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In Some Sense True

Tim Parks

The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy by [J.M. Coetzee](#) and [Arabella Kurtz](#)[BUY](#)

Harvill Secker, 198 pp, £16.99, May 2015, ISBN 978 1 84655 888 7

J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time by [David Attwell](#)[BUY](#)

Oxford, 272 pp, £19.99, September 2015, ISBN 978 0 19 874633 1

Tim Parks's latest book is *The Novel: A Survival Skill*.

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Whenever we are in the company of J.M. Coetzee, whether it be an interview, a novel, a memoir or an essay, we are inexorably drawn into the realm of the ethical. We must judge and be judged, or at least strive to do the one and brace ourselves for the other. Hence a book titled *The Good Story* will not offer an analysis of the qualities that make for a satisfying reading experience, but investigate the consequences of storytelling in terms, frankly, of good and evil. This written debate between Coetzee and the psychologist Arabella Kurtz about the role of storytelling in psychoanalysis and, more generally, in the construction and consolidation of individual identity is largely a dialogue of the deaf. Or rather, one partner in the debate is deaf, or perhaps simply resistant, while the other is unable to overcome that resistance. No 'progress' is made. Nobody shifts their position in the slightest. Which is not to say the book is not fascinating.

Coetzee, who has no personal experience of psychotherapy, is concerned that the process might involve assisting the unhappy patient to construct a more amenable life-narrative with little regard for the truth. He is 'alarmed by the prospect of a world in which people's notion of liberty includes the liberty to reconstruct their personal histories endlessly without fear of sanction'. (Punishment is rarely far from his mind.) 'Do therapist and patient nowadays,' he wonders, 'agree to trade only in fictions, fictions that both of them know ... to be fictions and is that enough to satisfy them?' Despite believing that people's 'needs and desires have a ... fiction-like status', he would prefer 'to focus on ... the longing or nostalgia for the one and only truth, a longing that I myself happen to feel strongly'. He speaks of "'real" selves' as opposed to fictions and asserts the existence of the 'soul'.

Kurtz, who is always thoughtful and persuasive, reminds Coetzee that 'when people seek psychotherapeutic help because they are in distress there is usually a real breakdown in the overall coherence of memory systems and the accompanying sense of self.' They come 'because they feel dreadful ... not because they do not know if God exists or how to read the weather'. In short, 'in psychotherapy one is not trying to establish objective truth' but rather to find 'a means of containing experience, in the sense of giving it form and meaning'. This will usually involve going over and over the most difficult of life's events rather than avoiding them, since 'more often than not the truth is what works.' 'I can't really go along with the opposition between practicality and truth set out in your account,' Kurtz asserts.

I say nobody shifts their position, but perhaps that isn't quite the case, since it's difficult, if not impossible, to establish what Coetzee's position might be. Early on in the debate, Kurtz tries to pin down his view, observing that he sees nothing between, on the one hand, 'a relationship with external reality, which is ... pure and interpretation free', hence 'inhuman', and on the other, 'an alarming situation where ... people are cut off from each other because of their absorption in wish-fulfilling fantasy'.

Many readers will feel that her summary is accurate and it's hard to disagree when she goes on: 'What is missing is a sense of us as living beings in the world.' But Coetzee believes he has been misinterpreted; on the one side, yes, 'a wilfully self-created reality that one might as well call fantasy', but on the other, 'a sense of one's self as immutably fixed because the history out of which one grew ... is immutable, beyond one's control.' He then goes on to wonder why memories 'should not be amenable to revision', something he now seems to be presenting as desirable: 'Why can't I install a new set of memories that suit me better than the old ones?' Later still, he reflects that in fact all

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too often people do install a quite different version of the past and have no problem with it; the idea that the truth will always find you out is simply not the case.

At this point, it's as if Coetzee were asking, why am I stuck with the ethically admirable but perhaps unhappy fate of adhering to the immutable reality of the past, when others feel free to manipulate their life stories at will? At the same time, speaking of his writing, he acknowledges that 'it must be evident to you that I don't have much respect for reality. I think of myself as using rather than reflecting reality in my fiction.' As if to placate Kurtz, or perhaps the reader, for presenting these seemingly incompatible assertions he tells her, 'As you can see, I am as divided, undecided and confused as can be.'

