J. M. Coetzee, *Summertime* (Knopf, 2009)

This is an age when no-one is blessed and reasonable and most are mad and unhappy. The task is to be unhappy and reasonable.

Alisdair MacIntyre (1977)

Reading *Summertime* is like playing a board game with the man who not only invented it but thought of all the moves you might possibly make at the same moment; the game in this case being to join with the narrator-interviewer’s pursuit of the real John Coetzee, the book’s apparent subject. Which version of this Coetzee bears the closest relation to the truth about him? Which sequence of sentences comes closest to the heart of him, the core of his identity? What relation does ‘John Coetzee’ bear to the J.M. Coetzee whose name appears on the dust jacket, and *that* J.M. to the prize-winning author currently resident in the Adelaide Hills?

But it is possible, even in taking this first modest move in lockstep with the narrator, that we already relinquish a more interesting possibility. The *real* John Coetzee, after all, cannot exist except as the point of investigation in a novel whose author bears a similar name. In the case of an author so invested in the ways accounts of oneself to oneself may fight each other to a standstill, there may be constraints on interpretation in suspending disbelief which Coleridge himself did not foresee. *Caveat lector.*

How, then, might *Summertime* be taken if not as a teasing out of the relation between various Coetzees and their spokespersons?

As it was with *Disgrace*, the nub of *Summertime* lies, not with the relation of its author with projections of him, but of the writer’s potential selves with that country, South Africa, which gives him permission, of a sort, to live. It is not the by now familiar South Africa of the apartheid era we find at the heart of this novel, but South Africa as exemplary, in its struggles against itself, of that broad swathe of contemporary civilization which thinks of itself as developed, or aspires to that as yet imaginary excellence.

This can be illustrated by noting a shift between the South Africa that appears in the first section of the novel (‘Notebooks 1972-75’) with the South Africa of the remainder of the novel. The transformation begins immediately after the Notebooks, in the book’s second chapter (‘Julia’), where most references to country are localised and personalised and the background of national trauma serves as auxiliary to a placement of character. The following passage is typical:

‘Yes.’ Then he said: ‘Do you live around here?’
‘Further out,’ I replied. ‘Beyond Constantiaberg. In the bush.’

It was a joke, the kind of little joke that passed between white South Africans in those days. Because of course it wasn’t true that I lived in the bush. The only people who lived in the bush, the real bush, were blacks. What he was meant to understand was that I lived in one of the new developments

carved out of the ancestral bush of the Cape Peninsula. (24)

Compare this with the following passage, from the Notebooks, which is typical of that section in setting the meditation on South Africa more universally:

So they come out, week after week, these tales from the borderlands, murders followed by bland denials. He reads the reports and feels soiled. So this is what he has come back to! Yet where in the world can one hide where one will not feel soiled? Would he feel any cleaner in the snows of Sweden, reading at a distance about his people and their latest pranks?

How to escape the filth: not a new question. An old rat-question that will not let go, that leaves its nasty, suppurating wound. (4)

It is this passage, and others like it, which provides the key, struck early, and in which, I suggest, all of Summertime should be heard, and against which the precise settings appropriate to a particular character should be allowed to register as minor elaborations on a major theme. The novel as a whole is part of Coetzee’s continuing meditation on responsibility in the face of moral disorder, and the action here arises, as it often does for him, not in consequence of what one character does or has done to them, but from speculation about the nature of man in society.

John Coetzee, the character in Summertime – like his creator, we may conjecture – wants to offer a South Africa to some degree honestly reflected in those fragments of the person the novel discloses. Though his narrator might want to make him cohere, that can’t be allowed, because the country itself does not cohere at this point in its history, and neither does the world to whose decadence South Africa makes its particular contribution.

A word, finally, about the style of this book, which probably does take us as close to the man as any hermeneutic plod or soft shoe shuffle. Coetzee – the author who resides on the outskirts of Adelaide – has at times been characterized as a magister ludi whose engagements with the worlds he describes are deficient in passion. But he seems to this reader, on the contrary, to be an unusually impassioned writer who brings an insistent close control against feelings which might otherwise threaten equilibrium. He keeps an unerring balance in expression, with nothing about it of an eighteenth-century circumscribed swagger, and much of a tight-lipped twentieth century defensive correctness, and in this, though little else, I would argue, Coetzee is a modernist writer. He is extraordinary in bringing muted good manners to bear in reporting the deepest, and the most disturbing, of emotions. Nothing is ever to excess in his prose. Everything is, always, in place. Coetzee’s characteristic cast – the comedy of the image is dwarfed by the admiration it brings with it – is more that of a corseted Gorky than a Camus, or an Orwell, doing a CSI Cold Case anatomy on civilization’s corpse.

Once take the measure of this carefully maintained balance between a sense of propriety and those slewing-across-the-landscape drives which might move us on but move us, also, towards chaos (I suspect that the careful construction of sentences is
associated in this writer's mind with civil society itself), and the shadows of *Summertime* grow more interestingly dark, its gradations of light, city and veldt, more stunning and more harsh, perhaps especially so for an Australian witnessing what appears in recent decades to be a flirting with prejudices and easygoing crudities of the sort that held South Africa in thrall for so many long years.

And the quotation from MacIntyre, at the head of this review? This side of *Summertime* and *Disgrace*, it will probably always conjure Coetzee, whose mien as writer the passage seems to describe very well. Whether or not this is *really* the real Coetzee is a question it would be unwise to hound to a doubtless indefinite conclusion.

Robert Lumsden