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## *Doubling the Point. Essays and Interviews* as J.M. Coetzee's Intellectual Autobiography

*Doubling the Point. Essays and Interviews* is a collection of J.M. Coetzee's critical-theoretical articles and non-fiction originally published between 1970 and 1990 in academic journals and the *New York Review of Books*. The essays are linked together by a long interview that David Attwell, the editor of the volume, conducted in writing with the author over a period of two years prior to the book's publication in 1992. Interesting appears the very conception of the volume, negotiated, as seems likely, between the two co-authors. Coetzee reveals he wanted to go back to his previous works in order to "understand the desire that drove" him to write non-fiction in the past two decades (DP: 18).<sup>1</sup> The project, he states, is "part of a larger autobiographical text" (DP: VII) and the conversations with the critic are "a way of getting around the impasse of [his] own monologue" (DP: 19). The autobiographical character of *Doubling the Point* is additionally strengthened by including, early on in the collection, Coetzee's short memoir from 1984, "Remembering Texas,"<sup>2</sup> that recounts the beginnings of his professional engagement with science, linguistics and literature; and by ending the volume with a retrospection, where the author assesses the impact of the dialogues upon himself in the form of an *autre*-biography.

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<sup>1</sup> For page references in parentheses, *Doubling the Point. Essays and Interviews* (1992) is abbreviated as DP.

<sup>2</sup> "Texas Memoir" recounts Coetzee's arrival in the USA in the 1960s and his studies in Austin. It depicts his engagement in academic work (technical and theoretical linguistics – fields that were not to become his long-term engagement), his expectations as a young man to make a fresh start in the USA, in "a wider world" (DP: 340), his desire to distance himself from South Africa, and his response to the American culture and politics in the times of the Vietnam war. Striking in this account is a sense of alienation and non-belonging that the author discerns in his attitude and responses to the new environment. The tone of dispassionate irony the author assumes to look at the younger version of his self alludes to *The Education of Henry Adams*, an influence Coetzee admits himself (DP: 26).

Considering the above facts, it is not surprising that the writer, known to be an individual fiercely protecting his privacy and an author distrustful of critics (Poyner 2006: 4, 5), this time gives full answers to the questions and redirects or reformulates, where he thinks necessary, the problem so that he can reflect upon it. One of the side-effects of this method is that large sections of the book read like a critical overview of the developments in the twentieth-century humanities. Attwell's questions, if they do refer to Coetzee's private space, do not aim at exposing facts hidden from the public, but at pondering on aspects of his work that appear oblique and cause interpretative difficulty. The cooperation with Attwell, Coetzee asserts at some point, is free of the common flaws of interviews which often either resemble interrogation before a public trial or draw on psychotherapy when the journalist, with religious fervor, "draws out truth-speech" (DP: 65). To Coetzee, truth "is related to silence, to reflection, to the practice of *writing*" (DP: 65/6, emphasis original). *Doubling the Point* is a genuinely collaborative work, and the role of the critic here is not only given its due credit but treated as on par terms with the novelist's. And it is so not just because the selection of essays and their grouping into thematic sections is Attwell's, nor even that Attwell runs the interview and thus chooses the topics of conversations, but because his critical perspective of Coetzee's work gives direction to the whole project.

The aim of this paper is to show that the intellectual autobiography and the intellectual biography of the author unfold in the collection as two distinct concerns: Coetzee's self-scrutiny evolves into meta-commentary on autobiographical theory and practice; Attwell's semi-biographical criticism expands into a recognizable trend in the Coetzee criticism. The two lines seem to converge at the end of the book, which gives an unexpected twist to the project and invites reflection on the function of the *autre*-biography that closes the collection.