The exchange becomes repetitive. Kurtz seeks to coax Coetzee away from his fierce polarisations by describing her experiences with people in therapy. Selfhood, she insists, is always constructed in relation to others and doesn't exist outside such relations; Coetzee is concerned that if truth is to be thought relational it will hardly be truth at all. Kurtz feels that what is constructed in relation has its own reality and hence is part of the truth. Coetzee shifts the ground a little by likening therapy to Catholic confession. We are back with the ethical: unhappiness is felt to be the result of sin. But confession, he observes, is all too often self-serving and theatrical, essentially seeking the feel-good factor of unburdening oneself: people just want to talk, and to be absolved. He brings in Dostoevsky and Stavrogin, whom he wrote about in *The Master of St Petersburg*. Always respectful, Kurtz doesn't agree. People 'come to therapy desperately wanting to get unstuck or to move beyond a circle of thoughts going round in their heads, with no promise of release ... they do not just want to talk; they want to be taken beyond their talk.'

Coetzee never seems concerned that the person choosing to go for therapy might be in serious distress, or wonders how best they might be helped. Doggedly – the word is his – he worries that Kurtz has proposed a contract between patient and therapist, according to which, as he sees it, the patient says: 'I will tell my story as if it were true, and you will deal with me as if I were not just making it up, and we will see where we can go from there.' This seems an aggressively reductive summary of the complex collaboration Kurtz has described. When Kurtz replies with another thoughtful description of the therapeutic experience, concluding that she does not think 'the complete truth can ever be reached', Coetzee remarks that he for one continues 'to distinguish between things that really happened in the past and things that did not really happen', after which he proceeds via *Don Quixote* to contemporary Australians' complacency with regard to the crimes of their settler antecedents and the fact that they live in stolen territory. This raises the stakes considerably. People 'ought to be riven with self-doubt but are not', he protests; on the contrary, morality is historicised so that we can feel that our forbears were not such bad folks after all. One can only agree with him. Kurtz does her best to bring the argument back to psychoanalysis.

By this point one is reminded of the lover in Coetzee's problematically autobiographical *Summertime* who remarked that Coetzee had an 'autistic quality', not 'constructed to fit into or be fitted into. Like a sphere. Like a glass ball. There was no way to connect with him.' At the same time one has to remember that it was Coetzee who gave us that description. Ironically, in one of the few moments in the book when he does focus on the process of therapy, he remarks that psychotherapists must often find themselves confronted with patients who, rather than entering into real dialogue, are 'caught in a round of mechanical complaints or accusations'. While Coetzee's complaints and accusations are never trivial, that is exactly the form this exchange tends towards.

Finally, Kurtz has the courage to suggest that Coetzee is influenced by 'an attitude that I would characterise as disapproving and puritanical, and that implicitly invokes a relationship between fiction and reality in which fiction is the inferior party and should always be relinquished in favour of an engagement with reality'. Characteristically, Coetzee doesn't take her up on this, but the irony now is that presumably it was Kurtz who initially came to Coetzee in the belief that 'the psychotherapist and the novelist have much in common' and that 'an outsider' and novelist like Coetzee might 'possibly have a contribution to make'. In fact, when the exchange switches to a discussion of novels, Kurtz's unwarranted optimism in this regard is exposed, and Coetzee is now by far the more canny and convincing of the two.

Kurtz feels that W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* brings the reader to the wisdom that 'if one relaxes the urge for mastery ... one does become more open to certain kinds of stimulation and insight,' something that is 'yet another point at which the paths of creativity and psychotherapeutic process converge'. Coetzee is having none of it. *Austerlitz* is 'troubled' and 'certainly not confident about offering us wisdom or guidance'. He offers a summary of the novel (a mode of debate he evidently prefers) and identifies its weakness: the plot is predicated on the notion that what is repressed will inevitably return to haunt us. This is not the case, he feels, but novelists and psychotherapists have a stake in believing it is, if only because the idea makes novels and psychotherapy possible and important. Elsewhere he remarks that novelists will always excuse their inventions and manipulations with the claim that 'for mysterious reasons that have to do with ... internal coherence' and 'plausibility' they are 'in some

sense true', but in the end the stories writers tell are 'much like the stories the rest of us tell about ourselves: they serve our own interests'.

