Writing Self as Other: J. M. Coetzee's "life writing" in *Scenes from Provincial Life*[1]

Sue Kossew

Abstract J. M. Coetzee's trilogy of fictionalized memoirs, or "Scenes from Provincial Life" as he has subtitled them, provides readers with a quirky and peculiarly Coetzee-like perspective on the genre of autobiography. This paper will situate this new work within both Coetzee's own elusive "life writing" (in the form of the previous two volumes) and the wider literary genre of memoir. What does it mean, for example, to look back from both a geographical and historical distance to a time when a now-famous and much-awarded literary figure was at the beginning of his literary career? And if, as Coetzee has suggested, this is the "third and last instalment" of his South African years, what insights (if any) does it afford us into his current thinking? Literary techniques such as the blurring of narrative boundaries between the biographical and autobiographical subject and the "betrayal" of self and others that is always part of writing a memoir draw attention, as other "late works" by Coetzee have done, to further exploration of the question of "who speaks" in any literary work. This teasing textual instability and the crossing of narrative borders and genres have increasingly become features of Coetzee's later works.
Key words Coetzee; writing self; Other; life writing; fictionalized memoirs

Author **Sue Kossew** is Professor of English at Monash University in Melbourne and current Head of the School of English, Communications and Performance Studies. She has published extensively on the work of J. M. Coetzee and on South African and Australian literatures. Her books include *Writing Woman, Writing Place: Contemporary Australian and South African Fiction*; *Critical Essays in World Literature: J. M. Coetzee* edited and with Introduction by Sue Kossew; *Pen and Power: A Post-colonial Reading of J. M. Coetzee and André Brink*. Her most recent edited book is *Lighting Dark Places: Essays on Kate Grenville* and she has co-edited a new collection of essays on J. M. Coetzee entitled *Strong Opinions: J. M. Coetzee and the Authority of Contemporary Fiction*. Email: sue. kossew@ monash. edu

J. M. Coetzee's trilogy of fictionalized memoirs, or "Scenes from Provincial Life" as he has subtitled them, provides readers with a quirky and peculiarly Coetzee-like perspective on the genre of autobiography. While *Boyhood* (1997) was published with the subtitle, "Scenes from Provincial Life," *Youth* (2002) did not have this subtitle at the time of publication, although it was clearly the next stage in the series of auto-

biographical texts by Coetzee.[2] Most recently, the dust jacket notes of *Summertime* suggest that it "completes the majestic trilogy of fictionalized memoir begun with *Boyhood* and *Youth*" and Coetzee has referred to it as the "third installment" of "Scenes from Provincial Life." While some reviewers were confused as to the genre of *Youth* in particular, it is clear that these three texts form a continuum of Coetzee's life-writing or, as David Attwell puts it, a "life-of-writing" ("Estrangements" 237). This most recent text, *Summertime*, is narrated by a "biographer" supposedly after Coetzee's death. Covering the years 1972 – 77 of the writer's life, and comprising interviews with people who apparently knew the writer, this third volume is even more distanced from the subject of the memoirs than were the previous two, narrated as they were in the third person. Literary techniques such as the blurring of narrative boundaries between the biographical and autobiographical subject and the "betrayal" of self and others that inevitably form part of writing a memoir draw attention in this text, as other texts by Coetzee have done, to further exploration of the question of "who speaks" in any literary work. This teasing textual instability and the crossing of narrative borders and genres have increasingly become features of Coetzee's later works.

This paper will consider *Summertime* both within Coetzee's own elusive "life writing" (alongside the previous two "memoirs") and in the context of his own critical writing on autobiography. In particular, it will suggest that Coetzee's writing of the self as other obsessively draws attention to the generic conventions of writing a life and to the ethical implications of such writing. In doing so, it exposes the impossibility of representing "truth" in any genre, whether history, fiction or life-writing.

