The importance of J. M. Coetzee in the development of twentieth-century fiction is now widely recognized. His work addresses some of the key critical issues of our time: the relationship between postmodernism and postcolonialism, the role of history in the novel and, repeatedly, the question of how the author can combine an ethical and political consciousness with a commitment to the novel as a work of fiction.

In this study, which may be used as an introduction and by those already familiar with Coetzee’s work, Dominic Head assesses Coetzee’s position as a white South African writer engaged with the legacy of colonialism. Through close readings of all the novels, Head shows how Coetzee inhabits a transitional site between Europe and Africa, and it is from this position that his more general concerns emerge. Coetzee’s engagement with the problems facing the postcolonial writer, Head argues, is always enriched by his awareness of a wider literary tradition.
J. M. COETZEE
CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN AFRICAN AND CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

Series editor: Professor Abiola Irele, Ohio State University

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DOMINIC HEAD

University of Central England
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Preface

Following the publication of his first novel in 1974, the white South African novelist J. M. Coetzee has produced, aside from his academic work and his translations, a total of seven slender novels, one every three or four yours. In terms of simple wordage this might seem a relatively modest creative output; yet the modesty is deceptive. Indeed, the importance of J. M. Coetzee to the direction of the late twentieth-century novel can scarcely be overestimated. It is signalled by the weighty questions which recur in discussions of his work: how does his writing make us reconsider our definitions of postmodernism and postcolonialism? How shall ‘history’ be imagined in novels? What does it mean for an author to pledge allegiance to the discourse of fiction (rather than the discourse of politics)? Is there a function for a literary canon? What role can literary theory play in these evaluations? And what kind of ethical stance might emerge from such intensely serious and significant investigations?

The attempts to answer these questions alert us to an as-yet-undefined site of creativity. This is the crucial issue in understanding Coetzee’s interim position in a very particular corner of postcolonial writing: the literature of the ‘post-colonizer’, which here locates a transitional site between Europe and Africa. In his collection of essays, White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa, Coetzee establishes a formulation which is to the point: ‘white writing is white only in so far as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African’ (WW, 11). His focus is on selected pre-apartheid writers of the 1920s and 1930s, but the theme of ‘European
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ideas writing themselves out in Africa’ (DP, 338–9) has a very important resonance to South Africa in the apartheid era and beyond. The sense of delay has very much to do with the racist underpinnings of apartheid, and the inevitable restrictions placed on ethnic and cultural identities: the literature that has emerged has been constrained, a ‘national’ literature only in an artificial sense, quite unable to embody a true hybridity. The peculiar problems of late-colonial and post-colonial South Africa are central concerns for Coetzee.

There is a sense in which Coetzee’s writing expresses and enacts this sense of constraint, and this can be seen as a measured and appropriate writer’s response to the trajectory of history ‘out there’. But this also signals a turning inwards, a preoccupation with specifically literary questions. Consequently, a focus for any analysis of Coetzee is how this self-reflexiveness is to be judged, given the pressing concerns of late- and now post-apartheid South Africa, which (in some quarters) are deemed to require a more obvious gesture of engagement and commitment on the part of the writer. Coetzee’s emphasis on the text and on questions of textuality, however, represents a utilization of postmodernist concerns fitted to his context. This is a considered programme of intellectual fidelity and revision, which is not only courageous, but probably visionary as well.

The focus of Coetzee’s work, not surprisingly, has ensured that the novels have received a good deal of attention from academic critics, most recently from those well-versed in post-structuralist theory: both Gayatri Spivak and Derek Attridge, for example, have produced elegant and sophisticated essays on the theoretical allusiveness of some of the later novels. In the monographs, this kind of sophisticated theoretical interpretation was pioneered by Teresa Dovey’s application of Lacan. An indispensable book is that by David Attwell, which is especially strong on Coetzee’s various intellectual sources. Susan Van-Zanten Gallagher’s study supplies invaluable information on the South African context. (Dick Penner’s book, listed in the bibliography along with the other three, is also useful.) Yet the developing sophistication of much of the criticism (which the
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novels have certainly demanded) also presents a problem:
Coetzee’s novels have a power and a resonance beyond the
concerns of academia, an impact confirmed by the many
prestigious literary awards bestowed on them. This may be to
suggest that the novels, like all very significant literary works,
operate on several levels simultaneously. The difficulty, then, is
how to bridge the gap between the surface lucidity and the
underlying complexity of Coetzee: to indicate his intellectual
importance without leaving the non-specialist behind. If this
problem is not easily resolvable, this book attempts, at least, to
counter the difficulty by concentrating on the novels them-
selves, and the unfolding reading experience they offer by
virtue of their significant themes and their formal procedures.
After the opening chapter, which focuses on the more complex
question of Coetzee’s place in contemporary writing, a separate
chapter is devoted to each of the novels. Due cognizance is also
given to the impressive and growing corpus of Coetzee criti-
cism which supplies points of reference (and contestation)
throughout the survey.

