

Western Political Philosophy in J. M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*

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Abstract

This paper aims at evaluating J. M. Coetzee's Diary of a Bad Year – a novel which, for the time being at least, has received much less critical assessment than the writer's widely-acknowledged masterpieces – from the perspective of the intertextual relation it establishes with Western philosophers in point of political thinking, but also from that of its own politics of writing, which have geared the author towards experimenting with the traditional, feminine and introspective, diary mode in view of forwarding his opinions on perennial, yet acutely contemporary issues such as the state and the constraints it incurs, democracy, anarchism, terrorism, doctrine; on breaking news issues like avian influenza or Al-Qaida; but also on lighter topics such as music, the body, tourism, language use or authority in fiction. On the one hand, the reading thus discloses Coetzee's affiliation to certain patterns of Western philosophical thinking, which he either follows closely, or confutes passionately. On the other hand, a further focal point in the present undertaking concerns the experimentalist-like innovation in point of form: the multi-layered diegetic scaffolding and the polyphony of the narrating instances.

Keywords: *politics of the novel, diary, contemporary issues, polyphony, intertextuality*

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The assessment of the South-African (now Australian citizen) J. M. Coetzee as one of the most important contemporary novelists worldwide can hardly be questioned judging by the two Booker Prizes he was awarded –in 1983, for *Life & Times of Michael K*, and in 1990, for *Disgrace*, novels rooted in the (post)apartheid South-African socio-political environment – and by the Nobel Prize for Literature received in 2003. Today, Coetzee's novels are impatiently awaited both by the academia and by the general public, who usually welcome them with due regard. Under the circumstances, it is no surprise that the release of his latest novel, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), has brought rumours of considerations for an unprecedented third Booker Prize.

Nevertheless, his last but one novel, *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), under focus in this paper, has received much less critical attention than his widely-acknowledged masterpieces. Of course, it could not escape the attention of David Attwell, Professor at University of York, a former student of Coetzee's, editor of a book of essays and interviews with the South-African author (*Doubling the Point*,

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1992), and probably the greatest authority in the critical evaluation of the latter's literary output. *Diary of a Bad Year* was also included in the *Cambridge Companion to J. M. Coetzee* by the reputed British critic of contemporary literature, Dominic Head, who describes it as a "challenging metafiction, breaking its fragile novelistic frame in extravagant fashion" (2009: 90). The name of the novel's first part also provides the title of an excellent collection of essays on authority in fiction: *Strong Opinions: J. M. Coetzee and the Authority in Contemporary Fiction*, edited by Chris Danta, Sue Kossew and Julian Murphet (2011). Already singled out as a significant contribution to the resurrection of the (debate on the) novel, *Diary of a Bad Year* remains to make history, just as it remakes the history of the genre.

Generally speaking, all the critics account for four defining aspects of *Diary of a Bad Year*. It is seen as a metafictional, autobiographical, political and philosophical piece of writing which, as Dominic Head maintains, "at first glance, [...] can seem more of a treatise on fiction than a work of fiction in itself" (2009: 93), practically rounding itself up as a complex cultural intertext centred on western political philosophy.

Unlike his earlier fiction, where the metafictional component results from placing the various "links between colonial fictions, history and exploitation" (Kossew 1996: 33) under the interpreter's lens, Coetzee's 2007 novel lays emphasis on fiction in general as a convenient disguise for considerations on contemporary history. In other words, the diachronic approach is replaced by the synchronic one, yet the preoccupation with politics and poetics is not given up. The diegetic scaffolding is multi-layered in both cases and the polyphony of the narrating instances, though understated, is preserved.

In Part One of *Diary of a Bad Year*, 'Strong Opinions' (very probably inspired from Vladimir Nabokov's 1990 collection of interviews, articles and editorials), history becomes his-stories, being dissected in distinct and monologic, short and effective political essays delivered in the voice of a fictional auctorial narrator, which build the foundation of Coetzee's house of fiction and contribute to the overall polyphony of the novel discourse. Architecturally placed on top are two successive storeys / private stories: J.C.'s and Anya's diary entries on the self, the other and the universe. The structure is graphically represented top-down on the page – as two, then three separate bands (as Anya is eventually allowed a voice in Chapter 6) – with His story suggestively placed on top of his and hers. Form supports content, the central notions of hierarchy, power, authority and patriarchy being foregrounded.

