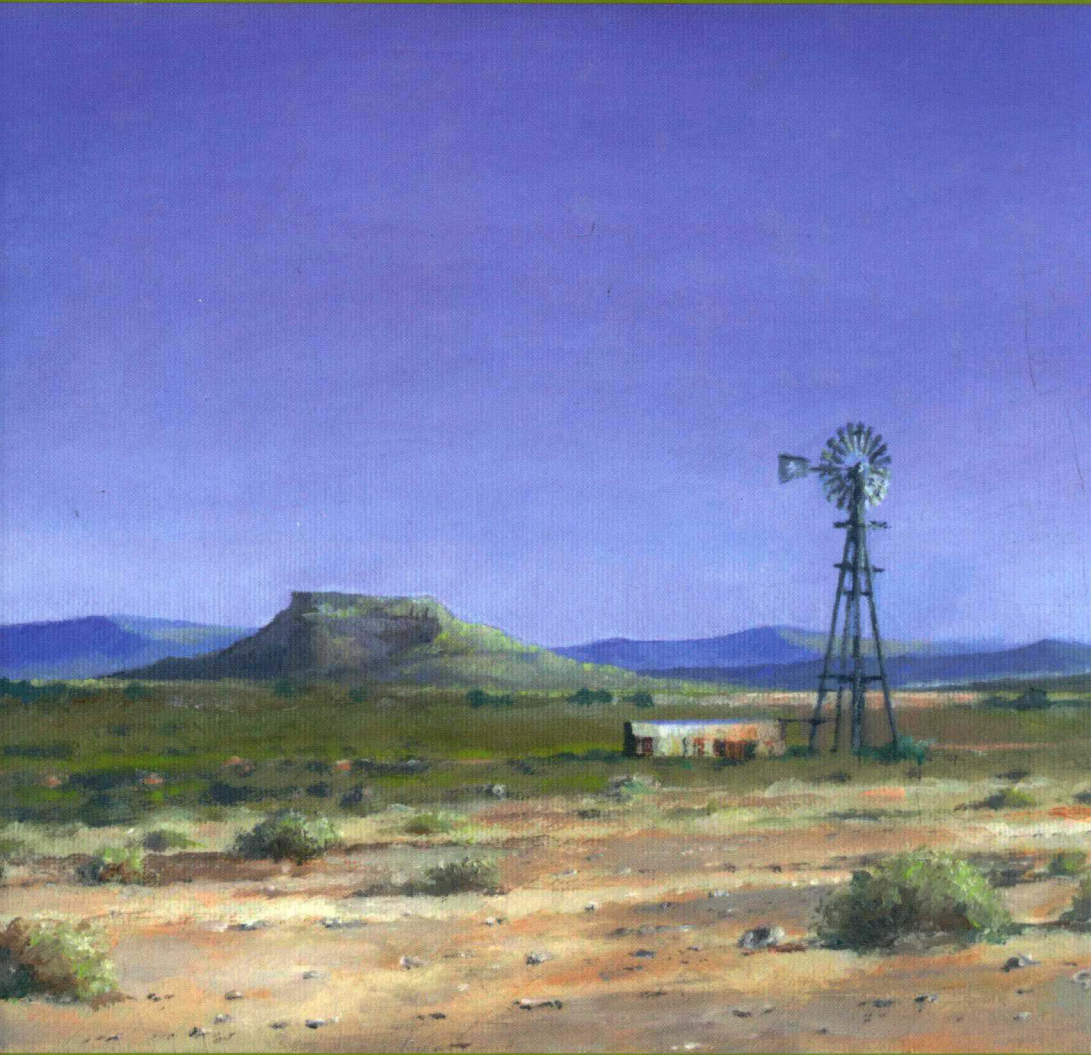


Dominic Head



The Cambridge **Introduction** to

J. M. Coetzee

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CAMBRIDGE
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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521687096

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First published 2009

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Head, Dominic.

The Cambridge introduction to J. M. Coetzee / Dominic Head.

p. cm. – (Cambridge introductions to literature)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-86747-4 – ISBN 978-0-521-68709-6 (pbk.)

