

## Chapter 1

# Coetzee's life

---

Anyone familiar with Coetzee's novels knows that they are challenging, and elusive of interpretation. And what is true of the work is true of the author himself: Coetzee is a very private person, who has a reputation for being unforthcoming with interviewers. This means that the available details of Coetzee's life are sparse (and not truly verifiable). However, in a paradoxical move, he has begun a process in the latter half of his career of developing a complex form of confessional writing, in which autobiographical elements are prominent. The most obvious books, here, are the two memoirs, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997) and *Youth* (2002), the former covering some key formative experiences up to the age of thirteen, the latter pinpointing formative moments between 1959 and 1964, with an emphasis on Coetzee's experiences in London. These enrich our understanding of the author's life – or, at least his chosen self-projection – but they must also be treated with caution. As exercises in the confessional mode, they also invite reflection on this mode, and sometimes do so by encouraging the reader initially to accept at face value accounts which must then be re-evaluated. *Youth*, which was published as 'fiction', is particularly challenging in this regard.

John Maxwell Coetzee was born in Cape Town on 9 February 1940. His boyhood in the Cape Province was dominated by cultural conflicts, consequent upon his situation as an English-speaking white South African, and the social location of his schoolteacher mother, and his father, who practised intermittently as a lawyer. One interesting detail, with significance for Coetzee's literary identity, is that he was accustomed to speaking English at home, while conversing in Afrikaans with other relatives.

The pertinent features of his academic and work career can be briefly traced: he left school in 1956, and then studied English and mathematics at the University of Cape Town (BA 1960), after which he moved to England to work in computers in 1962. He stayed until 1965, working as a programmer, during which period he wrote a Master's thesis on Ford Madox Ford (MA awarded by the University of Cape Town in 1963). In 1963 he married

## 2 Coetzee's life

Philippa Jubber (1939–91), with whom he had two children, Nicolas (1966–89) and Gisela (b. 1968). (The early death of his son was clearly an influence on his novel *The Master of Petersburg* (1994).)

In 1965 Coetzee returned to academia: he moved to the USA, to the University of Texas at Austin, on a Fulbright exchange programme, where he produced his doctoral dissertation on the style of Samuel Beckett's English fiction, completed in 1969. He taught at the State University of New York at Buffalo from 1968 to 1971, during which period he worked on his first novel *Dusklands*. Coetzee's application for permanent residence in the USA was denied, and he returned to South Africa to take up a teaching position at the University of Cape Town in 1972. Following successive promotions, he became Professor of General Literature at his alma mater in 1983, and then Distinguished Professor of Literature from 1999 to 2001.

Coetzee has held various visiting professorships in the USA – at Johns Hopkins University, Harvard University, and the University of Chicago, among others. He has won many prestigious literary awards, including the Booker Prize (twice: in 1983 and 1999), the *Prix Etranger Femina* (1985) and the Jerusalem Prize (1987). His international prominence with a wider readership beyond academia was secured with the publication of *Disgrace* in 1999, and consolidated with the award of the Nobel Prize in 2003. Yet the international acclaim that greeted *Disgrace* was not matched by its reception in South Africa. The treatment of the gang rape of a white woman by black men, as a figure for an aspect of postcolonial historical process, caused a furore, and this seems to have had a bearing on Coetzee's decision to turn his back on South Africa: in 2002 he emigrated to Australia to take up an honorary research fellowship at the University of Adelaide.

There is a biting irony in this. Whereas the censorship board in the apartheid era had scarcely been troubled by Coetzee's subtle interrogations of the colonial psyche, the ruling ANC in the new South Africa was incensed by *Disgrace*, and moved to condemn its depiction of black violence, finding therein a racist perspective and the promotion of racial hatred. It is not clear whether or not Coetzee had already decided to leave South Africa; but this reception must surely have concentrated his mind.

To amplify some of these sparse details we must turn to the autobiographical elements in the writer's work, and the paradox that a very private writer has begun to expose intimate details of his life – or at least to invite speculation on these details. Formerly known as a writer who did not consider himself a public figure, someone in the public domain, he has now made 'the life', or the question of articulating the life, an aesthetic focus of his work. In relation to the first half of Coetzee's career, it seemed that the

privacy of the man, his elusiveness, was also indicative of the nature of his literary project, with its emphasis on textuality, on novels as discursive events in the world, beyond the author's controlling hand. That judgement is in need of revision now that the writing project is linked to a kind of performance of the self.