With these comments Coetzee is allowed to have the last word in the debate, although Kurtz had already made it clear that psychologists don't believe repression is always unsuccessful, or indeed intrinsically bad. But the question the book leaves for Coetzee's admirers is how does his own fiction stand up to the kind of scrutiny he levels at others? Are his novels 'in some sense true'? Do they mainly 'serve [his] own interests'? And if so, in what way?

There could be no better place to look for answers to these questions than in David Attwell's *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*. Attwell is an ex-student of Coetzee's who has already written in defence of his work in *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. He now returns to his subject with the advantage of the papers Coetzee has deposited in the Harry Ransom Centre Library at the University of Texas at Austin, a collection that, aside from business correspondence and memorabilia, contains Coetzee's research materials, including the manuscripts of all his novels from *Dusklands* (1974) to *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). Remarkably, 'the manuscript entries and revisions are meticulously dated,' and include discussions and criticisms of the work's progress. It is as if, from the start, Coetzee had always thought of the creative process as something that would need to be examined; like the protagonists of his books he is constantly aware that his peers will be judging him.

Attwell reminds us of Coetzee's background to show how his fiction springs from it but also stands in a peculiar relation to it, such that Coetzee 'is always deliberately present and not present in his work'. As a child in an Afrikaner family that spoke English, Coetzee was caught between two communities, 'working on the question whether identities can be freely chosen, and ... discovering that they can't be, or not entirely'. At once one is struck by Coetzee's decision not to mention his own experience when discussing these matters with Kurtz.

In general, Coetzee's upbringing was such that there could never be a clear answer to questions of identity and allegiance. He loved the Karoo farm of his Afrikaner uncles but disliked the way they treated his mother. Later his closeness to his mother was complicated by her complacency about apartheid, another fact that might have anchored his general discussion of historic guilt with Kurtz. In the end it was the land not the people that attracted the young Coetzee. But the land was stolen; it was not his. His mother tongue was English, but then again, perhaps not, since it was an English spoken by Afrikaners. Asked whether he was Afrikaans, he complained that 'Afrikaners would never accept *him*.' Asking himself whether he would want to be 'counted apart' from the Afrikaner community, he responded, 'I think not ... not really.' Many years later, after winning the Nobel, when the Afrikaner community sought to claim him for its own, Coetzee referred to himself as 'a doubtful Afrikaner', then added, 'perhaps'.

In short, Coetzee's background encouraged an obsessive attention to positioning, but without allowing him ever to settle. 'What is *to take a position*?' he asked in an essay in his collection *Giving Offence*: 'Is there a position which is not a position ... in which one knows without knowing, sees without seeing?' Clearly this is his aspiration. On one of the few occasions when Attwell takes issue with his subject, it is over Coetzee's claim that the English language has an 'uneasy relationship with the natural world of southern Africa'. To the contrary, Attwell remarks, English had long been 'indigenising itself', but as for David Lurie, the protagonist of *Disgrace*, Coetzee's allegiance is to English as a literary language, something that exists on the page, or to English as an international lingua franca, something that exists everywhere and nowhere. The uneasiness, then, is Coetzee's, in that 'a local creolised English has little appeal' to him. Eventually, the author elects 'world culture over regional or national culture'. But it's already been established that one cannot simply decide who one is: the writer's heart remains attached to the landscape of his childhood, something that his version of English has no words for.

It makes sense, then, albeit tormented sense, that Coetzee's first novel, *Dusklands*, was begun in the US in 1970 (shortly before his thirtieth birthday) and split into sections set in contemporary America and in 18th-century South Africa. Alter egos, or possible alter egos, abound and contrast. There is a character called Coetzee in each section, and a narrator, Eugene Dawn, in the first section who shares many of the author's traits, notably a meticulous tidiness with his papers and the feeling that he's only really happy among books; both qualities seem allied to the novel's strategy of metafictional self-reference. Both sections recount a descent into extreme violence.

Since Coetzee's novels go through many drafts, often starting with completely different characters and plots from the versions we know, Attwell sets out to show how the author gets from A to B. Essentially it's a process of starting with the personal, topical and perhaps autobiographical, then working towards a T.S. Eliot-like 'impersonality' through repeated rewriting and editing. Coetzee was drawn to 'impersonality', Attwell remarks, 'because it suited his personality' – a curious formulation. But 'impersonality is not what it seems. It is not a simple repudiation of self in the name of art; on the

contrary, it involves an instantiation of self, followed by an erasure that leaves traces of the self behind.'