Throughout his fictional oeuvre, and in his commentaries on writing, Coetzee has scrupulously insisted on the constructed discursive nature of both fiction and history, or what is usually delineated as either imaginative or factual writing. He has drawn attention to the notion that "everything you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it" ("Interview" 17). In addition, he has suggested in an interview with David Attwell that "all autobiography is story-telling, all writing is autobiography" (Doubling 391). At the heart of his concern with discourses of self is the notion of "truth." Indeed, his inaugural Professorial lecture at the University of Cape Town in 1984 was entitled "Truth in Autobiography," signaling the longstanding and ongoing importance of this issue to Coetzee. In this lecture, he considers Rousseau's autobiographical text *Confessions* in terms of what he terms "the cost of telling the truth" (4). He identifies Rousseau's own autobiographical mode as that of making the truth rather than finding and telling the truth; not just representing the past but also representing the "present in which you wrestle to explain to yourself what it was that really happened that day" (4). The resulting account "may be full of gaps and evasion" but at least represents the mind trying to understand itself. In a post-Dostoevskyian world, however, even such self-questioning "merely lands one in an endless regression" (4). It is clear that this lecture contains the seeds of the argument Coetzee presents in more detailed form in his seminal essay, "Confession and Double Thoughts."[3]

If all writing is a form of writing the self, it may be assumed that there is a certain truth-value in all writing. Yet Coetzee distinguishes between the "personal narra-

tive" of autobiography and narrative fiction by the intentionality of truth-telling on the part of the writer as well as by the readers' assumptions of "certain standards of truthfulness" when reading an autobiography. Thus he suggests that autobiography has the intention to be "a kind of history rather than a kind of fiction."[4] However, he points out that any "verifiability" to which autobiographical narratives may be subject is limited as only their author is able to vouch for their reliability. He continues, in the same piece:

> For that reason, the element of trust on the part of the reader has to be strong: there has to be a tacit understanding, a pact, between autobiographer and reader that the truth is being told.
>
> Such a pact is, I would guess, rarely observed to the full…There may be actions or thoughts which he [the writer] feels it is simply too shameful to make public, or which he feels could destroy the reader's good opinion of him…There may be things he simply does not understand about himself, or has forgotten, or suppressed. (12)

Citing Freud's paper entitled "Therapy Terminable and Interminable," Coetzee suggests that autobiography is "bound up with soul-searching and the confession of sins." As such, its ultimate reader is God from whom there can be no secrets. Thus, he suggests, following Freud, any story about the self will have within it a mixture of "historical" and "poetic" truth, resulting in a "fiction of the truth" (12). This seemingly paradoxical notion informs the narrational strategies of all three of his fictionalized autobiographies in a process that Frank Kermode, in his recent review of *Summertime*, has labeled "fictioneering" (the term "fictioneer" is used by Coetzee's fictional biographer in *Summertime*).[5]

Most obviously, it is the use of the third person and the present tense in the first two volumes of Coetzee's "memoirs" that engaged the attention of reviewers, critics and readers. For example, in a review entitled "Third Person Singular", William Deresiewicz in the *New York Times* calls the deployment of a third-person narrative perspective and of the present tense "bizarre choices" for a writer of a life, signaling that Coetzee has "turned his back on the entire autobiographical tradition" (6). As Margaret Lenta points out, though, this is clearly not the case, as numerous other memoirs have been written both in the third person and in the present tense.[6] For Lenta, Coetzee's use of the third person, which converts autobiography to autrebiography, has a number of writerly and readerly effects including "the apparent separation of narrator from embryo artist, the love-hate relationship of narrator and reader with protagonist, [and] the remoteness in time" (168). She continues:

> Free indirect discourse, borrowing for the most part from the thought habits and vocabulary of the protagonist, but capable of moving into those of his associates or of a narrator, is the effective substitute for what in a more conventional account would be the first person. (168)

It is particularly appropriate, Lenta argues, that this artist-figure (most particularly figured in *Youth*) who is self-absorbed, lonely, proud and uncompromising, should be constructed through the narration as separate, distant and different from the author/narrator. This is narrating the self as other, or autrebiography, a term Coetzee himself introduces in an interview with David Attwell (Doubling 394). This perspective of otherness, however, does not just produce a distancing effect: as Dirk Klopper points out, these narrative devices of third-person and present-tense narration construct a "contradictory simultaneity of intimacy and distance, directness of observation and emotional detachment, access to the textured impressions of consciousness and its ironic displacement" (24).[7]