1. Coetzee, J. M., 1940 – Criticism and interpretation. I. Title. II. Series.

PR9369.3.C58Z675 2009

823'.914–dc22 2009000060

ISBN 978-0-521-86747-4 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-68709-6 paperback

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
J. M. Coetzee*

The South African novelist and Nobel Laureate J. M. Coetzee is widely studied around the world and attracts considerable critical attention. With the publication of *Disgrace* Coetzee began to enjoy popular as well as critical acclaim, but his work can be as challenging as it is impressive. This book is addressed to students and readers of Coetzee: it is an up-to-date survey of the writer's fiction and context, written accessibly for those new to his work. All of the fiction is discussed, and the brooding presence of the political situation in South Africa, during the first part of his career, is given serious attention in a comprehensive account of the author's main influences. The revealing strand of confessional writing in the latter half of Coetzee's career is given full consideration. This introduction will help new readers understand and appreciate one of the most important and challenging authors in contemporary literature.

Dominic Head is Professor of Modern English Literature at the University of Nottingham. His many publications include *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950–2000* (Cambridge, 2002) and (as editor) *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, third edition (Cambridge, 2006).

Abbreviations

AI	<i>Age of Iron</i> . 1990; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991
B	<i>Boyhood: Scenes From Provincial Life</i> . London: Secker and Warburg, 1997
D	<i>Dusklands</i> . 1974; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983
DBY	<i>Diary of a Bad Year</i> . London: Harvill Secker, 2007
Dis	<i>Disgrace</i> . London: Secker and Warburg, 1999
DP	<i>Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews</i> , ed. David Attwell. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992
EC	<i>Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons</i> . London: Secker and Warburg, 2003
F	<i>Foe</i> . 1986; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987
GO	<i>Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship</i> . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996
IHC	<i>In the Heart of the Country</i> . 1977; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982
LA	<i>The Lives of Animals</i> , ed. Amy Gutman. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999
MK	<i>Life and Times of Michael K</i> . 1983; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985
MP	<i>The Master of Petersburg</i> . London: Secker and Warburg, 1994
SM	<i>Slow Man</i> . London: Secker and Warburg, 2005
WB	<i>Waiting for the Barbarians</i> . 1980; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982
WW	<i>White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa</i> . New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988
Y	<i>Youth</i> . London: Secker and Warburg, 2002

Preface

The South African novelist J. M. Coetzee is one of the most highly respected – and most frequently studied – contemporary authors. His novels occupy a special place in South African literature, and in the development of the twentieth- and 21st-century novel more generally. They are widely taught, internationally, on undergraduate modules, and interest amongst post-graduate students is high. He was the first novelist to win the Booker Prize twice (for *Life and Times of Michael K* in 1983, and *Disgrace* in 1999), and has been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (2003). With the publication of *Disgrace* Coetzee began to enjoy popular as well as critical acclaim. Nevertheless, he is a difficult writer who engages with complex ideas, and it is the task of this book to explain the significance of Coetzee in an introductory spirit. This is a challenge, because his works can make an instant and impressive impact on readers, who are then sometimes uncertain as to how to understand, or account for that impact.

It is sometimes said that postmodernism arrived in Africa with the publication, in 1974, of *Dusklands*, Coetzee's first novel (although he is frequently discussed as a 'late modernist'). Presented as a pair of linked novellas, *Dusklands* associates its portrayal of eighteenth-century Dutch imperialism in South Africa with an anatomy of the terror that underpins US policy in Vietnam. These juxtaposed and bleak psychological fictions constitute an early instance of the contemporary 'internationalization' of the novel; and they raise questions that have become central to the academic study of the novel: how does literary writing bear upon critical definitions of modernism/postmodernism and colonialism/postcolonialism? How can 'history' be imagined in novels? As Coetzee's literary career has unfolded, in tandem with a distinguished academic career, his creative writing has repeatedly pushed at the questions that have been central to his life and times: what does it mean when an author pledges allegiance to the discourse of fiction (rather than the discourse of politics)? Is there a function for a literary canon? And what kind of ethical stance can be claimed for the novel, and by the academic-novelist?

