer of international stature, far above mere regional interest, and we can hardly help being interested in his being an Afrikaans-speaking South African. This is a book of distinction."

—Frank Kermode

Nadine Gordimer has written of J. M. Coetzee that his "vision goes to the nerve-centre of being. What he finds there is more than most people will ever know about themselves, and he conveys it with a brilliant writer's mastery of tension and elegance." *Doubling the Point* takes us to the center of that vision. These essays and interviews, documenting Coetzee's longtime engagement with his own culture, and with modern culture in general, constitute a literary autobiography of striking intellectual, moral, and political force.

Centrally concerned with the form and content of fiction, *Doubling the Point* provides rigorous insight into the significance of certain writers (particularly modernists such as Kafka, Musil, and Beckett), the value of intellectual movements (from structuralism and structural linguistics on through deconstruction), and the issues of political involvement and responsibility—not only for Coetzee's own work, but for fiction writing in general. In interviews prefacing each section of the book, Coetzee reflects on the essays to follow and relates them to his life and work. In these interviews editor David Attwell, remarkably well attuned to his subject, prompts from Coetzee answers of extraordinary depth and interest.

An internationally acclaimed novelist, J. M. Coetzee is a professor of general literature at the University of Cape Town. His books include *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, and, most recently, *The Age of Iron*.

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Coetzee

DOUBLING THE POINT

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Essays and Interviews

J. M. Coetzee

Edited by David Attwell

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Interview

DA: I would like to begin at the beginning, by raising the question of autobiography. There are few contemporary writers whose work enjoins us quite as rigorously as yours to examine the authenticity and authority of the speaking subject. The question is implicit in each novel from *Dusklands* on, and it is explicitly handled in *Foe*; in criticism, you have looked closely at autobiographical "truth" and confessional writing in Tolstoy, Rousseau, and Dostoevsky. In view of the prominence given to this question in your work, it is not surprising that you have written so little autobiographical prose, in the ordinary sense. What is it, then, that enables you to speak about the relationship between your critical activity and your fiction?

JMC: Let me treat this as a question about telling the truth rather than as a question about autobiography. Because in a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it. The real question is: This massive autobiographical writing-enterprise that fills a life, this enterprise of self-construction (shades of *Tristram Shandy!*)—does it yield only fictions? Or rather, among the fictions of the self, the versions of the self, that it yields, are there any that are truer than others? How do I know when I have the truth about myself?

My first response is that we should distinguish two kinds of truth, the first truth to fact, the second something beyond that; and that, in the present context, we should take truth to fact for granted and concentrate on the more vexing question of a "higher" truth.

But what is truth to fact? You tell the story of your life by selecting from a reservoir of memories, and in the process of selecting you leave things out. To omit to say that you tortured flies as a child is, logically speaking, as much an infraction of truth to fact as to say that you tortured flies when in fact you didn't. So to call autobiography—or indeed history—true as long as it does not lie invokes a fairly vacuous idea of truth.

Therefore, instead of trying to distinguish between kinds of truth, let me come at the question from a different angle.

As you write—I am speaking of any kind of writing—you have a feel of whether you are getting closer to “it” or not. You have a sensing mechanism, a feedback loop of some kind; without that mechanism you could not write. It is naive to think that writing is a simple two-stage process: first you decide what you want to say, then you say it. On the contrary, as all of us know, you write because you do not know what you want to say. Writing reveals to you what you wanted to say in the first place. In fact, it sometimes constructs what you want or wanted to say. What it reveals (or asserts) may be quite different from what you thought (or half-thought) you wanted to say in the first place. That is the sense in which one can say that writing writes us. Writing shows or creates (and we are not always sure we can tell one from the other) what our desire was, a moment ago.

Writing, then, involves an interplay between the push into the future that takes you to the blank page in the first place, and a resistance. Part of that resistance is psychic, but part is also an automatism built into language: the tendency of words to call up other words, to fall into patterns that keep propagating themselves. Out of that interplay there emerges, if you are lucky, what you recognize or hope to recognize as the true.

I don't see that “straight” autobiographical writing is any different *in kind* from what I have been describing. Truth is something that comes in the process of writing, or comes from the process of writing.

So we return to the question of elementary lies. I am tempted to try out the following definition of autobiography: that it is a kind of self-writing in which you are constrained to respect the facts of your history. But which facts? All the facts? No. All the facts are too many facts. You choose the facts insofar as they fall in with your evolving purpose. What is that purpose in the present case? Tentatively I propose: to understand the desire that drove me to write what I wrote from 1970 to 1990—not the novels, which are well enough equipped to perform their own interrogations, but everything else, the critical essays, the reviews, and so forth—pieces whose genre does not usually give them room to reflect on themselves.

Is that my true purpose? The truth is, at this stage of our interchange I probably know as little about my purpose, which lies in the present, as about the drives and desires, lying in the past, that I am now returning

to. Desire and purpose are on the same level: one does not command the other. Perhaps that is why I have turned to the mode of dialogue: as a way of getting around the impasse of my own monologue.

DA: Can we go back to the period before 1970? Before you began writing in earnest you served different apprenticeships, not all of them literary. You turned to fiction only after pursuing three different academic specialisms—mathematics (later, computer science), literary studies, and linguistics—and after taking your philological interests to the doctoral stage. Aside from the poetry and other work you produced as a student at the University of Cape Town, it was well over ten years before you committed yourself to fiction. To what extent was this preparation, and to what extent paralysis?

/MC: It is true, I wrote nothing of substance before I was thirty. I am not sure this was wholly a bad thing. How many men in their twenties write novels worth reading? But of course I did not see it like that, at the time. I did not say to myself, “Wait, you are not yet thirty . . .” On the contrary, as I remember those days, it was with a continual feeling of self-betrayal that I did not write. Was it paralysis? Paralysis is not quite the word. It was more like nausea: the nausea of facing the empty page, the nausea of writing without conviction, without desire. I think I knew what beginning would be like, and balked at it. I knew that once I had truly begun, I would have to go through with the thing to the end. Like an execution: one cannot walk away, leaving the victim dangling at the end of a rope, kicking and choking, still alive. One has to go all the way. (I could have used a metaphor of birth, I realize, but let it stand as it is.) I hesitated through the 1960s because I suspected, rightly, that I would not be able to carry the project through. But the materials for *Dusklands* had begun to be assembled a long way back. William Burchell, for instance, I had been reading and making notes from as early as 1962, knowing that they would go into some such book as *Dusklands* turned out to be.

DA: Can we turn to your introduction to the novel? While living in London in 1962–63, you wrote a master's thesis (300-odd pages) for the University of Cape Town on Ford Madox Ford. Later, in Texas, in 1967–68, you wrote your doctoral dissertation on stylistic analysis, concentrating on Beckett's English fiction. How did you come to be involved