The novel thus also advances a covert reading game in its first part: it might be read horizontally, following the three levels separately, or it might be read vertically, descending from the auctorially manipulative political discourse on the state of the world to the confessional writing and the feminine meditations of the personal diaries, in an endless cycle of public manifestations and private incursions.

The other, metafictionally overt, game on offer in 'Strong Opinions' is facilitated by its general frame: J.C., the aging writer working on a contribution to a collective volume on what is wrong with today's world, meets young Anya, whom he asks to work as his secretary and transcribe his dictaphone tapes. Their conversations take place without managing to bridge the status, age or gender gap, but they allow in-depth analyses of the communication between governors and governees, writers and readers, narrators and narratees.

Part Two, 'Second Diary', advertising the autobiographical vein, opens in continuation to Part One's Chapter 31 ('On the afterlife'), which provides it with a symbolical ending, and takes up the representation of death by maintaining the middle band, reserved to the old writer, blank for some time (Chapters 1-4), creating the impression of a continuous line on a life monitoring machine. With Chapter 5, J.C. is revived, and the previous game is taken up once more, with interruptions and reversions in the diegetic levels established previously.

Compared to the strong opinions formulated in Part One – on the origins of the state, the political left and right, anarchism and democracy, terrorism, guidance systems, Al Qaida, Guantanamo Bay, animal welfare, governance in Australia, etc. –, those put forward in Part Two are weaker and address lighter topics like dream, fan mail, mass-emotion, kiss and erotic life, ageing, the classics, Bach, mother tongue, birds, compassion, being photographed, children, etc. Both types are cowardly hidden in diaries, despite the misleading titles. As Paul Patton rightfully notes, "in fact, there is both diary and opinion throughout the novel, if indeed it is a novel. As well as the strong opinions in Part One, Part Two contains what their author refers to as gentler or soft opinions" (2011: 53).

The shift is also obvious in narratorial voice and focalisation, as well as in gender issues, with an obliquely misogynist Part One, where the feminine character is mostly objectified (Nabokov's *Lolita* coming to mind) and presented as unable to grasp the serious topics tackled in the Strong Opinions:

All he writes about is politics – he, el Senor, not Alan. It's a big disappointment. It makes me yawn. I try to tell him to give it up; people have had it up to here with politics. There is no shortage of other things to write about. He could write about cricket, for example – give his personal perspective on it" (Coetzee 2008: 26).

However, J.C. is unwilling to write about cricket for the time being. It is in Part Two that concessions are made: he ends up writing about the sport in question, just as he finally decides to approach other topics proposed by Anya in her repeated urges to make him give up political talk. In agreement with the German editor for whom he forays in the intricacies of contemporaneity, J.C.'s goal is to 'say his say on any subject he chooses, the more contentious the better', as one of the "six eminent writers [who] pronounce on what is wrong with today's world" (21). Murphet (2011: 64) compares the emerging pronouncements with a "non-fictional *J'accuse* in the venerable tradition of Zola", although, to J.C., the book entitled Strong Opinions, just like the first part of *Diary of a Bad Year*, is just "an

opportunity to grumble in public, an opportunity to take magic revenge on the world for declining to conform to [his] fantasies" (23) – which might be read as a tongue in cheek reference to / criticism of Nabokov's essayistic demarche.

Although having its central character oppose the mainstream in the book inside the book, Coetzee's novel remains inscribed within Western political philosophy, following a line of reasoning which characterises Eurocentrism. J.C. establishes direct and indirect intertextual dialogues with a wide array of artists and philosophers, covering the territories within their brains – a strategy reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's essay on 'Literary Geography' (in Lyon 1979: 186-189) – while subsuming the author's/ narrator's thoughts to a clearly delineated trend in political thinking.

Some of the sources are thus only identifiable on a closer look at the palimpsest of Coetzee's novel, while others are openly acknowledged. Forefront in the latter category – alongside Aristotle, Plato, Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Etienne de la Boétie, Michel de Montaigne, Kierkegaard etc. – one finds Immanuel Kant and Frederic Nietzsche. Kant's 'public performance of reason', "a tradition at least as old as Michel de Montaigne, [which] has since the eighteenth century come to be associated quintessentially with an Enlightenment concept of the public sphere" (Atwell 2010: 214) is recycled in the first part of *Diary of a Bad Year*. From Nietzsche, Coetzee borrows the ideas of resentment, revenge and drive to power. He openly acknowledges his influence in the essay 'On Boredom': "only the higher animals are capable of being bored, said Nietzsche. (...) As a child, I would have seemed to have been an unwitting Nietzschean" (Coetzee 2008: 217).

