



THE “RETROSPECT” OF WRITING WITHOUT AUTHORITY IN J.M. COETZEE’S *BOYHOOD*

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Abstract

John Maxwell Coetzee looks back at his pre-adolescent years spent in the Western Cape of South Africa in his short autobiographical text, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997). Coetzee avoids traditional autobiographical narrative technique by referring to himself in the third person (the text reads more like a novel or a biography) and by using a technique he already exploited with success in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980): the present tense is used to narrate past events. The desired effect is to avoid a self-obsessed repetition of the first-person pronoun, thus creating an artificial distance between “author” and “narrator.” The present tense, as in the novel, helps give an immediacy to events and emotions described. This paper studies the story spoken in a wavering voice, for the speaker is not only blind but, written as he is as a white South African into the latter half of the twentieth century, disabled,

disqualified – a man-who-writes reacts to the situation he finds himself in of being without authority, writing without authority.

While writers such as André Brink and Nadine Gordimer have been outspoken on the role of the author in South Africa, Coetzee has not said much on his role as a writer. Coetzee’s few comments on his role as a writer have been full of gaps and elusions. Looking at Coetzee’s responses in several of his interviews, one should note that he refuses to be “placed,” to be “labeled,” to be “assigned” a role. This refusal stems not so much from a desire to be private (“keeping it for your own consciousness,”) as from a refusal to accept an authoritarian determination of the role of the writer. Against the background of the prevailing critical image of J.M. Coetzee, the publication of his autobiographical novel *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* in



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1997 inevitably came as something of a surprise. Less surprising is the way in which the critical reception of Coetzee's autobiographical work has tried to contain the impact of that surprise. It reprograms this surprise in the assertion that we should have been expecting it all along, if only we had not failed to register the autobiographical promise of "the invaluable frame of reference provided by Coetzee's own theoretical writing on the genre" of autobiography both in Collingwood's critical essay "Autobiography as Autobiography" and in the non-fictional work edited by David Atwell, *Doubling the Point*. This work presents in two privileged moments, not only the possibility of an autobiography, but also the fact that this autobiography would take the particular form of a third-person present-tense narration. First, there is the "acute analysis of confession" (*Ethics of Reading*, 141) in the 1982-1983 essay, "Confession and Double Thoughts", a text Coetzee himself saw in hindsight "emerging as pivotal" (Coetzee & Atwell, *Doubling*, 391). This essay offers, in the words of Derek Attridge, a demonstration of "the structural interminability of confession in a secular context" (*Ethics of Reading*, 142). That this

theoretical impasse will find its formal solution in a third-person present-tense narration is ascertained by the second moment our interpretive program invokes: in the "Retrospect" at the end of *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee sketches "the first half" of his life, the part up till his move from England to Texas in the sixties (the terrain to be re-covered by *Boyhood* and *Youth*), in, precisely, the third-person present tense.

J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* portrays three years in the author's life, from the time he was ten to thirteen, from 1950 to 1953. His work was published in 1997, forty-four years after the narrative ends. *Boyhood*, the title chosen by J M Coetzee for his memoir, recalls the title of Leo Tolstoy's second volume of memories published in 1854 by the same name *Boyhood*. Coetzee seems to play with the expectations of those readers who anticipate the portrayal of a boy engaged in the highest level of thought to which the human intellect can tend like young Tolstoy and adds the subtitle "Scenes from Provincial Life" which also frustrates the expectations of those who expect a South African author to necessarily write about apartheid. The odd combination of "Boyhood" (Tolstoy, the great writer) and



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“Scenes from Provincial Life” (what greatness could be in there? What political message?) aptly introduces a rather unconventional autobiographical work.

Coetzee ostensibly limits himself to the “provincial” and “private” by telling “the only story he knows, the story of himself,” (161) although his is not a “portrait of the artist as a boy” either. Again, unlike Abrahams who establishes an intimate relationship with his readers from the very beginning by sharing with them his first memory, Coetzee opens *Boyhood* with a description in the third person that does not invite any emotional participation: “They live on a housing estate outside the town of Worcester, between the railway line and the National Road. The streets of the estate have tree-names, but no trees yet” (1). He is a detached narrator, but one who tries, nonetheless, to record the fragments of John’s boyhood as precisely as possible.

As already referred to Coetzee interposes a third-person distance between his writing self, the mature writer, and the “rude, unsocialised, eccentric” (78) boy he used to be, a distance given emphasis by the ironical remarks he frequently directs to his younger self. As a result, the readers

themselves are not drawn close to John either, but the author is not seeking their sympathy; rather, he is interested in subverting the conventions of the autobiographical genre. He avoids the conventional first person retrospective narration and instead uses the more fluid present tense.