Whatever the theory, the procedure as Attwell describes it is fascinating. Thus Coetzee began the novel that would become *Waiting for the Barbarians* in 1977, six years after being forced back to South Africa when he fell foul of the US authorities over a university sit-in. Having already published *Dusklands* and completed *In the Heart of the Country*, his mood was one of growing detachment from politics: 'Ever since I moved back to SA my attitude towards the Revolution has become more ambivalent. And in parallel with this movement, my *feravour* as a writer has waned.' Wanting nevertheless to write about a revolutionary, or post-revolutionary South Africa, he began a story written in a straightforward realist style in which white refugees gather on Robben Island (at that time Mandela's prison) to escape the collapsing republic.

The plot goes nowhere. Coetzee dismisses each false start with the word 'ABANDONED'. Initially his hero is a forty-year old Greek man, an ex-teacher of ancient history. The plot is 'a dark love story'. Then suddenly the hero is fifty and the girl he is with 21; first she is separated from her husband, then a widow. They have compulsive sex taking refuge in a prison cell, then lapse into sexlessness, at which point the hero 'dreams of erotic tenderness, without phallic consummation'. Thus the mood of exhausted longing that would eventually characterise the relationship between the magistrate and the barbarian girl in the novel we know was born. At this stage Coetzee imagines his hero eventually becoming a 'burier of the dead', another position that is both involved and not involved in society – the position of David Lurie at the end of *Disgrace*, though David disposes of dogs rather than people, an even more peripheral activity. It's this groping towards situations and positions that might express a core emotion, or a complex of conflicting emotions, always deeply entangled with ethical issues, transgression and penitence, that is so gripping in Attwell's account, and indeed so intensely personal.

Coetzee identifies his versions with letters, A, B, C, just as in his discussion with Kurtz he frequently breaks his arguments into numbered or lettered alternatives, always seeking control and distance. Finally, in version E he begins to find his subject, but now the writing itself bores him. 'I have no interest in telling stories; it is the process of storytelling that interests me.' The books must become an account of the struggle to find their subject; that is, of Coetzee's attempt to locate an area of unease and transform it into something shared. Hence there must be some self-conscious, metafictional quality to the story. It's an intense performance of autobiography, but without the facts of the subject's life and without the reader's being allowed to immerse him or herself in the story and become comfortable with it: we must be hard on ourselves. In this way, the author's manuscripts and notes, full as they are of twists, turns and uncertainties, could reasonably be understood as an extension of the work itself.

But this is still only the beginning of the process. Coetzee switches from third person to first. The novel's setting is abstracted from South Africa and shifted to something resembling the Amazonian jungle, then to something like the central Asian steppe. There is an intense search for a 'you' who might be the appropriate object of the protagonist's thwarted erotic longing. While attempting to find a believable landscape for the book, research on Mongolia throws up the idea of a magistrate travelling to a distant and troubled outpost of empire and writing back to his emperor. At last Coetzee has found his protagonist.

Three months into the writing, Steve Biko, the black-consciousness leader, died in prison in Pretoria after torture. Torture now becomes a central element in Coetzee's plot. The magistrate meets a torture victim; he himself will be a victim of torture. 'This may not be entirely honest,' Coetzee worries, 'but I must make the relation of the story to the Biko affair, the inspiration of the story by the Biko affair, clear.' He imagines a trial scene reminiscent of Biko's trial. But the word 'honest' signals Coetzee's constant concern, not only for the ethical issues in the plot but for the ethics of what he is doing. Is it right to point up a close link with Biko when Biko was not the original inspiration? The trial scene was dropped, but torture remains central.

Eventually, after endless permutations, he has the attraction of the magistrate to a crippled and tortured barbarian girl who has seen her dead father humiliated. 'It is difficult to believe in this ridiculous story,' Coetzee comments, hoping that 'some transmutation will occur to me.' In another sense, however, as his own marriage was breaking down, nothing could have been more believable than this deeply troubled magistrate. 'Through a lifetime of heroic repression enforced and then interiorised, I am now in a state where I desire nothing. That is to say, beyond desiring to desire.' Those who have read the conversation with Kurtz will again recognise the themes. It's intriguing that repression is now 'heroic'. And successful.