It should also be acknowledged that Coetzee is an accomplished essayist. His essays, written in a customary lucid and elegant style, cover a range of important contemporary debates, including: the modernist legacy; colonial identity; and the question of censorship. This book is principally concerned with Coetzee the novelist, so there is no extended discussion of the non-fiction in its own right. Reference is made to the essays, however, where they illuminate aspects of Coetzee's fiction.

For the first part of his career, up to and including the publication of *Age of Iron* (1990), it was inevitable that Coetzee's writing would be received as a response – usually, though not always, an oblique response – to the era of apartheid in South Africa. Coetzee occupied an interim position in a very particular branch of postcolonial writing: the literature of the 'post-colonizer'. This transitional site between Europe and Africa can be articulated by appropriating Coetzee's own comment on selected pre-apartheid writers of the 1920s and 1930s: 'white writing is white only in so far as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African' (*WW*, p. 11). That implication of a natural transition, as yet to come, carries its own censure of apartheid society where both biological and cultural hybridity were artificially policed and prevented.

There is also a broader colonial resonance in the theme of 'European ideas writing themselves out in Africa' (*DP*, pp. 338–9); but in Coetzee's work this has inevitably attracted censure from those impatient for political change in late- and then post-apartheid South Africa, who felt that the novelist had a duty to engage *overtly* with the world of history and politics. That sense of pressure in South African literary culture, to make writing serve a political purpose, has waned somewhat since the demise of apartheid and the democratic election of 1994. Yet Coetzee has continued to be a target of criticism where he has been perceived to be failing in his public 'duties'. Coetzee's writing – perhaps internalizing the sense of constraint in South African society – has been dominated by specifically literary questions, and does not produce the more obvious gestures of engagement and commitment that some commentators called for. (Coetzee's fellow South African novelist – and fellow Nobel Laureate – Nadine Gordimer, was one.) Yet Coetzee's apparently oblique engagements embody their own gesture of resistance, specifically a resistance to the idea that literature must supplement – and so be in thrall to – an agreed history 'out there'. Coetzee works on the principle that the novel should not supplement history, but establish a position of rivalry with it. This is one of the ways in which his emphasis on questions of textuality is a deployment of postmodernist (or late modernist) and post-structuralist concerns fitted to his context.

In his more recent phase of writing – and especially since the publication of *Disgrace* (1999), that groundbreaking second Booker winner – his concerns have reached a wider readership, in an exemplary instance of how the burning issues of professionalized academia can be made relevant to a non-academic audience. His readers can expect to be required to reflect on public morality and personal responsibility, the problems of the regulated society, mortality, and the function of the reader. As the shadow of apartheid recedes, so has Coetzee's writing struck out in vital new directions. His novels have all had a power and a resonance beyond the narrow concerns of academia, though this tendency to reach beyond the constraints of intellectual life has become more pronounced. For his entire output, however, the same critical problem obtains: how to treat the gap between the surface lucidity and the underlying complexity of Coetzee's work, how to indicate his intellectual importance without leaving the non-specialist behind. This book is an attempt to bridge that gap.

In a related sense, 'bridging' is one way of defining Coetzee's overall appeal and achievement. In the work preparatory to his book *The Lives of Animals* (1999), later incorporated in the novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), Coetzee gave a series of public lectures which were actually extracts from this fictional work-in-progress. One such was his Dawson Scott Memorial Lecture 'What is Realism?', given at the PEN International Writer's Day at London's Café Royal in 1996, which was finally to form the opening chapter of *Elizabeth Costello*. Presenting this piece of fiction as a lecture, which incorporates a fictionalized lecture also entitled 'What is Realism?', Coetzee struck upon a form of performance which simultaneously cultivated 'the realist illusion' while reflecting self-consciously upon it. This is the essence of Coetzee's 'bridging' – bringing together the concerns of academic and non-academic readers, in a mode that puts a heavy burden on the realist bridge upon which it still depends.