For both Lenta and Hermione Lee, it is James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that provides a close comparison with these two Coetzee memoirs. Lee suggests that Coetzee is "even harsher towards his younger self than Joyce is to Stephen's high aspirations" and that *Youth* is "the ultimate alienated and alienating autobiography; not an inward exploration, or an ethical indictment of the author/subject, but a self-parody" (15). The self-deceptiveness of any seemingly truth-telling act exposed and addressed in these two volumes returns one to the issue of "double thoughts" in the confessional mode. For, as Coetzee points out in his essay on confession, "the only sure truth in autobiography is that one's self-interest will be located at one's blind spot" (Doubling 392). Thus, for Coetzee, it is likely that "getting to the core of yourself may not be feasible, that perhaps the best you can hope for will not be the history of yourself but a story about yourself, a story that will not be the truth but may have some truth-value" ("Fictions" 12). By using narrative strategies that draw attention to the constructed nature of writing a life, then, and to the impossibility of "sincerity" or "authenticity" (words he uses in relation to Rousseau's *Confessions*), Coetzee mobilizes a self-referential autobiographical mode that holds out the promise of intimacy and revelation, and occasionally approaches it, while simultaneously keeping the self at arm's length.

Thematically, the notion of being a provincial ("Scenes from Provincial Life") is inevitably linked to Coetzee's apartheid-era South African identity. This sub-title itself could ambiguously echo William Cooper's little-known 1950s autobiographical trilogy (*Scenes from Provincial Life*, *Scenes from Metropolitan Life*, and *Scenes from Married Life*, and its sequels, *Scenes from Later Life* and *Scenes from Death and Life*) or Honoré de Balzac's *Scenes from Provincial Life*, one section of his *Comédie Humaine*. Clearly there is some reference, too, to Tolstoy's fictionalized autobiographical trilogy, *Childhood* (1852), *Boyhood* (1854) and *Youth* (1856).[8] The provincialism of *Boyhood* lies both in the physical isolation of its setting in a new housing estate in the town of Worcester ("between the railway line and the National Road" 1) and in its protagonist's uncertain identity: as neither English nor Afrikaner South African, as of the farm but not on the farm, as an outsider shut out of the comfort of belonging to a designated group in his own motherland. In *Youth* it is the painful and shameful nature of his South Africanness ("like an albatross around his neck" 101) as well as his apparent sexual ineptitude that mark him as a provincial: a colonial "other" in "swinging" London of the 1960s. *Summertime* presents the shame of his enforced re-

turn to the provincialism of South Africa having failed to secure a green card in the United States, a return from the relative freedom of living "overseas" to a place of restriction from which he has grown apart and a return to living with his father in unwanted domestic intimacy.

If, for Coetzee, "double thoughts" and self-interest are inevitably linked to the confessional mode as explicated in the "Confession and Double Thoughts" essay, betrayal of the self and others is an inevitable aspect of autobiography as, indeed, of all writing. As one critic has pointed out, Coetzee's "cynical ethics of the self" produces a "self in Coetzee's fiction [that] is irredeemably self-interested, fails to transcend itself to engage with the other as other and, in effect, is caught in an interpersonal aporia between self and other" (Yeoh 345). There are many examples of how this sense of betrayal is played out in Coetzee's life-writing trilogy, both in his representation of interpersonal relationships and in the very practice of writing the self and others.

Boyhood begins with betrayal. The ten-year-old narrator tells of his mother's desire to escape the confines of their house on a newly-built bleak housing estate outside the town of Worcester — a "restlessness" he shares with her — by buying a bicycle. Her initially fruitless attempts to ride the heavy bicycle are met with ridicule by the narrator's father: "Women do not ride bicycles, he says" (*Boyhood* 3). Replicating the child's logic, the narrator tells of how he "begins to waver" in his support of his mother's cycling as she struggles to learn to ride, asking "What if his father is right?... perhaps women are indeed not supposed to ride bicycles" (3). From that point, it is only a matter of a paragraph until "His heart turns against her. That evening he joins in with his father's jeering. He is well aware what a betrayal this is. Now his mother is all alone" (3). The childish notion of his taking sides, ganging up with the men against the woman to keep her in her place, is counterbalanced by a sophisticated awareness of the way this behavior has "defeated" her and that he "must bear part of the blame." The betrayal of his mother continues with his keeping his life at school "a tight secret" from her, despite his awareness of her strong need to protect him. Similarly, his rages against his mother and the "torrents of scorn he pours upon her", conduct that is kept "a careful secret from the outside world" (13), form part of a self-acknowledged pattern of abusive behavior. By conceding that this turning-away from his mother reinforces that he "belongs with the men," he is showing a consciousness of gender roles and their Freudian implications well beyond his years. The revelation of this previously closely-guarded secret of his "shameful" behavior to the reader comes close to the confessional mode that Coetzee has identified as an inevitable element in autobiography.