Here we must turn to those two hybrid works that inhabit the border between fiction and autobiography, *Boyhood* and *Youth*. The 'Coetzee figure' that emerges from these books is often unpleasant, even disreputable (this is especially so in *Youth*). The oddity of this confessional gesture raises – and seems intended to raise – a host of questions about the relationship between fiction, autobiography, philosophy and confession. Such questions can, in themselves, prove revealing about Coetzee's identity; but these books also contain some explanation and contextualization of the author's familiar concerns. One such is Coetzee's preoccupation with his own ethnicity.

The question of identity, as a literary as well as an ethnic matter, has proved problematic for many white South African writers, especially those who, like Coetzee, have been based in South Africa. Coetzee is not an Afrikaner, but a white South African inhabiting a very particular margin, since his background partly distances him from both Afrikaner as well as English affiliations. Yet Coetzee's own comments on his ethnic identity show him to be intensely aware of the slipperiness of his position, and of the historical guilt that connects colonial and postcolonial experience. Although he felt no affinity with contemporary Afrikaner identity in the apartheid years, Coetzee admitted that he could be branded 'Afrikaner', on the basis of historical connection, and as a way of identifying his guilt by association with the crimes committed by the whites of South Africa. Coetzee has indicated that his writing sometimes draws its validity from this sense of complicity.

In *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997) this particular issue of ethnicity, which is one of the key themes of the book, is put into context for us. Coetzee offers a series of autobiographical sketches, writing in the third person, and using the present tense, his trademark fictional mode. There is a narrow historical focus – the book traces episodes in the life of this boy from the age of ten to the age of thirteen (with some earlier recollections) – yet, if the sketches are taken at face value (and I will be suggesting a major caveat to this in due course), then a great deal about Coetzee's early years can be gleaned.

What distinguishes Coetzee's use of the present continuous tense in this book, from the uses to which it is put in his fiction, is the subject matter: a childhood memoir. This is not an obvious point about the difference between fiction and non-fiction, but an observation about the *fit* between the

4      *Coetzee's life*

treatment of childhood experience and the effects generated by the present continuous. The sense of duration (and, often, boredom) associated with childhood is aptly caught by this mode of writing. It is also a way of dignifying the truism that the child is always present in the adult: the present tense of *Boyhood* conveys that sense of the continuing importance of the formative experiences described.

The experience of growing up in the South African town of Worcester is presented as one of endurance. The young Coetzee preferred Cape Town (where the family previously lived), and hankers after life on the farm in the Karoo – the arid, semi-desert plateau in Cape Province – owned by an Afrikaner uncle, and which he associates with happy holiday memories. The austere housing estate in Worcester that is his home makes a sorry comparison.

Coetzee's father emerges from this book in a bad light; but, on reflection, is a more sympathetic figure. (This, coupled with the intense relationship between Coetzee and his mother, creates a faint Lawrentian echo.) We understand that the father loses his government job in Cape Town as 'Controller of Letting' when the Nationalists come to power, for political reasons (he is not a Nationalist supporter), and that the removal to Worcester to work as a bookkeeper for Standard Cannery (he is actually a lawyer, though has not practised since 1937) is a consequence of victimization. By the end of the book, however, the father has sunk into alcoholism, and has brought debt and disgrace upon the family, after their return to Cape Town and his failed attempt to restart his legal career.

As we have seen, a crucial aspect of Coetzee's identity, amplified in this book, is his bilingual status as both Afrikaans and English-speaking, but belonging to a family that clearly dissociates itself from the Afrikaner group. This is a form of self-exile that places them on the margins of South African life, since 'African' and 'Afrikaner' became the important poles between which the political tussle in the latter half of the twentieth century took place. Yet there is also social ambition in the parents' affiliation, and in their choice to educate Coetzee in English.

At his new school in Worcester, the young Coetzee is confronted with a question about his religion, and, coming from a family that does not practise religion, he is unable to respond appropriately. Asked, impatiently, by a teacher (and, we assume, a member of the Dutch Reformed Church) if he is 'a Christian or a Roman Catholic or a Jew', he plumps for Roman Catholic (B, p.19). This gives him extra free time in the playground, while the Christians go off to assembly, but means he is bullied (together with the Jewish boys) when the Afrikaners return. It is this kind of experience that

produces a deep antipathy to the Afrikaner identity, and a fear of being made to conform to it: 'the thought of being turned into an Afrikaans boy, with shaven head and no shoes, makes him quail. It is like being sent to prison, to a life without privacy' (B, p. 126). Even so, he discovers a facility in speaking Afrikaans in his extended family setting (associated with the freedom of his uncle's farm) that makes him feel as if 'all the complications of life seem suddenly to fall away'. Yet the childish appeal of seeming to become 'at once another person' (B, p. 125) is really of a piece with his desire for independence, and his refusal of the full implications of Afrikaner identity, which would deprive him of that crucial sense of 'privacy': 'he cannot live without privacy' (B, p. 126). There is a particular political dimension to this, and to his parents' resistance of the Afrikaans language. In response to the 'rumours that the government is going to order all schoolchildren with Afrikaans surnames to be transferred to Afrikaans classes', talked about by his parents 'in low voices', he formulates a plan: if ordered out of his English class by an inspector he will cycle home and refuse to return to school; and will 'kill himself' if his mother betrays him (B, pp. 69–70).