In *Doubling the Point* Attwell's focus is on "the interplay" (DP: 2) between Coetzee's novels (from *Dusklands* (1974) to *Age of Iron* (1990)) and his non-fiction: scholarship, criticism, public addresses, and essays in such diverse fields as linguistics, translation and cultural studies, literary criticism and history, politics and the ethics of writing. He traces evolution of the author's interests showing, chronologically, formative impact of subsequent fields of his interests upon his awareness of language, literary form, discursive character of speech, and understanding of power relations. What emerges from David Attwell's concerns is a sort of biographical criticism in the sense that Coetzee's comments upon his research interests are shown as formative for his creative practice. As Attwell asserts, "the intensity and accomplishments of Coetzee's life in literature and scholarship are borne out finally in the novels" (DP: 2). The strong intellectual and theoretical orientation of Coetzee's fiction, Attwell observes, originates from a whole range of literary and philosophical traditions and is rooted in structuralist and post-structuralist conceptions of language, literature and culture. However, his reflexive self-consciousness is not indicative, as Attwell demonstrates, of postmodern playfulness

and formal games, but of “an encounter in which the legacies of European modernism and modern linguistics enter the turbulent waters of colonialism and apartheid” (DP: 3).

Attwell sees Coetzee’s work as a form of postcoloniality “that brings its metropolitan heritage into a charged and complex relationship with the historical crisis in which it finds itself” (DP: 3). Discussing Coetzee’s textual innovation as of European provenience, Attwell, nevertheless, situates his work primarily in the South African context. The author’s concerns, Attwell explains, “bring into focus the more representative crisis of postmodernism and its so-called paralysis before history, but Coetzee’s achievement is to have found the means, within fiction, to interrogate this paralysis – indeed, not only to interrogate it but to move beyond it to a reconstructed position in which fiction begins to speak to the political on its own terms” (DP: 4). He claims that the author, confronted with questions about accountability to society and to history,<sup>3</sup> does not flinch from the debate but opens up a broader problem concerning the authority of fiction as a form of address that has the power to rival overt political interventions. Coetzee’s fiction, Attwell explains, is not directly involved in answering back to a specific historical moment and to the political because by doing so it would enter a language that it attempts to reject. Instead, it elaborates its independent status and becomes a successful weapon to resist discourses of history. This way, in Attwell’s view, Coetzee frees his works from occupying a location of opposition to politics and finds for them positions outside binary categories.<sup>4</sup> These locations – evasive, provisional and weak as they may appear – create a stance that, paradoxically, turns out empowering.

In Attwell’s excellent critique of Coetzee’s work, discernable are his attempts to mitigate allegations against the novelist, both as a writer and as a public intellectual, for his evasion of strictly political engagement, accusations salient especially in South Africa. Attwell’s interpretation, going against the dominant critical line in the late apartheid era, is that the author is not “out of touch with the sensibilities of the times and indifferent to the existential conditions of contemporary South Africa,” but that his writing has “oppositional energies” (Parry 1996: 61).<sup>5</sup> Liberation of fiction from political rhetoric and from realistic representation, Attwell explains, allows Coetzee to restore ethical dimensions to the novel because, freed from commenting on current situations, it may speak about what is meaningful

<sup>3</sup> Jane Poyner, in “‘The lives of J.M. Coetzee’: writer/critic/citizen” (2003), states: “By scrupulously defining what might be paradoxically termed a ‘non-position,’ [Coetzee] makes himself accountable to society and history.”

<sup>4</sup> In her article, “J.M. Coetzee: writing with/out authority,” Fiona Probyn (2002) elaborates on Attwell’s observations and lucidly analyzes the multiplicity of Coetzee’s positioning strategies both in his novels and his non-fiction.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Durrant (1999) makes a similar point to Attwell’s: “Coetzee’s commitment to the autonomy of his art is precisely that which ensures the political force of his novels,” and he adds that Coetzee’s “novels are only able to engage with the history of apartheid precisely by keeping their distance.”