Similarly, he shows an awareness of the painful nature of his strong emotional attachment to his father's family's farm. While "confessing" through his life-writing his fierce love for the farm, he is also aware of it as a source of contention in the tug-of-war between his parents and thus of the need to keep it secret. Thus, "he cannot talk about his love [for the farm]···because confessing to it would be a betrayal of his mother···not only because she too comes from a farm, a rival farm···but because she is not truly welcome on this farm" (80). The idea that places themselves can lie at

the heart of both belonging and contestation is played out in the text both in the context of his parents' rival family backgrounds, as in this quotation, and also in the context of apartheid South Africa, where "his people" are "uneasy guest[s]" (79). His instinctive awareness that "one day the farm will be wholly gone, wholly lost" and that he is already "grieving at that loss" (80) signals a distinctly unchildlike perspective. Thus, the theme of betrayal is linked not just to his fluctuating loyalties to his parents ("He is her son, not his father's son" 79) but to the wider issue of disputed national belonging. It is also, inevitably, located on the site of the body. The narrator, undergoing the changes to his body that signal adolescence, "feels like a crab pulled out of its shell, pink and wounded and obscene" (151). Betrayed by his own body, the writing self, the thirteen-year-old boy of Boyhood's ending, turns to the life of the mind, taking on responsibility for being the only one to "do the thinking" (166). It is he who has to keep in his head "all the books, all the people, all the stories" for, if he does not remember them, "who will?" (166). The duality of this heavy writerly responsibility coupled with the awareness of the inevitability of betrayal through writing ends this first installment of the life-of-writing and points the way to the second installment.

Indeed, betrayal of women and the sense of his leading a "double life" in which he has to bear the "burden of imposture" (13) that often takes the form of an excruciating self-consciousness extends from *Boyhood* into *Youth*. It is the genre of the memoir that enables the double life to be exposed, the secrets and silences of his troubled family life evoked so painfully in *Boyhood* relentlessly returned to in *Youth*. The betrayals in *Youth* are twofold and linked: the floundering of his quest for poetic creativity and the failure of his sexual encounters. John, the "he" of the text, is sure that he is destined to be a writer but is instead working for IBM, desperately trying to "burn with the sacred fire of art" (*Youth* 66) while living out a mundane and unfulfilling daily life and keeping secret his desire to become a poet. If, as "everyone says," "sex and creativity go together," and if women instinctively locate "the fire that burns in the artist" (66), he believes that it is through sex that he may be able to access this creative spark. However, he is unable to attract attention from any English girls on the train, despite his ostentatious flourishing of various books of poetry (72), attributing this to their awareness of his "colonial gaucherie" (71). The sexual, and indeed social, encounters he does have are marked by a coldness in his own responses, a lack of reciprocity that he attributes to his own "meanness" and "poverty of spirit," what amounts in his estimation to a "moral sickness" (95). Yet, amusingly and ironically, in tendering his notice at IBM, he cites lack of friendships as one of the reasons for his resignation.

His inability to escape his provincial South Africanness (his first prose story is, for him, disappointingly set in South Africa, a "handicap" that he would prefer to leave behind (62)), is a failure of his programmatic plan of "turning himself into a different person that began when he was fifteen" (98) and that will not end, he asserts, until "all memory of the family and the country he left behind is extinguished" (98). Yet he is still a foreigner in London: "Not in a month of Sundays would Londoners take him for the real thing" (102). His romantic notion of being "remade" in

London and of getting rid of his "old self" to reveal a "new, true, passionate self" (111) is, of course, itself couched in the language of fiction, revealing through ironic distancing the naiveté of the narrator. By the end, though, he believes he is "on his way to becoming a proper Londoner" (113) by becoming emotionally hardened as a result of his ongoing misery. But he also experiences a rare moment of positive and even transcendent belonging, transformed by a moment of "ecstatic unity" with the green earth on Hampstead Heath (117). Even this, however, is couched in Lawrentian language that signals the bad faith of self-conscious romanticism. The stain of his identity, like the stain of Marianne's blood on his mattress, can be hidden for a while but not for long.