There are several elements in the portrayal of the young Coetzee that contribute to his sense of independence, or, the refusal to conform; and this prefigures the sense of resistance that becomes the key characteristic of the writer. One notable instance of this refusal to conform (and one instance of the book's humour) is the boy's whimsical predilection for things Russian. At the outset of the Cold War, and in a country in which communism is soon to be criminalized, this is evidently a startling and precocious preference for a young boy. His parents' disapproval does not cause him to relinquish his fascination with Russia; merely to turn it 'into a secret' (B, pp. 27–8).

An intriguing part of the memoir, already alluded to above, is the young Coetzee's deep attraction to the family farm in the Karoo, which passed to his uncle on the death of his grandfather: 'the farm is called Voëlfontein, Bird-fountain; he loves every stone of it, every bush, every blade of grass . . . it is not conceivable that another person could love the farm as he does' (B, p. 80). This formative experience was clearly an inspiration for *Life and Times of Michael K*, where the love of/identification with the farm is honed into an ethical vision. As we have seen, the freedom of Voëlfontein is associated with his facility in speaking Afrikaans; but there is no sense in which the appeal of the farm also embodies a cultural 'pull' he otherwise resists, or that the love of it is associated with an atavistic desire for possession of the land. Indeed, the particular linguistic inflection the young Coetzee associates with the farm suggests something much more positive, a

6 *Coetzee's life*

'slapdash mixture of English and Afrikaans' that is the extended family's 'common tongue when they get together' at Christmas:

It is lighter, airier than the Afrikaans they study at School, which is weighed down with idioms that are supposed to come from the *volksmond*, the people's mouth, but seem to come only from the Great Trek, lumpish nonsensical idioms about wagons and cattle and cattle-harness. (*B*, p. 81)

The family tongue is a hybrid, situated against the odious ideology otherwise associated with Afrikaner culture in *Boyhood*.

This is, of course, also the child's rose-tinted view, which is partly justified by the treatment of the 'coloured people' who work the farm, a treatment that is more equitable than the young Coetzee has observed in racial relations in Worcester. A stronger burgeoning sense of racial justice is implicit in the boy's reactions throughout. Indeed, Coetzee assigns to his younger self an understanding of historical injustice in his perception of Cape 'Coloureds', 'fathered by whites . . . upon the Hottentots'. He also knows that 'in Boland the people called Coloured are not the great-great-grandchildren of Jan van Riebeeck or any other Dutchman . . . They are Hottentots, pure and uncorrupted. Not only do they come with the land, the land comes with them, is theirs, has always been' (*B*, p. 62). In one telling episode, he is given some money to take his friends for an ice cream in a café, as a birthday treat; but the occasion is spoiled by 'the ragged Coloured children standing at the window looking in at them.' Their faces betray no 'hatred'; rather, they are 'like children at a circus, drinking in the sight, utterly absorbed, missing nothing'. Even if these children are chased away, 'it is too late, his heart is already hurt' (*B*, pp. 72–3). This is an arresting turn of phrase that successfully conveys the ambivalence of the moment, the boy's disappointment shot through with an incipient sense of guilt. It is a brilliant snapshot, the privilege being the element that simultaneously facilitates the pleasure, and sustains the inequality that undermines that pleasure. The older Coetzee is implying an awareness of this contradiction in his memory of his 'hurt' heart. And, of course, in the implied analogy with circus animals Coetzee assesses the privileged situation of himself and his friends as a kind of aberration, a form of fascinating exoticism.

The portrayal of the relationship with the mother is at the heart of this memoir: she is presented as the embodiment of maternal self-sacrifice, something the young Coetzee simultaneously desires in her, yet resents. The focus here is the contradictory and often unpleasant responses of the boy, detailed in the kind of excoriating confessional style that characterizes both

of Coetzee's memoirs. We have a sense of a boy whose self-importance and coldness are both caused by having been spoiled at his mother's hands.