Coetzee opens *Boyhood* with a seemingly ordinary description of an ordinary household. Everything looks “in order” in the first few lines, but almost immediately a grotesque image of disease and pain cuts across the narrative:

The hens develop gross swellings on their legs, like elephant-skin. Sickly and cross, they cease to lay [...] So one after another his mother takes the hens between her knees, presses on their jowls till they open their beaks, and with the point of a paring knife picks at their tongues. Then hens shriek and struggle, their eyes bulging (1).



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Later on the narrator describes other calamities: “storms of dust [...], “ants, flies, plagues of fleas” (2). But the most disturbing image is that of John’s mother with a “paring knife” cutting out the horny shells under the hens’ tongues. The boy looks at his mother’s “bloody fingers” in disgust and it is clear from the very beginning that their relationship will not be an easy one. He enjoys being his mother’s favourite “man,” but at the same time he is aware of the fact that her unconditional love may suffocate him, or rather castrate him, as the first image of the woman holding a knife seems to suggest.

The father figure is absent and a strong woman is the head of the household. John’s father has a weak personality and does not seem to possess any “special” qualities in his son’s eyes. He is no war hero, he does not know how to play cricket properly, he does not even hunt “like a man,” but at night when the animals can be easily caught unawares. He is no longer an attorney, a job that John found particularly “distinguished”: “[he] lost his job in Cape Town, the job with the title his mother was so proud of - Controller of Letting - when Malan beat Smuts in 1948” (67).

Although Coetzee does not foreground the political situation in South Africa, politics has nonetheless a dramatic impact on his life in that the family has to move from their comfortable “house with the big overgrown garden” (67) to the dusty cottage in Worcester when the National Party wins the elections and John’s father, a supporter of the United Party, finds himself unemployed. John’s constant feeling of alienation has political roots too; it can be traced back to the historical division between the English and the Afrikaners in South Africa. The boy is Afrikaner, but his mother tongue is English, a problematic “double identity” in a country where the two cultures have been in constant confrontation. To make things more difficult for him, he identifies with the British, but has no English blood. This is the product of his parents’ design: his mother is half Afrikaner and half German, his father is an Afrikaner, but they speak English at home, admire the English and send their children to English medium schools. John is neither Afrikaner nor British and he finds himself being discriminated against by both the Afrikaners and the English: There is the English language, which he commands with ease. There is England and everything that



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England stands for, to which he believes he is loyal. But more than that is required, clearly, before one will be accepted as truly English: tests to face, some of which he knows he will not pass. (129) John feels that he has strong roots in his father's family farm, but in practice, he remains an outsider even there and usually prefers to relate to the maternal side of the family. He wholeheartedly supports England, but he knows the British and British culture/history only through books and not necessarily the “correct” ones, but comics, the *Children's Encyclopaedia*, *The Reader's Digest* and the like: To John England is the boy at the battle of Jutland, who stood by his guns while the deck was burning under him. England is Sir Lancelot of the Lake and Richard the Lionheart and Robin Hood with his longbow of yew and his suit of Lincoln green (128). When Coetzee describes the heroes of his youth, Sir Lancelot, Richard the Lionheart, Robin Hood, again, he deliberately does not meet the reader's expectations. Two of these are fictional, another has been “fictionalized” by nationalist historians of crusading England and Europe. His acquaintance with Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain comes from the post-war celebrations of these events as turning points

in the war. His fascination with “boy war-heroes” is something we would expect from an “average” boy, not the young artist Coetzee. Moreover, when Jack Cornwell – “the boy at Jutland” - died, the deck of the ship was not “burning” and the ship did not sink. The author deliberately has John confuse this story with that described by the nineteenth century poet Felicia Hemans in her well-known poem “Casabianca” - which used to be taught in South African schools at the time - and which begins: “The boy stood on the burning deck” (*Poetical Works*, 398). Coetzee is mocking his young self's half-digested knowledge of British history by putting together Jack Cornwell and the “burning deck” in the poem.

Coetzee speaks both English and Afrikaans. English is Coetzee's first language, but he learns Afrikaans early through mixing with Afrikaans -speaking children and relatives. John is extremely intelligent and perceptive. He is different from other boys and particularly from his brothers, who, to the contrary, are average, “normal” and stand no chance to compete with him for his mother's love. John's brother “is at most a nervous, wishy-washy imitation of himself. In fact, he suspects that



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at heart his brother may be normal”. Similarly, John’s father “is normal in every way” and “he is grateful to his mother from protecting him from his father’s normality” (8). His constant claim for uniqueness might portray him as a rather egoistic boy and, as Cristiana Pugliese writes: “he is secretive, selfish, cruel. Nobody, whether other children or grown-ups, seems to like him, with the exception of his mother, his cousin Agnes and his great aunt” (501). Thus, John’s level of likeability is not very high. His actions often suggest that he performs them only to let it come into light that he is better than the others.