His own reflections on his writing self and his fear of the "confrontation with the blank page" (166) that stands for the failure of his poetic ambitions are confronted in his contradictory attempts to come to terms with the shame of his "caddish behaviour" (130) towards Marianne. While admitting to himself his dishonourable behavior, he is both seeking to punish himself and to fit the episode "into the story of his life that he tells himself" (130). He can only hope that the story "will not get out" (130) but is humiliated by his cousin's letter that accuses him of behaving badly. He recognizes the bad faith of his excuse that an "artist must taste all experience, from the noblest to the most degraded" (164) in order to justify himself, as well as the sophistry of the paradox that the poet needs to tell self-justificatory lies in order to experience "moral squalor." In this self-recognition of an impasse that is at once personal and writerly, the text draws towards an ending with the 24-year-old John still awaiting a visit from destiny: "he would rather be bad than boring, has no respect for a person who would rather be bad than boring, and no respect either for the cleverness of being able to put his dilemma neatly into words" (165). This paradox is one that "goes to the heart of all his writing" (9) and that he expresses earlier in the text in relation to his diary. Having deliberately left his diary lying around so that Jacqueline could read about how he feels she is intruding on him, he wonders whether he should record in his diary all his emotions, even the ignoble ones, or keep them "shrouded." He continues:

> Besides, who is to say that the feelings he writes in his diary are his true feelings? Who is to say that at each moment while the pen moves he is truly himself? At one moment he may be truly himself, at another he might simply be making things up. How can he know for sure? (10)

The double bind of "truth in autobiography" is brilliantly encapsulated in these paradoxes of the writing self.

The notion of self-punishment through confession is evoked in both *Youth* and in *Summertime* by the repetition of the phrase "Agenbyte of inwit" (Youth 130 and *Summertime* 4). Meaning literally a prick of conscience, it is also the title of a confessional prose work written in Middle English and referred to by James Joyce in *Ulysses*. In *Youth*, it is referred to in the context of the narrator's suggestion that he "will gnaw away at himself" as penance for his "caddish" behaviour (130) and Coetzee

takes up the question of bad faith and conscience again in the first pages of *Summertime in the context of South African border killings recorded in the notebook entry of* 22 August 1972 that opens the text: "How to escape the filth: not a new question. An old rat-question that will not let go, that leaves its nasty, suppurating wound. Agenbite of inwit" (4). In this entry, it becomes clear that the writer has come back to South Africa (also referred to in *Youth* as a "wound") after living abroad, to be again under the "dirty thumb" of the ruling Nationalist Party government (6).

The eight notebook entries that make up the first section of the text cover the dates from August 1972 to June 1975 and appear in the text with additional italicized writer's comments that were, we are told by the biographer, known only as Mr Vincent who has purportedly put together this book, written by Coetzee as "memos to himself, written in 1999 or 2000 when he was thinking of adapting those particular entries for a book" (20). The self-judgmental nature of these comments (for example: "To be expanded on: his readiness to throw himself into half-baked projects; the alacrity with which he retreats from creative work into mindless industry" 8) recall the idea of his using writing to punish himself for his perceived misdeeds that we encountered in *Youth*. They also set the tone for the increasingly distanced and self-critical portrait of the artist that will emerge in this text. The next six sections of the text bear the names of the people being interviewed by Mr Vincent about the person, J. M. Coetzee, under whose name, of course, the text appears, and the final seventh section is titled "Notebooks: undated fragments." Thus, while the opening and closing sections of the text, the Notebooks, are written in the by-now familiar third-person present-tense narration of the previous two volumes of the "memoirs," the remaining material is presented in interview form, with questions from Mr Vincent and answers from those who have known the by-now famous but dead author, J. M. Coetzee. These interviewees include five women and one man, and the interviews are conducted in Canada, South Africa, Brazil, London and Paris, in the chronological order in which the interviewees entered Coetzee's life and sometimes with a hinted association with particular works of fiction. That Mr Vincent has never met "Coetzee" means that what his interviewees tell him is unverifiable. Thus, the truth-value of autobiography is doubly displaced in the major part of this text: firstly, onto Mr Vincent, the biographer, who is supposedly transcribing but also editing the interviews and, secondly, onto the interviewees whose own memories make up the text. The literalness of this "making up the text" is evident when Dr Julia Frankl warns the biographer (and reader) of the truth-status of her recollections:

> So let me be candid: as far as the dialogue is concerned, I am making it up as I go along. Which I presume is permitted, since we are talking about a writer. What I am telling you may not be true to the letter, but it is true to the spirit, be assured of that. (32)

At the same time, Julia warns Mr Vincent not to try to manipulate her story in which, contrary to what she believes to be his expectations, she is the main character and John the minor one (reminiscent of Susan Barton in *Foe* who is trying to keep control

of her own story): "if you go away from here and start fiddling with the text, the whole thing will turn to ash in your hands" (44). And her final words to him are that she is "just telling the truth. Without the truth, no matter how hard, there can be no healing" (84). She refuses to answer Mr Vincent's final brief question and the reader never finds out what that question might have been. The inclusion of the request for another question and its refusal, along with the place and date of the interview, adds a level of believability to the text, emphasizing the "reality effect" that pretends to be using unedited, unmediated material.