In the light of Coetzee's later connections between ethics and Christianity – a form of secular appropriation – the younger Coetzee's reaction to a biblical reading from the Gospel of Luke is intriguing. The reading (Luke 24: 5–6) describes the moment when the sepulchre is found to be empty, Jesus having risen. The boy does not like to hear these verses read, because 'if he were to unblock his ears and let the words come through to him, he knows, he would have to stand on his seat and shout in triumph. He would have to make a fool of himself forever' (*B*, p. 142). In an avowed unbeliever (*B*, p. 143), it is a reaction that demands attention. It implies the sensitivity of the boy to a particular kind of sentiment; but it is also a moment that reveals the unreliability of the memoir, the childhood perspective infused with the adult sensibility.

This ambivalence inevitably colours our perception of the book as a portrait of the artist as a boy. The later memoir *Youth* gently punctures the artistic pretensions of Coetzee as a 'youth'; and in *Boyhood* there is one arresting passage that identifies his creative aspirations. Bored by the topics presented for him in composition classes – sport, road safety, highwaymen – he articulates a desire to discover a more powerful topic:

What he would write if he could . . . would be something darker, something that, once it began to flow from his pen, would spread across the page out of control, like spilt ink. Like spilt ink, like shadows racing across the face of still water, like lightning crackling across the sky. (*B*, p. 140)

The tone of this is hard to gauge. Setting aside the boyish desire to shock, or be dramatic, there is an implication of artistic potential that obviously suggests the perspective of the older Coetzee, commenting ironically on his younger self. Yet we cannot avoid taking this partly at face value; and we may do so, especially because of the way this passage echoes the final paragraph of *Foe*, where something is unleashed from Friday's mouth that implies the unstoppable and awesome power of postcolonial history. What is particularly noteworthy here is that Coetzee suggests that an aspect of that sublime/awesome discourse will be an aspect of his own writing.

Inevitably, there is a dual perspective in this kind of autobiographical recollection, the mature artist projecting backwards onto his younger self certain notions that may or may not have been present in a frame of mind that is unrecoverable. What makes this routine duality particularly problematic in Coetzee's memoir is that he cultivates it, holding it up as a stylistic



8 *Coetzee's life*

feature for the reader's attention. An early example of this is a description of the boy walking beside his mother. He considers that he 'probably looks quite normal', but reports an inner apprehension that suggests otherwise: 'he thinks of himself scuttling around her like a beetle, scuttling in fussy circles with his nose to the ground and his legs and arms pumping. In fact he can think of nothing about himself that is still. His mind in particular darts about here and there all the time' (*B*, p. 59). For a writer influenced by Kafka, the re-imagining of himself as a beetle in a family situation is arch. The description also undermines itself: the lucid 'external' view suggests a form of self-knowledge that cannot plausibly come from a mind that 'darts about . . . all the time'.

The point here is that we can detect not simply an artist's re-articulation of childhood experience, but a deliberate reminder that it is, indeed, a re-articulation. The effect is to make the idea of truth or veracity in the memoir subject to doubt, so that the emphasis of the writing is sometimes to question the memoir as a mode of writing. In this respect, *Boyhood* takes its place in Coetzee's series of problematic treatments of confessional writing. (The two novels written prior to the memoir, *Age of Iron* (1990) and *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), are the key texts.)

However, if one effect of *Boyhood* is to invite questions about the possibility of truth in autobiographical writing, questions that chime with some of Coetzee's fictional preoccupations, the memoir does still work differently. It is a form of hybrid, in which the author's fictional style is refashioned to engage with personal memory, and this makes the effects of the book very uncertain, but not necessarily less 'believable' than in a more conventional memoir. If the possibility of retrieving childhood memories is made subject to doubt, that use of the present continuous in this context makes this less relevant. As we have seen, the use of the present continuous serves to emphasize, implicitly, the continuity between child and adult, so that the memories projected backwards have a value in themselves. The focus then becomes what the *adult* makes of his formative experiences, and the way they are now woven into his narrative of 'the artist as a young boy'. In this respect, the memoir can be taken as 'reliable'.

The most obvious instance of dual perspective occurs towards the end of the book, and this is the keynote moment of the work. Coetzee here projects onto his thirteen-year-old self the ability, momentarily, to 'see the world as it really is'. In particular, the pubescent Coetzee is credited with the ability to see himself through the eyes of a passer-by, appearing no longer as 'a child, too big for that now, too big to use that excuse, yet still as stupid and self-enclosed as a child'. We can take this as an economical way for Coetzee to



establish the life-stage for his boyhood self, in the convention of a memoir written in a confessional mode. It is the following perception assigned to the young Coetzee that is particularly noteworthy, however:

In a moment like this he can see his father and his mother too, from above, without anger: not as two grey and formless weights seating themselves on his shoulders, plotting his misery day and night, but as a man and woman living dull and trouble-filled lives of their own. The sky opens, he sees the world as it is, then the sky closes and he is himself again, living the only story he will admit, the story of himself.