Sometimes his otherness depends on the otherness of his family, such as religious issues or being beaten as a punishment. In school, most pupils are beaten, but never John. The text hints that he connects “other” with “unnatural”. John’s liking of the letter R is one reason why he chooses to “be” a Roman Catholic, as well as it is one of the reasons why he likes the Russians. This passage also reveals the secrecy John constantly contains within himself. His family does not know about him being a Roman Catholic in school, and his peers do not know that he prefers the Russians to the

Americans. In this way, John isolates himself from other people and thus his perception of his otherness is fortified.

Being a Catholic is a part of his life reserved for school. Preferring the Russians to the Americans is a secret so dark that he can reveal it to no one. Liking the Russians is a serious matter. It can have you ostracized. [...] When the Russians and the Americans were first set before him as antagonists between whom he had to choose [...], he chose the Russians as he chose the Romans: because he likes the letter r, particularly the capital R, the strongest of all letters (26-7).

The peak of his perception of himself as special and different from other people is reached when John, at the age of 10, goes to a camp with his Boy Scout troop. In order to 16 receive a brand, the boys must swim over a river and back again. John does not know how to swim, but manages to reach the other side. On his way back across the river again, he loses his energy and almost drowns. He



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becomes unconscious but is saved by his troop leader. “From that day onward he knows there is something special about him. He should have died but he did not. Despite his unworthiness, he has been given a second life. He was dead but is alive” (17). This occurrence is not the only time John differs from the rest of his peers in the scout troop. At the same camp he almost drowned, he feels like he stands out from the rest because of his “wrong” equipment. All the boys are requested to bring a ground-sheet to sleep on. Since he does not have one, nor does he or his mother know what it is, he brings a red rubber mattress his mother gives him. When at the camp, he realizes that everyone else has a green ground-sheet. He feels like “[h]is red mattress at once sets him apart” (15).

One of the main issues of John being different is his linguistic rootlessness. He comes from an Afrikaner family, but speaks English as his first language. Cristiana Pugliese notes: John’s constant feeling of alienation has political roots too; it can be traced back to the historical division between the English and the Afrikaners in South Africa. The boy is Afrikaner, but his mother tongue is English, a problematic

‘double identity’ in a country where the two cultures have been in constant confrontation. To make things more difficult for him, he identifies with the British, but has no English blood. [...] John is neither Afrikaner nor British and he finds himself being discriminated by both the Afrikaners and the English (“Two Self,” 499). With an Afrikaner father and a mother half German, half Afrikaner, John’s family would count as an Afrikaner one, but he is sent to an English school, the family speaks English to each other and they “admire the English” (“Two Self,” 499). This creates confusion, not only for John but for other people, as he does not belong to a certain group of people that share the same language. John’s being different from the English, since he is Afrikaner, and different from the Afrikaner, since his mother tongue is English results in a lack of belonging. The linguistic otherness is involuntary from John’s perspective, but has been created by his parents and their choice to give their children English as their mother tongue. However, it seems as if John makes a distinction between his English self and his Afrikaner self. He states that he is English rather than Afrikaner, but also claims that: “[w]hen he speaks Afrikaans all



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the complications of life seem suddenly to fall away” (Boyhood, 125).

The question of identity, as a literary as well as an ethnic matter, has proved problematic for many South African writers, especially those who, like Coetzee, are based in South Africa. As Ian Glenn in “Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee, and the Politics of Interpretation,” suggests, Coetzee is not an Afrikaner, but a white South African inhabiting a very particular margin, since his background has partly distanced him from both Afrikaner as well as English affiliations (20). Coetzee’s own comments on his ethnic identity show him to be intensely aware of the slipperiness of his position, and of the ambivalence of this site which divides colonial from postcolonial experience. He has spoken of the term “Afrikaner” as having three different applications, the first two of which would disqualify Coetzee from Afrikaner group membership. The first is linguistic and cultural: English rather than Afrikaans is Coetzee’s first language, and he is not ‘embedded’ in Afrikaner culture, such as the Reformed Church. In its second sense, ‘Afrikaner’ becomes an ideological tool, moving from an anti-British political agenda

in the 1880s, to an anti-black Nationalism in the later years of apartheid. By this definition, those who do not share the political vision – whether or not they are Afrikaans-speakers – can be expelled from affiliation with the group. The third application of the term is the external activity of naming, a brand imposed on the basis of historical association. In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee suggests, he does not have the power “to withdraw from the gang” (342), from the guilt, by association, with the crime committed against Africa by the whites of South Africa. As a privileged white attacking the social system, Coetzee is inevitably in complicity with the whites to some degree, and this is a dilemma which all white South African writers have had to face. Coetzee’s position with regard to this dilemma is that of self-disgust. The situation might sometimes evoke in whites the necessary task of historical transformation best served by working from within the nation, rather than from a position of self-imposed exile.