and susceptible to moral judgment (DP: 4, 12).<sup>6</sup> Coetzee's interventions, Attwell underlines, occur in his writings through his relentless scrutinizing of power relations, of mechanisms of oppression and of positions from which authors may address the public. Attwell's interpretative proposition, which he was to pursue in his subsequent book, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*,<sup>7</sup> published a year after *Doubling the Point*, has developed into a strong but polemical trend in the Coetzee criticism. As Samuel Durrant (1999) observes in "Bearing Witness to Apartheid: J.M. Coetzee's Inconsolable Works of Mourning,"

Following the publication of *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* and *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, David Attwell has become the principal apologist for – if not custodian of – the work of J.M. Coetzee. In order to defend Coetzee against the influential neo-Marxist dismissal of Coetzee within South Africa, which criticized the novels for failing to represent the material conditions of apartheid, for their perceived "revulsion" from history, critics such as Attwell and Susan Van Zanten Gallagher have endeavored to re-historicize Coetzee's fiction by emphasizing its discursive relevance to the time and place in which the novels were produced.

While in Attwell's critical biography occasional apologetic tone cannot pass unnoticed, Coetzee refuses to comment on accusations of the above sort and responds briefly: "One writes the books one wants to write. One doesn't write the books one doesn't want to write" (DP: 207). All throughout the interviews he is vigilant to "answer for (in two senses)" his novels (DP: 206, emphasis original). His novels, he says, "are well enough equipped to perform their own interrogations" (DP: 18). He denies a privileged access to his narratives, where the author occupies a god-like position of power and knowledge:

What I say is marginal to the book, not because I as author and authority so proclaim, but on the contrary because it would be said from a position peripheral, posterior to the forever unreclaimable position from which the book was written ... the author's position is the weakest of all. Neither can he claim the critic's saving distance ... nor can he pretend to be what he was when he wrote – that is when he was not himself. (DP: 206)

Coetzee's attitude to this autobiographical project is open: he begins self-scrutiny without a thesis about himself – his aim is not to reveal what he already knows but to find out where the dialogues may lead him. The outcome of exchanges, he professes, lies in the future and will presumably remain open till the book's end, if it comes out at all (DP: 18). What one would label as traditionally autobiographical material – the author's personal vicissitudes – is scarce indeed: Coetzee offers little

<sup>6</sup> Such understanding of the ethics of writing, Attwell observes, informs also Coetzee's ethics of intellectualism (DP: 5, 12). That Coetzee does not, to borrow Said's expression, "speak truth to power" in direct political polemic derives from Coetzee's skepticism about efficiency of contestation from a position vis-à-vis power by means of political language.

<sup>7</sup> In the Introduction to *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, David Attwell writes: "My critical apparatus entails a description of Coetzee's oeuvre as a form of situational metafiction, with a particular relation to the cultural and political discourses of South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s" (1993: 3).

insight into his life-as-lived, into “facts of life,” focusing instead on his mindscape and intellectual and artistic experiences. As he contends, “in a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it” (DP: 17). He ponders on this idea in the following questions: “This massive autobiographical writing-enterprise that fills a life, this enterprise of self-construction (shades of *Tristram Shandy*!) – does it yield only fictions? Or, rather, among the fictions of the self, the versions of the self, that it yields, are there any that are truer than others? How do I know that I have the truth about myself?” (DP: 17).

Clearly, Coetzee’s understanding of autobiography is related to the view that all writing relies on self-disclosure. But what he finds important about auto-narratives is not the relation between facts of life and their representation, nor is it even the complex issue of selecting facts and storyfying them, a problem he briefly acknowledges:

You tell the story of your life by selecting from a reservoir of memories, and in the process of selecting you leave things out. To omit to say that you tortured flies as a child is, logically speaking, as much an infraction of truth to facts as to say that you tortured flies when in fact you didn’t. So to call autobiography – or indeed any history – true as long as it does not lie invokes a fairly vacuous idea of truth. (DP: 17)