In contrast, the editor admits to his next interviewee, Margot Jonker, Coetzee's cousin, that he has indeed fiddled with the interview material collected in a first interview with her a year previously. His editing of the interview includes his having cut out his questions, having "fixed up the prose to read as an uninterrupted narrative spoken in your voice" and having "dramatized it here and there, letting people speak in their own voices" (87). Additionally, he has used the third-person and present-tense narration of Coetzee's other memoirs, explaining that "the she I use is like I but is not I" (89), a convention that Margot finds confusing. It is, of course, appropriate that many of the memories are of the family farm, Voëlfontein, so poignantly described in *Boyhood* and of Coetzee's early and later association with it.[9] Despite Mr Vincent's assurances that he will change anything she doesn't like, and that Margot's sister is unlikely to read "an obscure book put out by an academic press in England" (91) so will not object to the description of her as "hardhearted," as he reads Margot his "recast" narrative version of her first interview, she interrupts with objections, suggesting that his version doesn't sound like "what I told you" (91). By the end of the narration, she is adamant that it cannot stand as it is: "I want to go over it again, as you promised" (152). That the narrative does indeed appear to "stand as it is" in the version we read suggests either that she did in the end agree to the changes or that the editor betrayed her trust by not making them.

While the interview in the section entitled "Adriana" and conducted in Brazil maintains its conventional transcribed form, the interviewee suggests that her ability to "change the record" of the interview is extremely limited. This is because she is aware of her status as "one of Coetzee's women," a label that she is doomed to wear because of his infatuation with her, which was, she confirms, totally unreciprocated. Mr Vincent suggests that she was the original for Susan Barton in *Foe*, a Brazilian woman in the first draft – attractive, resourceful and with "a will of steel" (200). In this way, the reader is offered yet another version of how writers betray their subjects: by turning them into fictional characters.

It is in the interview with Martin, a fellow academic at the University of Cape Town and rival for an academic position for which John has applied, that the biographer is called on to account for the methodology of his biography. While Martin is ultimately not particularly forthcoming about details of John's personal life (it is the shortest interview in the book and he parries the biographer's question about John's personal relations by replying: "You are the biographer. If you find that train of thought worth following up, follow it" 211), he does comment on their shared sense of discomfort at living in apartheid South Africa, their shared academic interests and

on John's "strain of secretiveness." It is predominantly the interviewee, though, who here asks questions of the interviewer, questioning Mr Vincent's desire to hear "stories" about his subject, his choice of interviewees and his decision to interview those with an emotional investment in their relationship with him. Thus, Martin queries whether, in choosing only five sources for his work, the biographer is "inevitably going to come out with an account that is slanted towards the personal and the intimate at the expense of the man's actual achievements as a writer" (218). The biographer's responses include his belief that a biography has to "strike a balance between narrative and opinion" (216) and that he is "not interested in coming to a final judgment on Coetzee" which he leaves to history. He continues: "*What I am doing is telling the story of a stage in his life, or if we can't have a single story then several stories from several perspectives*" (217, italics in original). The silence with which the biographer meets some of Martin's comments about his biographical method signals a subtle shift in power. The biographer himself is being asked to justify his approach.

In the final interview, that with Sophie Denoël, a former colleague and lover of John Coetzee's, the ethics of writing a life and the connections between a writer's private life and his work are brought even more strongly to the fore. In challenging the biographer about his "authorization" to write a book on Coetzee, Sophie elicits a response from him that goes to the heart of the text's instability. Mr Vincent admits that his efforts to speak to people in South Africa who had known Coetzee were largely unsuccessful (some who had claimed to know him had mistaken him for another Coetzee). When Sophie asks why he does not rely more on the diaries, letters and notebooks, the usual raw material for biography, he cites their unreliability: they "*cannot be trusted…as a factual record…because he was a fictioneer…making up a fiction of himself*" (225, italics in original). He himself would rather hear "the truth…from people who knew him directly in the flesh" which will provide a range of "independent perspectives" than rely on the writer's own "*self-projection comprised by his oeuvre*" despite the risk that these people may also be "fictioneers" (226, italics in original). It is, though, clear to the reader by now that Mr Vincent's own collection of interviews has an equally end-directed intentionality, particularly his desire for more personal stories from his interviewees that would dispel the image of Coetzee as "a cold and supercilious intellectual" (235). It is also clear from the interviews that he has failed in this regard, as most confirm his character as "wooden," without "special sensitivity" and as bordering on the autistic in matters of the body. So to whom is the reader to turn for a more nuanced version of Coetzee the man?