This complex issue of identity is of vital importance in establishing the niche of postcolonialism which Coetzee inhabits. If he is unwilling, or unable to resist the



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external appellation of 'Afrikaner' this has to do with historical revision, the uncovering of contamination in the colonial legacy. At the same time, he strongly resists the contemporary taint, affiliating himself with an indeterminate, but growing, ethnic-linguistic group who

...are merely South Africans (itself a mere name of convenience) whose native tongue, the tongue they have been born to, is English. And as the pool has no discernible *ethnos*, so one day I hope it will have no predominant colour, as more 'people of colour' drift into it. A pool, I would hope then, in which differences wash away. (342)

In resisting this label, Coetzee here identifies himself with a utopian drive towards cultural and biological hybridity in South Africa. As Dominic Head puts it:

It is very important to recognize that this affinity with the process of decolonization, for someone like Coetzee, also depends upon the more passive

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acceptance of historical guilt: 'Afrikaner' is an identity to be both rejected/acknowledged in the present process of historical revision. (7)

Over this border position, which to some degree is an inevitable situation for the white anti-apartheid writer, looms the shadow of compromise. A familiar critical debate in Coetzee studies concerns the question of historical engagement, and the appropriate fictional response to the apartheid regime. If Coetzee is accurately represented as South Africa's most significant post-modernist writer, a doubt may legitimately emerge concerning his credentials in dealing with the particular historical moment. Coetzee has invariably negotiated with both the sophisticated literary questions posed by the poststructuralist/postmodernist turn and the key social and political issues of the day and has won much critical acclaim. There is no doubt that Coetzee's engagement with history seems oblique when his work is compared with the forms of gritty realism associated with black prose fiction, or, for



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example, with the novels of Nadine Gordimer.

The problem of realism in connection with Coetzee turns out to be a problem of definition. In evaluating the dominance of various forms of realism in South African prose fiction, David Atwell in *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, recounts that South African fiction is an “unquestioned means of bearing witness to, and telling the truth about, South Africa,” (11). Indeed, his avoidance and criticism of a certain concept of realism is a reaction against a perceived norm.

The standard invoked in this debate about South African fiction derives from the writings of Georg Lukacs, especially his work, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* which underlines the concept of ‘critical realism’ (11) in fictional writing. A focus of Lukacs’ prescription for the novel is the realization of individual characters coupled with an understanding of the historical dynamic, a representation of public and private realms in which one is not subordinate to the other: instead there should be a dialectical interaction between public and private realms. It is through the typification of character that this is

achieved: in the Lukacsian novel of critical realism a character is the representation of both individuality and typicality. In such a character “the determining factors of a particular historical phase are found.....in concentrated form” (11). This formula for the capture and concentration of historical forces has proved compelling, in an ethical sense, as a prescription for the fictional recording of, or bearing witness to the life in South Africa.

By using a third person narrator, Coetzee creates an illusion that the protagonist in *Boyhood* is any boy, and the reader might be surprised to realise that the protagonist shares the author’s name. This connection allows Coetzee to choose if *Boyhood* is an autobiography or a fictional story where the protagonist happens to have his name, simply by claiming that the events in the book have or have not occurred in reality.

Furthermore, Collingwood-Whittick suggests that with his choice of narrative, Coetzee separates himself from the protagonist and, in this way, disconnect them from each other. She writes:

omniscient narration in
Boyhood is used as a screen



which Coetzee interposes between the intensely private individual who feels the need to set down the truth of his own blemished and guilt-ridden personal history and the internationally renowned public figure who lives in the full glare of voracious media interest (22).