The problem, he declares, is that of telling the truth about the self.<sup>8</sup> The truth about the self, in Coetzee’s understanding, is not something the subject is aware of but is reluctant to expose to a broader audience. It is what is yet unknown to the subject. The truth is to be formulated and constructed in the process of writing.<sup>9</sup> Writing, for Coetzee, is not a two-stage process in which one first decides what to write and then actually writes it down. One writes, he contends, because one does not know what one wants to express. “Writing reveals to you what you wanted to say in the first place ... What it reveals (or asserts) may be quite different from what you thought (or half-thought) you wanted to say in the first place. That is the sense in which one can say that writing writes us” (DP: 18). Truth, he argues, “is something that comes in the process of writing, or comes from the process of writing” (DP: 18), with a test for it being “a feel of whether you are getting closer to ‘it’ or not ... a sensing mechanism, a feedback loop of some kind” (DP: 18). Coetzee treats the process of writing as a kind of experience and destination, as a reciprocal relation between the author and the text, as a process of self-discovery and self-disclosure during which the writing subject constructs truths about himself, truths that, in turn, shape his writing self.

The kind of writing that is specifically concerned with constructing the truth is, for him, the confessional mode. He elaborates on it in the essay titled “Confession

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<sup>8</sup> Derek Attridge elaborates on Coetzee’s conception of “the essential truth about the self” in his *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004: 144–146).

<sup>9</sup> In the analysis of Coetzee’s idea of conveying the truth of the self in confessional writing I reiterate the argument from “Strategies of Renunciation and Practices of Inhabitation in J.M. Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year*,” my article co-authored by Edward Szynal (2008: 30–31).

and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky” (1985). Analyzing their works (Rousseau’s *Confessions*, Tolstoy’s *Kreutzer Sonata* and Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, *The Possessed* and *The Idiot*), Coetzee observes that in a secular context, without grace and the promise of absolution that belong to faith, self-scrutiny relies on endless regressive self-investigation.<sup>10</sup> A search for the ultimate truth about the self is a solipsistic game, a sterile procedure because the confessant, while confessing his transgression, looks in vain for the final explanation of his wrongdoing. Behind one sort of motivation he will always discover another set of reasons which will appear deeper than the previous ones and which, a while later, will be subject to further questioning. What follows from such an understanding of self-scrutiny, of search for “that within oneself that is wrong” (Attridge 2004: 145), is that transgression is not an indispensable element of confession: “what needs to be confessed is not the crime but that which lies behind it” (Attridge 2004: 145).

Coetzee further observes that the truth of the self does not come without self-deception: the confessant cannot escape self-interest and so-called “double thoughts.” The will to confess wrongdoing is always accompanied by an expectation of some selfish gain. No matter how unfavourable for the self the confession may appear, it will be driven by egoism – a hope for immediate profit, for consolation or liberation from the burden. Even self-abasement, shame and disgrace may be a source of comfort, may make oneself feel better, and may lead to the construction of subsequent self-excusing fictions. Self-interest, Coetzee carries on, cannot be eradicated, no matter how hard the confessing subject tries to get rid of it. At best, self-interest will be located at one’s blind spot. Auto-scrutiny, Coetzee concludes at this point, because of the confessant’s self-interest “is an instrument not of the truth but of a mere will to be comfortable, to be well thought of, and so on” (DP: 292).

Given the above, with one’s awareness of limitations of confession, “what potential for the attainment of truth can there be in the self-interrogation of a confessing consciousness?” (DP: 293), Coetzee asks. Through his analyses of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, he nevertheless discovers possibilities for authors to resolve the process of self-deception. Dostoyevsky, Coetzee explains, who cannot get through the impasse of secular self-scrutiny, points “finally to the sacrament of confession as the only road to self-truth” (DP: 291). But Tolstoy, for whom transcendence of self-consciousness is not available, resorts to illumination from the outside (in *Anna Karenina* these are a peasant’s words to Levin (DP: 292)). In *Kreutzer Sonata*, in turn, as Coetzee demonstrates, Tolstoy finds yet another way of challenging the