The final undated fragments from the notebooks provide a very different tone, even from the dated entries provided at the beginning of the book, which tend to a more political perspective on the writer's reporting of events on his return to South Africa. These final entries project more deeply personal, emotional material that centres on the father/son relationship. If the biographer has failed to produce an image of Coetzee that is warm and personable in the interviews, these final notebook entries, despite their italicized commentary that suggests they may be used later for other purposes, come closer to it. For it is here that we return to the realm of guilt and confes-

sion. In explaining, for example, his accompanying his father to a rugby match at Newlands, the writer of the notebooks records his feelings as follows:

> He goes with his father…because sport…is the strongest surviving bond between them, and because it went through his heart like a knife to see his father…go off to Newlands like a lonely child. (245)

The compassion of the son for the father's loneliness and the way it pierced his heart speaks more about the man and his emotional life than anything the reader has encountered previously in the text. Similarly, his awareness that he would be a better son if he knew what his father cared about or wanted, in the absence of his talking about himself, or keeping a diary or writing letters, is made even more poignant by the fact that his only insight into his father's state of mind is provided by a quiz entitled "Your Personal Satisfaction Index" that his father has perhaps deliberately left lying around. In it, his father has scored a total of 6 out of 20, suggesting a less than fulfilled life (251). Thus the sense he has that his father's family is without passion (247) extends also to his own assessment of himself as a "gloomy fellow; a wet blanket; a stick in the mud" (248).

The adult son's memory of his "mean and petty deed" as an adolescent of scratching his father's favorite Renata Tebaldi record is one that has haunted him with a remorse that has "grown keener" with time. This returns us to the "Agenbite of inwit" (4) reference at the beginning of the text, the prick of conscience that demands confession. Trying to atone for this misdeed by replacing the record was, he insists, his way of seeking his father's forgiveness

> *For countless acts of meanness…In sum, for all I have done since the day I was born, and with such success, to make your life a misery.* (250, italics in original)

The directness of this first-person address marks a significant shift in the text, making it seem less mediated, more felt. But there is no response from his father. It is equally heart-wrenching to read of the son's inability to reach out, physically or emotionally, prior to his father's operation, an operation that will render the father forever wordless. The son's inability to interpret his father's needs is even more tragic now. The dilemma of the ending of the text where the son is trapped either into responsibility for his father or into abandoning him is clearly not really a choice at all.

So, as readers, we do after all gain some insight into the emotional life of the writer through these final notebook entries. But again we are warned of the "double thoughts" of confession as well as the intentionality, the fictioneering, of all writerly material, whether diaries, letters, notebooks, autobiographies or biographies. In the end, there is no one version, only versions, of a life and the more lasting impression, apart from rare moments when "true confession" seems momentarily attainable, is that the subject of the life-writing will inevitably both betray and/or be betrayed.

In his preamble to reading one of the notebook entries to Martin in *Summertime*,

Mr Vincent suggests that he suspects that the entry "was intended to fit into the third memoir, the one that never saw the light of day" (205) and refers to its use of the same third-person convention as in *Boyhood* and *Youth*. This teasing self-referentiality (the book we are reading is, of course, the third memoir "that never saw the light of day" disguised as a partial and perhaps even unfinished biography) is in keeping with the ironic humor deployed throughout *Summertime*, particularly in Coetzee's use of the distancing effect of biography to make comments on himself through the words of others. An example is when Julia says: "I know he had a reputation for being dour, but John Coetzee was actually quite funny" (63). In writing the self as other, Coetzee is able to draw attention both to the constructed nature of any version of the self and to the ethical implications of such writing. In doing so, he emphasizes the impossibility of representing "truth" in any genre and the double bind of self-interested confession that is an inevitable part of autobiography. But, as Derek Attridge points out, even such doubts about verifiability or the status of a "true confession" do not preclude the work encapsulating, for the reader as well as the writer, what Attridge calls a "certain form of truth" (161) and what Coetzee calls, perhaps more circumspectly, the "aura of truth" (*Youth* 138).