Coetzee is also an accomplished essayist: his non-fictional
work is marked by an elegant lucidity which is evident even in
his treatment of difficult and contentious issues. Indeed, the
essays cover a range of hotly debated contemporary questions,
including, for example, the nature of the modernist legacy, the
nature of colonial identity and various aspects of censorship. It
is beyond the scope of this book to offer an analysis of the non-
fiction in its own right, but reference is made to the essays (now
readily available in three separate collections) wherever they
seem to illuminate an aspect of the fiction.

If there is an ambivalence in Coetzee’s appeal to different
reading communities, the ambivalence I am registering may
also, of course, be an aspect of Coetzee’s project, and another
reason for his perceived importance. This ‘bridging’ element to
Coetzee’s own work was suggested in his Dawson Scott Mem-
orial Lecture ‘What is Realism?’, given at the PEN International
Writers’ Day at London’s Café Royal on 30 March 1996. Presenting
a fiction instead of a lecture (which incorporated a
fictionalized lecture, itself entitled ‘What is Realism?’), Coetzee
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wove together different levels of address, including critical reflection on ‘the realist illusion’, an effect which this ‘fiction-as-lecture’ itself constantly disrupted without ever destroying. This quite astonishing duality, combining an unerring control of fictional time and space with a self-consciousness which threatens it all along, is Coetzee’s defining characteristic as a novelist. It is this which enables him to allude to complex ideas within works which yet retain an elegant narrative shape. The result is a troubling and brooding resonance within finely wrought fictions which, like the characters within them, can never be finally made to yield their full significance in a reduced, extractable form.

Thanks and acknowledgements to: Abiola Irele for his helpful comments on the manuscript; to Michael Bell, Chris Nash and John Rignall at the narrative reading group, University of Warwick, for suggestions on a paper on Michael K; and to the School of English, vce, for funding remission from teaching in the second semester 1995–6.
Abbreviations

GO  Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship (University of Chicago Press, 1996)
IHC  In the Heart of the Country (1977; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982)
MP  The Master of Petersburg (London: Secker and Warburg, 1994)
Chronology

1940 Coetze born in Cape Town.
1948 Afrikaner National Party wins general election and comes to power in South Africa: the apartheid regime commences.
1949 Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (together with Immorality Act) makes marriage and sexual relations illegal across the colour line.
1950 Immorality Act; Group Areas Act (with subsequent amendments) divides urban areas into racially exclusive zones; Population Registration Act classifies people by race.
1958 H. F. Verwoerd becomes Prime Minister.
1960 Sharpeville massacre occurs at an anti-pass demonstration: police open fire on crowd outside Sharpeville police station, killing 67 Africans and wounding 186. Signals end of non-violent resistance.
1961 South Africa becomes a republic and leaves British Commonwealth. Coetzee graduates in English and Mathematics, University of Cape Town.
1963 MA awarded, University of Cape Town.
1965 Returns to academia: moves to the US, to the
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>B. J. Vorster becomes Prime Minister.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1968–71</td>
<td>Coetzee teaches at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Commences work on first novel, <em>Dusklands</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Takes up teaching position, University of Cape Town.</td>
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<td>1974</td>
<td>Publication of <em>Dusklands</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Thousands of black schoolchildren in Soweto protest against compulsory use of Afrikaans in teaching. Two students are shot dead by police resulting in nationwide protests. By 1977, 575 people are dead (official estimates).</td>
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<td>1977</td>
<td>Steve Biko arrested and killed by police. Publication of <em>In the Heart of the Country</em> (CNA Literary Award).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Vorster resigns. P.W. Botha becomes Prime Minister.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Publication of <em>Waiting for the Barbarians</em> (CNA Literary Award; James Tait Black Prize; Geoffrey Faber Award). Symbolic attacks by Umkhonto we Sizwe (military wing of the ANC) on two oil-from-coal plants. School boycott (started by Cape Town pupils).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Publication of <em>Life and Times of Michael K</em> (Booker–McConnell prize; CNA Literary Award; Prix Etranger Femina (1985)). New wave of school boycotts, which continue through 1984 and 1985.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>New constitution gives Asians and ‘Coloureds’ (not Africans) limited participation in government. Botha now state president. Coetzee becomes professor of general literature, University of Cape Town.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) suspends school boycotts.</td>
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<td>1986</td>
<td>Pass laws repealed; indefinite nationwide state of emergency proclaimed. Publication of <em>Foe</em> (Jeru-</td>
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Chronology

salem Prize (1987)). Cape Town unrest: vigilante destruction of shack settlements makes 60,000 people homeless.

1988  Publication of White Writing (essays).
1989  F. W. de Klerk succeeds Botha as state president.
1990  Release of Nelson Mandela; unbanning of ANC.
1992  Publication of Age of Iron (Sunday Express Award).
1992  Publication of Doubling the Point (essays and interviews).
1994  First multi-racial election sees the ANC sweep to power. Nelson Mandela becomes president. Publication of The Master of Petersburg.
1996  Publication of Giving Offense (essays on censorship).