<sup>10</sup> Gilbert Yeoh explains limitations of the confessional mode as discussed by Coetzee in the essay on confession: “[Coetzee] highlights how self-examination, as opposed to enabling truth-telling, drives the self into an infinite regression of moral self-doubt about its motives. Even the self that is most rigorously honest and exhaustive in its self-examination cannot tell the truth about itself – what it arrives at is another self-serving fiction about itself. Consequently, the process of confession is one without end” (2003: 333).

futility of confession: disillusioned and bored with “cranking truth out of lies” and “impatient with the novelistic motions that must be gone through before the truth may emerge,” Tolstoy decides “*to set down the truth*, finally, as though after a lifetime of exploring one had acquired the credentials, amassed the authority, to do so” (DP: 293, emphasis original). The authority Coetzee is talking about does not extend outside the text, nor does it reach beyond the process of writing. It terminates with the completion of the work. “The end of confession,” Coetzee concludes, “is to tell the truth to and for oneself” (DP: 291).

When, in the last exchange with Attwell, Coetzee is asked to assess retrospectively where their conversations have brought him, he replies that the essay on confession appears to him as pivotal. First, it addresses the question of telling the truth in autobiography, a problem of capital importance for a project of self-scrutiny like *Doubling the Point*. Second, the essay marks a transition point in the story Coetzee has been telling throughout the book: there is “a certain definiteness of outline up to the point of the essay; after that it becomes hazier, lays itself open to harder questioning from the future” (DP: 392).

Coetzee now steps down, as it were, from the level of meta-autobiographical considerations and turns to autobiographical practice. What follows is a three-pages-long, present tense, third person *autre*-biography. He looks back at himself and, through the prism of his situatedness in history and culture – that of a white South African from a milieu of anti-apartheid, powerless, financially unprivileged class – he reassesses his creative and academic achievement. He sees himself, at the beginning of his writing career, as “a socially marginal young intellectual of the late British empire” (DP: 394), who feels uprooted, alienated and disadvantaged because of his descent marked by historical complicity. A sense of complicity, experienced from early childhood, makes it impossible for him to identify with any environment and produces in him a feeling of marginality and alienness. His involvement in science and in high modernist literature with its conception of “language as self-enclosed game” (DP: 393) is a withdrawal from reality. As he puts it, “he is trying to find a capsule in which he can live, a capsule in which he need not breathe the air of the world” (DP: 393). His formalistic studies and academic research pursued in the following years, although they deepened his skepticism about the possibility of telling the truth in language, are not lost. As he admits, they “brought illuminations” that could not have been reached in any other way (DP: 394). The essay on confession, Coetzee reveals, is a turning point in his writing life. He now “sees in it a submerged dialogue between two persons”: a person that he desired to be, and a person that he then was and, perhaps, still is. The subject of the debate is “between cynicism and grace. Cynicism: the denial of any ultimate basis for values. Grace: a condition in which the truth can be told clearly, without blindness” (DP: 392). The essay that has freed him of cynicism, Coetzee declares, “marks the beginning of [his] more broadly philosophical engagement with a situation in the world” (DP: 394).

It is hard not to notice that with this avowal Coetzee comes close to the interpretative line of his oeuvre that David Attwell has proposed in the dialogues, and his self-scrutiny could also be read as an apology, a staged apology with the voice of the critic annexed as part of Coetzee's self-portrait. If that should be the case, such an apology would be deeply disappointing and would suggest that the dialogues have not made him aware of his "blind spots." But the fact that *autre*-biography closes the book, whose central concern has been the construction of the essential truth of the self in writing, points to another possibility: this auto-narrative may appear rather as yet another test of the confessional mode, driven this time by the question if confession is possible in the third person. The decade following the publication of *Doubling the Point* was to bring an answer: Coetzee's two book-length *autre*-biographies, *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002), whose status as fact or fiction is indeterminate, possess confessional intensity that neither their distancing ironic form nor dispassionate tone can obscure.

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