【Notes】

1. This paper is a version of the chapter "Scenes from Provincial Life," written expressly for *A Companion to the Works of J. M. Coetzee*, edited by Tim Mehigan, by Camden House, an imprint of Boydell & Brewer, Rochester, New York and Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK, to be published in late 2011.

2. Hermione Lee points out that while *Youth* was published without a subtitle in the United Kingdom, the US edition was indeed subtitled "Scenes from Provincial Life II" (Hermione Lee, "Heart of Stone: J. M. Coetzee" in *Body Parts: Essays on Life Writing* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2005)167 – 76, 167. Coetzee's description of *Summertime* as the third "instalment" of "Scenes from Provincial Life" suggests that he would have preferred to have had this subtitle in all editions of *Youth*, thereby avoiding the confusion caused to some reviewers.

3. J. M. Coetzee, "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky." in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell. 251 – 293.

4. J. M. Coetzee, "Fictions of the Truth," *The Age* 13 May 2000, 12 (attributed to *The Telegraph*, London, no date).

5. See p. 225 of *Summertime* and Frank Kermode's review, "Fictioneering" in the *London Review of Books*, 8 October (2009)9 – 10.

6. Margaret Lenta, "Autrebiography: J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*," *English in Africa* 30. 1 May(2003)157 – 69. Lenta gives the examples of Caesar's *Gallic War and the Civil War*, Lord Hervey's eighteenth-century memoir and Christopher Isherwood's memoir, *Lost Years: A Memoir 1945 – 51*. She also points out a number of parallels in subject matter between Coetzee's first two memoirs and Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Others have pointed out that there are further precedents for this third-person autobiography. These include Dirk Klopper's example of Henry Adams' *The Education of Henry Adams* (Dirk Klopper, "Critical Fictions in J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*," *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in South Africa*, 11.1 (2006)22 – 31, 30, Note 6). Derek Attridge refers to both Henry Adams and Joyce as "two obvious precursors" but points out that they both use the past tense, a choice that introduces "adult irony to complicate"

childhood naiveté (Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004)141.

7. My emphases.

8. Derek Attridge also mentions Turgenev and George Eliot's works as possible sources for Coetzee's sub-title, particularly Eliot's *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004)155, Note 20.

9. It is interesting to compare the account given on p. 97 of *Summertime* with the parallel account on p. 94 of *Boyhood*. In both, John unburdens himself to his cousin (she is called Agnes in *Boyhood*, Margot in *Summertime*) and in *Summertime*, the John-figure admits to being in love with her. An episode which is not mentioned in *Boyhood* but given prominence in *Summertime* is John's cruelty to the locust. In *Summertime* this is represented as a shameful memory which he remembers with pain and for which he asks forgiveness every day.

【Works Cited】

Attridge, Derek. *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Attwell, David. ed. *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews.* Cambridge Mass, London: Harvard University Press, 1992.

---. "Coetzee's Estrangements." *Novel* (Spring/Summer 2008): 229 – 43.

Coetzee, J. M. *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life.* London: Secker & Warburg, 1997.

---. "Fictions of the Truth," *The Age* 13 May (2000)12.

---. "Interview." *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews.* Ed. David Attwell. Cambridge Mass, London: Harvard UP, 1992. 17 – 30.

---. *Summertime: Scenes from Provincial Life.* North Sydney: Knopf, 2009.

---. "Truth in Autobiography." *Inaugural Lecture* (University of Cape Town) new series No. 94, (1985): 1 – 6.

---. *Youth.* London: Secker & Warburg, 2002.

Deresiewicz, William. "Third-Person Singular." Rev. of Youth, *New York Times* July 7(2002): 6.

Klopper, Dirk. "Critical Fictions in J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*." *Scrutiny* 2: *Issues in English Studies in South Africa* 11.1 (2006): 22 – 31.

Lee, Hermione. "Uneasy Guest." Rev. of *Youth*, *London Review of Books* 24.13 (2002): 14 – 15.

Lenta, Margaret. "Autrebiography: J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*." *English in Africa* 30.1 (2003): 157 – 69.

Yeoh, Gilbert. "J. M. Coetzee and Samuel Beckett: Ethics, Truth-Telling, and Self-Deception." *Critique* 44.4 (2003): 331 – 48.

责任编辑:郭晶晶