This is an astonishing duality, a mode of writing that combines a sophisticated control of fictional time and space with a self-consciousness that continually threatens to disrupt it, but without ever quite doing so. At its best, Coetzee's fiction generates a beguiling, elegiac yet brooding resonance. The result is a series of poetic and elusive novels which, like the characters they contain, wilfully resist any critical attempt to master or reduce. This means that the element of misrepresentation that is evident in all criticism is, perhaps, highlighted most especially in criticism of Coetzee's novels. And this may sound like a particular hostage to fortune at the beginning of an introductory volume of this kind; but it does give me the opportunity to place stress on the need for openness in the reading of a novel by Coetzee, even while acknowledging the acute difficulty of sustaining that openness.

The various elements of ambivalence that surround Coetzee's work – the implicit debate about representation, his sense of contextual constraint as a writer, and the cultivated elusiveness of the novels themselves – are suggestively caught in this remarkable statement by Coetzee from an interview with David Attwell, which I will leave unglossed. I hope it will resonate in the mind of the reader consulting the pages that follow:

I am not a herald of community or anything else . . . I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations – which are shadows themselves – of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light. (*DP*, p. 341)

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Chapter 1

Coetzee's life

Anyone familiar with Coetzee's novels knows that they are challenging, and elusive of interpretation. And what is true of the work is true of the author himself: Coetzee is a very private person, who has a reputation for being unforthcoming with interviewers. This means that the available details of Coetzee's life are sparse (and not truly verifiable). However, in a paradoxical move, he has begun a process in the latter half of his career of developing a complex form of confessional writing, in which autobiographical elements are prominent. The most obvious books, here, are the two memoirs, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997) and *Youth* (2002), the former covering some key formative experiences up to the age of thirteen, the latter pinpointing formative moments between 1959 and 1964, with an emphasis on Coetzee's experiences in London. These enrich our understanding of the author's life – or, at least his chosen self-projection – but they must also be treated with caution. As exercises in the confessional mode, they also invite reflection on this mode, and sometimes do so by encouraging the reader initially to accept at face value accounts which must then be re-evaluated. *Youth*, which was published as 'fiction', is particularly challenging in this regard.

John Maxwell Coetzee was born in Cape Town on 9 February 1940. His boyhood in the Cape Province was dominated by cultural conflicts, consequent upon his situation as an English-speaking white South African, and the social location of his schoolteacher mother, and his father, who practised intermittently as a lawyer. One interesting detail, with significance for Coetzee's literary identity, is that he was accustomed to speaking English at home, while conversing in Afrikaans with other relatives.

The pertinent features of his academic and work career can be briefly traced: he left school in 1956, and then studied English and mathematics at the University of Cape Town (BA 1960), after which he moved to England to work in computers in 1962. He stayed until 1965, working as a programmer, during which period he wrote a Master's thesis on Ford Madox Ford (MA awarded by the University of Cape Town in 1963). In 1963 he married

Philippa Jubber (1939–91), with whom he had two children, Nicolas (1966–89) and Gisela (b. 1968). (The early death of his son was clearly an influence on his novel *The Master of Petersburg* (1994).)

In 1965 Coetzee returned to academia: he moved to the USA, to the University of Texas at Austin, on a Fulbright exchange programme, where he produced his doctoral dissertation on the style of Samuel Beckett's English fiction, completed in 1969. He taught at the State University of New York at Buffalo from 1968 to 1971, during which period he worked on his first novel *Dusklands*. Coetzee's application for permanent residence in the USA was denied, and he returned to South Africa to take up a teaching position at the University of Cape Town in 1972. Following successive promotions, he became Professor of General Literature at his alma mater in 1983, and then Distinguished Professor of Literature from 1999 to 2001.

Coetzee has held various visiting professorships in the USA – at Johns Hopkins University, Harvard University, and the University of Chicago, among others. He has won many prestigious literary awards, including the Booker Prize (twice: in 1983 and 1999), the *Prix Etranger Femina* (1985) and the Jerusalem Prize (1987). His international prominence with a wider readership beyond academia was secured with the publication of *Disgrace* in 1999, and consolidated with the award of the Nobel Prize in 2003. Yet the international acclaim that greeted *Disgrace* was not matched by its reception in South Africa. The treatment of the gang rape of a white woman by black men, as a figure for an aspect of postcolonial historical process, caused a furore, and this seems to have had a bearing on Coetzee's decision to turn his back on South Africa: in 2002 he emigrated to Australia to take up an honorary research fellowship at the University of Adelaide.