Collingwood-Whittick suggests that the separation of the protagonist from the author is made in order to show the two different personalities: 10-year-old John, who is unknown, sees himself as “unnatural” and is full of shame and guilt, and J. M. Coetzee, the world-famous author who safeguards his personal life. This interpretation suggests that, with his choice of narrator, Coetzee separates himself from the protagonist in order to protect his private life. This, in turn, point to the suggestion that Coetzee’s style of writing *Boyhood* has nothing to do with John’s feeling of being different from his peers. Another reason for the choice of narrative might be to get closer to the objective truth. Like Linda Anderson wrote, one can trust the narrator to tell the

truth only if he/she seems trustworthy, as she puts it:

Within critical discussions of autobiography, “intention” has had a necessary and often unquestioned role in providing the crucial link between author, narrator and protagonist. Intention, however, is further defined as a particular kind of “honest” intention which guarantees the “truth” of writing. Trust the author, this rather circular argument goes, if s/he seems to be trustworthy (2-3).

However, the narrator of *Boyhood* can be seen as both trustworthy and untrustworthy. The third person narrator implies objectivity, distance and the ability to see thoughts and actions from the outside. On the other hand, a first person narrator has experienced the events told in the book and by that, the reader might get the impression that it is the truth as experienced by the narrator/protagonist which is told. Either way, the trustworthiness can be questioned. Sheila Collingwood-Whittick remarks that “[f]or Coetzee, as for most other



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autobiographers, the goal of absolute truth has proved unattainable” (20). With the absolute truth being an impossibility, the reader, and author, must settle for the second best, which is the narrator which can come the closest to what is called the absolute truth, which means everything that happened, seen from an objective point of view. In the case of *Boyhood*, the choice was an omniscient third person narrator. For some reason, Coetzee did not find a first person narrator able to tell as much of the truth as one in the third person.

Derek Attridge writes: “Fiction, it might be said, is always involved in a certain avoidance of responsibility: these things haven’t actually happened. [...] Historical writing (including biographical and autobiographical writing), however, cannot avoid responsibility to the past” (86-7). This passage suggests that the author of a historical novel has a responsibility to tell the truth in some way, whereas an author of fiction does not. Fiction may take place in a historical setting, but it does not have to be accurate. The demand on the author to provide a text which reflects an actual event is determined by the genre of the text.

Attridge continues by discussing what kind of truth Coetzee writes about: “[t]he truth that *Boyhood* offers, then, is, in the first place, that of testimony: a brilliant account of what it was like to grow up as a white male in the 1950s in South Africa” (91). Here Attridge brings in a new definition of what Coetzee actually wrote: a testimony. With that interpretation, Coetzee would be telling the truth and *Boyhood* would not be fictional to any extent. The unconventional style of the narrative Coetzee chose has caused readers and critical writers many problems, mainly concerning how much of *Boyhood* is true and how much is fiction. By choosing a genre, the reader may also be able to decide if it is the truth which is written in *Boyhood*, but the choice of genre falters too. Interestingly, Coetzee does not seem to be as bothered by his choice of narrative as some of his readers or some literary critics are. In fact, in an interview published in his book *Doubling the Point*, he says that “[a]ll autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography” (391). This quote suggests that the absolute truth can never be told, but every text is partially true or carries traces of the author’s life.



J. M. Coetzee does not reveal if he has written *Boyhood* in the rather unconventional way he did just in order to be unconventional. Critics seem to believe that he did so with the aim of distancing himself from the protagonist and protect his private life. Furthermore, the protagonist would not enjoy a high level of credibility and trustworthiness, as he is a ten-yearold boy when the narrative begins and thirteen when it ends. Moreover, since he sees himself as the centre of the world, like children in general do, the reader might become suspicious that he does not know what is happening in the outside world. No matter how much John might perceive himself as different from his family and friends; it is not likely that Coetzee chose to write his unconventional autobiography just in order to be different.

Coetzee, contrarily, does not give any clear explanation to why he has written *Boyhood* in such an unconventional way. Critics present different theories concerning this question. Most critics argue that it is to distance himself from the protagonist and thereby protect his private life. Others suggest that the choice of narrative is based on the ability to tell the truth. An omniscient

third person narrator would be able to come closer to telling the absolute truth, which is the goal of biographical writing, than the very young protagonist. However, no critics claim that Coetzee wrote an unconventional story in order to be different. It is possible that Coetzee wanted *Boyhood* to be perfect.

In *Boyhood* the ending marks a new beginning. It is only at his great aunt's funeral that John seems to start something by himself. He is growing into an adolescent and, perhaps, a writer (20). At the end of the book - as John leaves boyhood behind - he realises that the way in which he is "special" is that he is the one who has the responsibility to remember: "He alone is left to do the thinking. How will he keep them all in his head all the books all the people and all the stories?" (166) John will become a writer of stories, he will create living persons in stories which are both real and fiction, like the people in them, and like himself in his "memoir".

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