

Reading between life and work: Reflections on J.M. Coetzee's life-writing

The work of J.M. Coetzee – the novels, taken together with the memoirs and the critical essays – offers rich and provocative material for an exploration of the borderlines or sutures between fiction and non-fiction, between life and work, representation and reality. Coetzee is perhaps one of the first novelists who in our time has openly interrogated, while also strategically blurring, this divide – which is why he has long represented a fascinating but difficult subject for considerations of both his fiction and his life-writing.

This difficulty reached particular pertinence in the past several years, first with the completion of his 2011 memoir trilogy *Scenes from Provincial Life* (bringing together *Boyhood* [1997], *Youth* [2002], and *Summertime* [2009]), and then with the appearance in 2012 and 2015 of two important yet interestingly contrasting books. There is the first biography of the author ever to be published, by John Kannemeyer, which finds biographical evidence in the fiction; and this was followed by, more recently, critic David Attwell's *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time*, the first book-length study to trace the alchemy of the author's life-into-art transformations through his meticulous and detailed notebooks. Whereas Kannemeyer in his book was relatively new to Coetzee as a literary subject, and had considerable ground to cover by way of background research, Attwell's work by contrast represented a return to the subject of Coetzee, yet in a different guise. His reading shifted away from the earlier post-structuralist engagement with his former teacher in *Doubling the Point*, to a more empirical if also genetic focus on his 'writing life', shaped by his encounter with the Coetzee archives at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas.

As has been clear from the early 1980s, when Coetzee devoted his inaugural lecture at the University of Cape Town to the topic 'Truth in Autobiography', he has taken very seriously, as if as an instruction for both life and art, the Derridean observation that there is nothing prior to writing. He proceeds very much as if our identities, our sense of self, are constructed, and hence can be scrutinised through the operations of written language, and, later in his career, the manipulations of narrative form. This conviction has allowed him to explore in-depth, in ways that would be painful were they not so coded, the fine connections between writing a life, life-writing, and writing fiction; between Jakobson's expressive function of language, as against his symbolic function.

This conviction also marks the overall aspect of the Coetzee collection of papers held at the Harry Ransom Center Library at the University of Texas at Austin, as even the most cursory overview of the over 140 boxes or 58.33 linear feet of documentation (drafts, proofs, notebooks) reveals. Each one of Coetzee's novels emerges from a tortuous process of writing and rewriting, reading and rereading, something that Tim Parks also observes in his review of Attwell's book.

Throughout, Coetzee's work ponders the autobiographical energies that run across all narrative fiction and are transformed in the process of being written up and written over. Memorably, in an interview with Attwell collected in *Doubling the Point* (importantly, a *written* interview), Coetzee observed that 'everything that

you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it?. And from this it follows, one may as well add, that all writing is autobiographical. Or, as Coetzee has put it, in words also cited prominently by Kannemeyer: 'All autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography'.

Further reading

David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time*, Jacana, 2015.

Elleke Boehmer, 'Reading between Life and Work'. *Textual Practice*, 2016.

J.M. Coetzee, *Scenes from Provincial Life*, Harvill Secker, 2011.

J.C. Kannemeyer, *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*, Jonathan Ball, 2012.

Source URL (modified on 04/08/2020 - 09:19): <http://writersinspire.org/content/reading-between-life-work-reflections-jm-coetzees-life-writing>