There is a biting irony in this. Whereas the censorship board in the apartheid era had scarcely been troubled by Coetzee's subtle interrogations of the colonial psyche, the ruling ANC in the new South Africa was incensed by *Disgrace*, and moved to condemn its depiction of black violence, finding therein a racist perspective and the promotion of racial hatred. It is not clear whether or not Coetzee had already decided to leave South Africa; but this reception must surely have concentrated his mind.

To amplify some of these sparse details we must turn to the autobiographical elements in the writer's work, and the paradox that a very private writer has begun to expose intimate details of his life – or at least to invite speculation on these details. Formerly known as a writer who did not consider himself a public figure, someone in the public domain, he has now made 'the life', or the question of articulating the life, an aesthetic focus of his work. In relation to the first half of Coetzee's career, it seemed that the

privacy of the man, his elusiveness, was also indicative of the nature of his literary project, with its emphasis on textuality, on novels as discursive events in the world, beyond the author's controlling hand. That judgement is in need of revision now that the writing project is linked to a kind of performance of the self.

Here we must turn to those two hybrid works that inhabit the border between fiction and autobiography, *Boyhood* and *Youth*. The 'Coetzee figure' that emerges from these books is often unpleasant, even disreputable (this is especially so in *Youth*). The oddity of this confessional gesture raises – and seems intended to raise – a host of questions about the relationship between fiction, autobiography, philosophy and confession. Such questions can, in themselves, prove revealing about Coetzee's identity; but these books also contain some explanation and contextualization of the author's familiar concerns. One such is Coetzee's preoccupation with his own ethnicity.

The question of identity, as a literary as well as an ethnic matter, has proved problematic for many white South African writers, especially those who, like Coetzee, have been based in South Africa. Coetzee is not an Afrikaner, but a white South African inhabiting a very particular margin, since his background partly distances him from both Afrikaner as well as English affiliations. Yet Coetzee's own comments on his ethnic identity show him to be intensely aware of the slipperiness of his position, and of the historical guilt that connects colonial and postcolonial experience. Although he felt no affinity with contemporary Afrikaner identity in the apartheid years, Coetzee admitted that he could be branded 'Afrikaner', on the basis of historical connection, and as a way of identifying his guilt by association with the crimes committed by the whites of South Africa. Coetzee has indicated that his writing sometimes draws its validity from this sense of complicity.

In *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997) this particular issue of ethnicity, which is one of the key themes of the book, is put into context for us. Coetzee offers a series of autobiographical sketches, writing in the third person, and using the present tense, his trademark fictional mode. There is a narrow historical focus – the book traces episodes in the life of this boy from the age of ten to the age of thirteen (with some earlier recollections) – yet, if the sketches are taken at face value (and I will be suggesting a major caveat to this in due course), then a great deal about Coetzee's early years can be gleaned.

What distinguishes Coetzee's use of the present continuous tense in this book, from the uses to which it is put in his fiction, is the subject matter: a childhood memoir. This is not an obvious point about the difference between fiction and non-fiction, but an observation about the *fit* between the

treatment of childhood experience and the effects generated by the present continuous. The sense of duration (and, often, boredom) associated with childhood is aptly caught by this mode of writing. It is also a way of dignifying the truism that the child is always present in the adult: the present tense of *Boyhood* conveys that sense of the continuing importance of the formative experiences described.

The experience of growing up in the South African town of Worcester is presented as one of endurance. The young Coetzee preferred Cape Town (where the family previously lived), and hankers after life on the farm in the Karoo – the arid, semi-desert plateau in Cape Province – owned by an Afrikaner uncle, and which he associates with happy holiday memories. The austere housing estate in Worcester that is his home makes a sorry comparison.

Coetzee's father emerges from this book in a bad light; but, on reflection, is a more sympathetic figure. (This, coupled with the intense relationship between Coetzee and his mother, creates a faint Lawrentian echo.) We understand that the father loses his government job in Cape Town as 'Controller of Letting' when the Nationalists come to power, for political reasons (he is not a Nationalist supporter), and that the removal to Worcester to work as a bookkeeper for Standard Cannery (he is actually a lawyer, though has not practised since 1937) is a consequence of victimization. By the end of the book, however, the father has sunk into alcoholism, and has brought debt and disgrace upon the family, after their return to Cape Town and his failed attempt to restart his legal career.