With the plot at last taking shape, Coetzee embarks on an intensive reading programme – Kierkegaard, Henry James, Pasternak, Flaubert, Barthes, Paz, Freud – to give the book its intellectual structure. In its early versions the magistrate's erotic engagement with the tortured girl is quite explicit, complete with ejaculations. Later, this material is

edited out and we arrive at last at that strangely rarefied superimposition of desire and guilt, enervated eroticism and penitence, a yearning for reparation at once intimate and political that seems quite masochistic in its eagerness to suffer the humiliation already suffered by the object of desire, as if only humiliation and punishment guaranteed reality, as if it were only through erotic attraction that one might draw close to the victims of imperialism. In any event it is the same deeply disturbing combination of emotions that Coetzee would conjure up in quite a different way in the more realistic settings of *Disgrace* around the figures of the student Professor Lurie sleeps with and his daughter who is raped. The author's private world and South African realities fuse in the most frightening ways.

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The subtitle of Attwell's book is 'Face to Face with Time', a phrase taken from a draft of the next novel he discusses, *Life & Times of Michael K*. Having escaped various captors and tormentors, the destitute, hair-lipped Michael flees to the Swartberg mountains: 'I have retreated and retreated and retreated, I thought, till I am on the highest mountaintop and there is nowhere more to go save up into the heavens. Now I am face to face at last with time: everything else is behind me.' It is the dream of an existential confrontation beyond human relations, absolute and transcendent. One recognises in it that nostalgia for 'the one and only truth' that Coetzee speaks about in his exchange with Kurtz. But if the writer cut the expression from the published version it was perhaps in the awareness that one cannot stand 'face to face' with time, since time has no face; only people have faces. The phrase is meaningless and the sought encounter unavailable. Rather than ascending to the heavens, if Michael is not to join the forces fighting white oppression in South Africa he will have to settle for his beloved gardening, a relation with the earth, and through the earth, presumably, if only in some indirect way, with others. Unsurprisingly, in an early draft the Michael figure was not a gardener but a poet.

Attwell comments: "'Face to face with time" conveys the way Coetzee puts fiction between himself and history, between himself and his mortality.' Certainly Attwell is right to underline this aspiration in Coetzee's work, though again and inevitably, it remains an aspiration, since it isn't easy to see how one can insert things between oneself and history, or mortality; Coetzee and his fictions are part of history and as he himself remarks at one point in his debate with Kurtz 'what ties one to the real world is, finally, death. One can make up stories about oneself to one's heart's content, but one is not free to make up the ending.' If the fictions do function as buffers, then, it is between Coetzee and other people: ourselves for example, the readers, the public. Indeed, Attwell has an interesting discussion of Coetzee's decision not to give ordinary speeches or papers on public occasions but to tell stories instead; clear and direct meaning, amounting to a declaration of his own position, is always withheld in favour of a potent cluster of event and emotion that inevitably unsettles, since we can never be sure how to relate to the person who has no position, or will not declare it if he has.

Writing these words brings to mind something that one of Coetzee's mentors, Samuel Beckett, once wrote in a letter to Georges Duthuit towards the end of a long and tormented attempt to formulate the nature of his art: 'I have this frantic urge to fix up for myself a situation that is literally impossible, what you call the absolute.' It's an assertion we might tie up with another remark in the same correspondence, where Beckett warns Duthuit that 'I who hardly ever talk about myself talk about little else.' Reading Attwell's excellent account of the genesis of Coetzee's fictions, one could arrive at a similarly paradoxical formulation: Coetzee does not do autobiography but, looked at another way, he doesn't do anything but. And again, it's precisely because Coetzee does not do autobiography that he doesn't do anything but. Which is to say: it's because he is unable or unwilling to settle on a position for himself that he has to keep on worrying around the question, so much so that the writing itself becomes the place where Coetzee most convincingly is; hence his fierce commitment to literature (in its way 'self-serving', since literature has become his home) and his decision to keep his papers so meticulously and place them in a library, if not for eternity, at least for a good few hundred years.

The goal of the psychoanalytic process that Kurtz describes in *The Good Story* is to bring her patients to a more or less stable position that they can be comfortable with; the thrust of Coetzee's writing is to draw us into an exciting vortex of instability where we are 'riven with self-doubt'. As E.M. Cioran remarked, 'Cruelty is a sign of election, at least, in literature.' In this regard, though the psychoanalyst and the novelist, or at least a novelist like Coetzee, may both be working in the territory of narrative and its relation to identity, the nature of their separate enterprises could hardly be more different.

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