

Jane Poyner, *J.M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship* (Ashgate, 2009)

English academic Jane Poyner edited an important collection of essays under the title *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual* (Ohio University Press, 2006), and she has now written a monograph dealing with Coetzee's staging of

the paradox of postcolonial authorship: whilst striving symbolically to bring the stories of the marginal and the oppressed to light, stories that heretofore have been suppressed or silenced by oppressive regimes, writers of conscience or conscience-stricken writers risk re-imposing the very authority they seek to challenge. (2)

Poyner's work is theoretically literate and complex, very much addressed to fellow academics and advanced students. Her prose is dense and sometimes convoluted and, when she quotes from him, it can suffer in comparison with Coetzee's lucidity (always a hazard in writing about such a masterly author). She moves through the first eight novels, chapter by chapter, treating themes such as madness, marginality, 'bodying forth the other', censorship, and reconciliation. The final chapter, 'Coetzee's Acts of Genre in the Later Works', deals more briefly with *The Lives of Animals*, *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year*. Puzzlingly for a work which is concerned with the relationship between author, narrator and subject, she does not include *Boyhood* or *Youth* in her study.

Especially in the first half of the book, the dependence on the demigods of European theory occasionally seems excessive. In her discussion of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Poyner writes, 'Through a Foucauldian lens, ambivalence in *Barbarians*, including the ambivalent discourse of colonialism and a Janus-faced modernity, lays bare the madness of reason and the "civilizing" mission' (64). I would have thought that any intelligent reader of this novel could have discerned that without needing Foucault's help. Frantz Fanon is continually invoked. Interestingly, a scan of the indexes of all Coetzee's own non-fiction reveals no references to Fanon whatsoever. It may be my own personal prejudice, but I found the chapter on *Age of Iron*, which refers to George Orwell's writings on political language, more satisfying. Poyner often draws on Coetzee's own critical and theoretical writing to advantage. In fact, my impression is that overall she quotes more from secondary sources than the novels themselves. When she does allow herself to look closely at the works without mediation, however, she proves to be an expert reader. There is an excellent linguistic examination of the burrow scene in *Life & Times of Michael K*, for example, showing how Coetzee has used 'a peculiar and varied verb scheme and temporal clauses that emphasize a change in pace' to disrupt the sense of linear time (81).

There are a few instances of misreading. Marilyn's erotic photograph was not published in *Playboy Magazine* (26); it was an amateurish pose on 'a black satin Playboy sheet.'¹ A quotation from Stephen Watson's interview with Coetzee is

¹ J.M. Coetzee, *Dusklands* (New York: Penguin, 1985) 13.

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apparently mangled by coming by way of an intermediary text: when asked who Magda and Jacobus Coetzee were, Coetzee actually responded, hesitantly, 'I ... figures in books,'² rather than 'I-figures in books' as Poyner has it (42). A more characteristic tendency is over-reading, perhaps an occupational hazard of this kind of intense scrutiny. Is Klein-Anna in *In the Heart of the Country* really named for Anna Freud and Melanie Klein? Magda's adoption of the prefix 'klein' may indeed be an instance of her objectification of the other (45), but surely the name itself just means 'Little Anna', to distinguish her from another Anna in the household. In the Magistrate's dreams in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, snow is said to connote 'inhospitability [and] impermanence' (63). Perhaps, but a more usual cultural meaning of snow is purity. In at least one instance, Poyner appears to ignore the possibility of development of Coetzee's attitudes over time. With reference to Elizabeth Costello's abhorrence of the violence in Paul West's novel *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*, she writes,

The disjunction between Costello and Coetzee on the problem of representing the obscene and violent in fiction ... is strikingly apparent: we only have to think of Eugene Dawn's photographs in *Dusklands*, the scenes of torture in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the mutilation of Friday in *Foe*, the murder of Bheki ... in *Age of Iron* or the rape of Lucy in *Disgrace*, to see that Coetzee is a novelist more than familiar with representing acts of inhumanity, even, in the case of *Dusklands* and *Barbarians*, in the most stomach-churningly intimate detail. (173)

As Poyner herself points out, however, the later works avoid the 'stomach-churningly intimate detail' and use instead the power of suggestion, avoiding the pornographic detail which Costello also deprecates 'in her old age' (172).

But there is a lot to admire in this solid and intricate work of scholarship. Poyner undercuts some of her own more contentious readings by pointing out that 'typically his novels negate the very allegorical readings they solicit' (142), and concludes that 'Coetzee's fiction is too complex to be reduced to single planes of signification or straightforward allegory' (184). Through a detailed analysis of the meaning of postcolonial authorship and an often subtle interrogation of postcolonial orthodoxy, Poyner has made a significant contribution to Coetzee scholarship.

Gillian Dooley

² Stephen Watson, 'Speaking: J.M. Coetzee,' *Speak* May/June 1978, 24.

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