As we have seen, a crucial aspect of Coetzee's identity, amplified in this book, is his bilingual status as both Afrikaans and English-speaking, but belonging to a family that clearly dissociates itself from the Afrikaner group. This is a form of self-exile that places them on the margins of South African life, since 'African' and 'Afrikaner' became the important poles between which the political tussle in the latter half of the twentieth century took place. Yet there is also social ambition in the parents' affiliation, and in their choice to educate Coetzee in English.

At his new school in Worcester, the young Coetzee is confronted with a question about his religion, and, coming from a family that does not practise religion, he is unable to respond appropriately. Asked, impatiently, by a teacher (and, we assume, a member of the Dutch Reformed Church) if he is 'a Christian or a Roman Catholic or a Jew', he plumps for Roman Catholic (*B*, p. 19). This gives him extra free time in the playground, while the Christians go off to assembly, but means he is bullied (together with the Jewish boys) when the Afrikaners return. It is this kind of experience that

produces a deep antipathy to the Afrikaner identity, and a fear of being made to conform to it: 'the thought of being turned into an Afrikaans boy, with shaven head and no shoes, makes him quail. It is like being sent to prison, to a life without privacy' (B, p. 126). Even so, he discovers a facility in speaking Afrikaans in his extended family setting (associated with the freedom of his uncle's farm) that makes him feel as if 'all the complications of life seem suddenly to fall away'. Yet the childish appeal of seeming to become 'at once another person' (B, p. 125) is really of a piece with his desire for independence, and his refusal of the full implications of Afrikaner identity, which would deprive him of that crucial sense of 'privacy': 'he cannot live without privacy' (B, p. 126). There is a particular political dimension to this, and to his parents' resistance of the Afrikaans language. In response to the 'rumours that the government is going to order all schoolchildren with Afrikaans surnames to be transferred to Afrikaans classes', talked about by his parents 'in low voices', he formulates a plan: if ordered out of his English class by an inspector he will cycle home and refuse to return to school; and will 'kill himself' if his mother betrays him (B, pp. 69–70).

There are several elements in the portrayal of the young Coetzee that contribute to his sense of independence, or, the refusal to conform; and this prefigures the sense of resistance that becomes the key characteristic of the writer. One notable instance of this refusal to conform (and one instance of the book's humour) is the boy's whimsical predilection for things Russian. At the outset of the Cold War, and in a country in which communism is soon to be criminalized, this is evidently a startling and precocious preference for a young boy. His parents' disapproval does not cause him to relinquish his fascination with Russia; merely to turn it 'into a secret' (B, pp. 27–8).

An intriguing part of the memoir, already alluded to above, is the young Coetzee's deep attraction to the family farm in the Karoo, which passed to his uncle on the death of his grandfather: 'the farm is called Voëlfontein, Bird-fountain; he loves every stone of it, every bush, every blade of grass . . . it is not conceivable that another person could love the farm as he does' (B, p. 80). This formative experience was clearly an inspiration for *Life and Times of Michael K*, where the love of/identification with the farm is honed into an ethical vision. As we have seen, the freedom of Voëlfontein is associated with his facility in speaking Afrikaans; but there is no sense in which the appeal of the farm also embodies a cultural 'pull' he otherwise resists, or that the love of it is associated with an atavistic desire for possession of the land. Indeed, the particular linguistic inflection the young Coetzee associates with the farm suggests something much more positive, a

'slapdash mixture of English and Afrikaans' that is the extended family's 'common tongue when they get together' at Christmas:

It is lighter, airier than the Afrikaans they study at School, which is weighed down with idioms that are supposed to come from the *volksmond*, the people's mouth, but seem to come only from the Great Trek, lumpish nonsensical idioms about wagons and cattle and cattle-harness. (*B*, p. 81)

The family tongue is a hybrid, situated against the odious ideology otherwise associated with Afrikaner culture in *Boyhood*.

