

Coetzee's Siberian Wastes

Jim Davidson

J.M. Coetzee

Youth

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IN *YOUTH*, the South African novelist J.M. Coetzee (who has recently taken to the Adelaide Hills) continues the project he began some years ago with *Boyhood*. We are told by the publishers that this is a novel; indeed, the use of the third person throughout makes this plausible. But there is little doubt that it is autobiographical, if not autobiography; if it is a novel, then the claim resides essentially in its being an exploration of mood and feeling, rather than external events — with perhaps an occasional fictional elaboration. Whatever the case, Coetzee is intent on tracking the Siberian wastes of himself.

This is done with singular ruthlessness as the central character struggles to find self-realisation. Determined to stand alone at the age of nineteen — self-supporting, scornful of family, at odds with South Africa (while not being at all political) — he constantly interrogates everything he does, or is about to do, and lurches into a compensatory passivity. In Cape Town, an older, more experienced woman moves in on him — on rather than with, since 'he can't remember inviting her; he has merely failed to resist'. For a time, until he finds himself falling behind in the class, he is attracted by the purity of mathematics. He will be an artist, he decides, a poet. But he is also fatalistic: destiny is to reveal itself, in part through experience, whatever that may entail. Art, if necessary, must come out of the contemptible side of himself. It has plenty of opportunity. In Cape Town, an unenthusiastic coupling results in the girl having an abortion, which she has to arrange and pay for herself. In London, he effects a particularly bloody deflowering and, although the girl is a close friend of his cousin, cannot stir himself to make a phone call after the event.

'Misery is his element,' we are told. If it were to be abolished, he would not know what to do with himself. Yet, from each bout of it, Coetzee's character does not emerge purified or confirmed. 'Some of us are not built for fun,' he reflects ruefully. Throughout the book there is often a chill, Calvinistic disapproval. A native passivity and a sense of destiny too easily combine to generate contempt. He disapproves of dancing, believing that, if it is a metaphor for sex, then why don't people just get on with it? Nor is he happy

about flirting, since he has no talent for it. At one point, feeling sexually blocked, he tries homosexuality and, since he fails at it, declares it a game for losers.

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Coetzee was not the first colonial (or post-colonial) to feel that London might provide the solution. (Nor will he be the last.) Peter Conrad, at the other end of the 1960s, famously dated the moment he came alive from his first walk across Westminster Bridge. For the character in *Youth*, it is rather similar — without, of course, that moment of epiphany. Just as Conrad had felt incomplete in Tasmania, Coetzee was hardly present in South Africa: there is a handsome black milkman in this book to represent broader issues, and a good account of the impact of a stream of silent black marchers at the time of Sharpeville; little else. Indeed, the young Coetzee thinks of himself as ‘northern’, so much so that later he thinks of living in Stockholm; yet civilisation for him is essentially an Anglo-French affair. There are three cities, he decides, where life can be lived intensely: London, Paris and, perhaps, Vienna.

Whereas Conrad felt at most something like a changeling, a child beyond the comprehension of his parents, Coetzee’s character has had an altogether more difficult upbringing. This was the subject of *Boyhood*, the earlier autobiographical novel. There we saw the cipher of a father, annihilated by being discarded by the public service on the Nationalist rise to power, and a smothering mother. An obligatory Afrikaans education also sent the character scuttling to Catholicism or to the idea of Russia — exotic markers of difference in a dreary country town. But the intense desire to leave all this totally behind has leached him. It means that, while he has an

immense desire to be remade, and hopes that London will do the job for him, in fact his personal resources are too meagre to provide the necessary basis.

Inevitably, England disappoints. The place is not serious enough for him, too given to a witticism or a sneer when it comes to ideas. And when it comes to presenting himself as a trendy young man, he cannot quite do it, since he finds the prevailing style with its narrow, black trousers, pointed shoes and tight jackets to be too ‘Latin’. He consoles himself with a string of loveless affairs and, for a time, works with IBM; but gradually he feels more and more estranged from his creative self, and throws in the towel. He has also been working on a thesis on Ford Madox Ford, and becomes increasingly disillusioned with that. There are days when he sits in his room and talks to no one; days where the S in his diary indicates silence.

For a time, his most intense fantasies centre on film stars such as Monica Vitti; perhaps one day she will miraculously appear at his door. Later his hopes broaden out, to some woman in a crowd who will miraculously come forward and claim him, releasing him into love — miraculously vanishing each morning when her work is done, leaving his creative juices free to flow and to produce some spirited poetry. Sex and art, he believes, are inextricably linked, and, in his Wagnerian way, he believes that there must be some Senta figure only too pleased to be touched by the divine fire of his creativity, who will offer redemption in return. By the end of the book, he has at least realised — and it is a healthy dose of realism for someone who has not yet produced — that if some woman does come to love him, it will be because they have loved his work first.

Towards the end of *Youth*, he becomes a computer programmer, based outside London. Absorbed in his work, he experiences the end of yearning; more alarmingly, it is also the end of his poetry writing. He strikes up a somewhat unsatisfactory friendship with another programmer, an Indian, infinitely more adrift than he and incapable of looking after himself. Ganapathy is a warning. He begins to realise that he has been suffering from fear of failure; but redemption is close at hand. In the British Library, while stalled on Ford Madox Ford, he has been prompted to look at old travellers’ accounts of the Cape. It is a characteristically indirect way of coming to terms with his origins.

In the end, he decides to rebuild South Africa from the ground up, in a kind of virtual world of his own. To do this, he realises that he will have to unlearn, as well as learn, so that he can re-create the past authentically, in such a way that people will take his fabrication for real. He is now launched; Coetzee’s first novel, *Dusklands*, was such a book. Since then, of course, he has tackled contemporary themes, never more brilliantly than in *Disgrace*. The present work is different again: a meticulous analysis of vulnerability, and of negative capabilities. Fearfully honest, it is at once a depressing and a compelling read.