(B, pp. 160–1)

This is another instance of dual perspective that works in a complex way. The stagey moment of clarity is a kind of wish-fulfilment, *possible* in the boy, though it is inconsistent with the selfishness that has been more usually associated with his point of view. It is improbable, then; and the improbability serves to expose the unreliability of the memoir – and all memoirs – and the difficulty of genuine secular confession. Yet the projection back of a doubtful epiphany of empathy also serves to reveal the empathy and understanding of the adult. It is a reshaping that is indicative of the later artist's consciousness; and, paradoxically, it becomes more genuine in the later Coetzee in inverse proportion to the degree it is felt to be a fabrication in the response of the boy: the desire that it *should have been so* is felt all the more.

Coetzee's second memoir, *Youth* (2002), exhibits the same rich ambivalence as *Boyhood*, its embodiment of the same literary conundrum – how to disentangle fact from fiction – being central to its effects. Indeed, the literariness of the work is signalled in the publisher's categorization of the work as 'fiction', and by the blurb that, in contrast to the dust jacket of *Boyhood*, makes no reference to Coetzee's own life. Opportunistic marketing is one explanation for this playing down of the autobiographical element: this was Coetzee's first book since the phenomenally successful *Disgrace*, so there was a good publishing reason to tout *Youth* as a new novel. Technically, it is a companion piece to *Boyhood*, tracing a series of formative vignettes in the life of a South African student (plainly based on Coetzee's experiences) narrated from the central character's perspective, but in the third person using the present tense.

*Youth* covers the period from 1959, when Coetzee was a nineteen-year-old student in South Africa, through to 1964 when he was working in England, having left South Africa for London in 1962, in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre (1960). In his time in England Coetzee worked as a computer

10 *Coetzee's life*

programmer (then a new profession), first for International Business Machines (IBM), and then for the British firm International Computers. He also researched and wrote his Master's thesis on Ford Madox Ford, which was actually awarded in 1963, though there is no indication of the success of the thesis in *Youth*. The parents have little prominence or significance in this work. This is chiefly for the obvious reason that the youthful Coetzee in this portrayal has left home; and his determination to cast off the burden of his South African identity necessarily involves a rejection of parental values. Even so, it is interesting to note how the implied sympathy for the father in *Boyhood* is entirely absent from *Youth*. The brief mention of the father brings only the fear of an adverse genetic inheritance, 'the strain of fecklessness' (Y, p. 122). Correspondence from his mother simply inspires astonishment that she has not understood his desire to avoid 'contact with South Africans' (Y, p. 125).

There are, however, particular literary echoes in the title that signal the brand of self-consciousness that governs the work, and which makes plausible the publisher's categorization of the book as 'fiction'. At first glance, it is Tolstoy's *Youth* that seems the obvious point of reference: like Coetzee's book, Tolstoy's is based on the author's experiences and forms part of a sequence (a trilogy in Tolstoy's case). Tolstoy, like Coetzee, presents his earlier self in an unfavourable light, which makes this an important antecedent.

It is the other intertext, however, that may reveal a still more intriguing connection, in this case as a form of counterpoint. Conrad's short story 'Youth' is evidently evoked by Coetzee's choice of title, and the Conrad piece offers an ironic contrast to the purport of Coetzee's project. In 'Youth', Marlow (whose voyages resemble Conrad's own) tells the tale of his 'first voyage to the East', which is also his 'first voyage as second mate' ('Youth', *Heart of Darkness* and *The End of the Tether*, Collected Edition (London: Dent, 1967), p. 4). It is a tale of heroic elemental struggles, first with a leaky vessel in stormy seas, and then with a cargo fire and explosion that eventually sinks the ill-fated craft. Marlow's youthful verve, fascination with the idea of the exotic East, and infatuation with the romance of the sea, are all proof against the hardships and disappointments of the voyage. Marlow reflects on the appeal of this formative experience, where burgeoning personal responsibility and the encounter with an exotic other come together, a feeling encapsulated in the moment when he first encountered 'the East', in the form of a verdant bay, glittering sands and a crowded jetty: 'And this is all that is left of it! Only a moment; a moment of strength, of romance, of glamour – of youth!' (p. 42). The feeling, conditioned by the sense of