This is, of course, also the child's rose-tinted view, which is partly justified by the treatment of the 'coloured people' who work the farm, a treatment that is more equitable than the young Coetzee has observed in racial relations in Worcester. A stronger burgeoning sense of racial justice is implicit in the boy's reactions throughout. Indeed, Coetzee assigns to his younger self an understanding of historical injustice in his perception of Cape 'Coloureds', 'fathered by whites . . . upon the Hottentots'. He also knows that 'in Boland the people called Coloured are not the great-great-grandchildren of Jan van Riebeeck or any other Dutchman . . . They are Hottentots, pure and uncorrupted. Not only do they come with the land, the land comes with them, is theirs, has always been' (*B*, p. 62). In one telling episode, he is given some money to take his friends for an ice cream in a café, as a birthday treat; but the occasion is spoiled by 'the ragged Coloured children standing at the window looking in at them.' Their faces betray no 'hatred'; rather, they are 'like children at a circus, drinking in the sight, utterly absorbed, missing nothing'. Even if these children are chased away, 'it is too late, his heart is already hurt' (*B*, pp. 72–3). This is an arresting turn of phrase that successfully conveys the ambivalence of the moment, the boy's disappointment shot through with an incipient sense of guilt. It is a brilliant snapshot, the privilege being the element that simultaneously facilitates the pleasure, and sustains the inequality that undermines that pleasure. The older Coetzee is implying an awareness of this contradiction in his memory of his 'hurt' heart. And, of course, in the implied analogy with circus animals Coetzee assesses the privileged situation of himself and his friends as a kind of aberration, a form of fascinating exoticism.

The portrayal of the relationship with the mother is at the heart of this memoir: she is presented as the embodiment of maternal self-sacrifice, something the young Coetzee simultaneously desires in her, yet resents. The focus here is the contradictory and often unpleasant responses of the boy, detailed in the kind of excoriating confessional style that characterizes both

of Coetzee's memoirs. We have a sense of a boy whose self-importance and coldness are both caused by having been spoiled at his mother's hands.

In the light of Coetzee's later connections between ethics and Christianity – a form of secular appropriation – the younger Coetzee's reaction to a biblical reading from the Gospel of Luke is intriguing. The reading (Luke 24: 5–6) describes the moment when the sepulchre is found to be empty, Jesus having risen. The boy does not like to hear these verses read, because 'if he were to unblock his ears and let the words come through to him, he knows, he would have to stand on his seat and shout in triumph. He would have to make a fool of himself forever' (B, p. 142). In an avowed unbeliever (B, p. 143), it is a reaction that demands attention. It implies the sensitivity of the boy to a particular kind of sentiment; but it is also a moment that reveals the unreliability of the memoir, the childhood perspective infused with the adult sensibility.

This ambivalence inevitably colours our perception of the book as a portrait of the artist as a boy. The later memoir *Youth* gently punctures the artistic pretensions of Coetzee as a 'youth'; and in *Boyhood* there is one arresting passage that identifies his creative aspirations. Bored by the topics presented for him in composition classes – sport, road safety, highwaymen – he articulates a desire to discover a more powerful topic:

What he would write if he could . . . would be something darker, something that, once it began to flow from his pen, would spread across the page out of control, like spilt ink. Like spilt ink, like shadows racing across the face of still water, like lightning crackling across the sky. (B, p. 140)

The tone of this is hard to gauge. Setting aside the boyish desire to shock, or be dramatic, there is an implication of artistic potential that obviously suggests the perspective of the older Coetzee, commenting ironically on his younger self. Yet we cannot avoid taking this partly at face value; and we may do so, especially because of the way this passage echoes the final paragraph of *Foe*, where something is unleashed from Friday's mouth that implies the unstoppable and awesome power of postcolonial history. What is particularly noteworthy here is that Coetzee suggests that an aspect of that sublime/awesome discourse will be an aspect of his own writing.

Inevitably, there is a dual perspective in this kind of autobiographical recollection, the mature artist projecting backwards onto his younger self certain notions that may or may not have been present in a frame of mind that is unrecoverable. What makes this routine duality particularly problematic in Coetzee's memoir is that he cultivates it, holding it up as a stylistic