Also present are Samuel Beckett (partly explainable through Coetzee's doctoral thesis, concerned with the stylistic analysis of Beckett's English works), Kafka and, not surprisingly, Dostoevsky. The author of *The Karamazov Brothers* is, almost unavoidably, compared to yet another great Russian novelist, Tolstoy, in an analysis which seems rooted in Bakhtin's distinction between the latter's monologism and Dostoevsky's polyphony, and which apparently aims at dismantling Barthes's and Foucault's theories on the death of the author and on the function of authorship, respectively. Thus, in J.C.'s words, "no one is better at building up authority than Tolstoy", which is owed to the novelist's status: "during his later years, Tolstoy was treated not only as a great author but as an authority in life, a wise man, a sage" (151). On the other hand, Dostoevsky's genius resides in constructing, through the voice of Ivan from *The Karamazov Brothers*, an impressive anguished rhetoric against forgiveness, despite his strong Christian views (225-6). In Attwell's opinion, the rejection of the Barthesian credo that "the authority of the author has never amounted to anything more than a bagful of rhetorical tricks" (Coetzee 2008: 149) is "an abjuration on Coetzee's part, because he has often implicitly positioned himself in the tradition it represents, the tradition of anti-illusionism which culminates [...] in Samuel Beckett" (2010: 220).

This functional monologism has also been acknowledged by Julian Murphet, who remarks that "the strong opinions of J.C. (...) are the closest Coetzee has yet come to the importation of what Bakhtin calls 'direct authorial

discourse', 'single-voiced discourse' of the 'monologic type' into his novels; and (...) are meant to be sensed and recognized as such" (2011: 74). Nevertheless, monologism seems to have been imported in view of deconstruction also, firstly because the triad of discourses in the architecture of *Diary of a Bad Year* offers more than one standpoints and, secondly, because all the names and sources in the novel's cultural intertext, whether overt or covert, reinforce plurality and diversity.

The very strategy of embedding political thought within an experimental metafictional novel supports this notion further. As Jonathan Lear remarks, it is not only a display of literary virtuosity, but "an attempt to defeat the reader's desire to defer to the moral authority, the novelist J. M. Coetzee" (2008: 68). Actually, the strategy is in keeping with the Western philosophical tradition, where many attempts at using literary characters in view of divesting the author of his intrinsic authority have already been identified. Lear, for instance, starts his demonstration from Plato's *Dialogues*, at whose centre is the figure of Socrates, who, with the claim that he only knows that he does not know, "distinguishes himself by eschewing authority when it comes to ethical knowledge" (id. 72). Lear then accounts for Kierkegaard's practice of writing under pseudonyms, explained by the Danish philosopher as an attempt to create pseudonymous authors who then "go and write their own books" (73). In his view, one must learn to "write without authority", or to split authority into multiple entities which escape the gravity of the governing centre. Coetzee however remarks that citing the philosopher readily turns him into this contested authoritarian centre: "by copying Kierkegaard's words here, I make Kierkegaard into an authority. Authority cannot be taught, cannot be learned. The paradox is a true one" (2008: 151).

Much in Kierkegaard's vein, J. M. Coetzee creates a fictional authority... in fiction, the authorial voice being barely disguised in J.C., a South-African aging novelist relocated to Australia who refers to *Waiting for the Barbarians* as "my novel" (Coetzee 2008: 171). This blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction or, better said, between the fictional and the autobiographical, being both a political statement and "an instance of Coetzee pushing at the limits of the novel in a way that makes the authorial persona a central focus" (Head 2009: 94). And at the centre it has always been. As Bill Ashcroft notes in a short excursion through the entire Coetzeean catalogue:

There is no writer I know who is harder on his characters, particularly those characters whom we might associate with the author – Jacobus Coetzee in *Dusklands*, David Lurie in *Disgrace*, the central characters of *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*, the testy narrator in *Diary of a Bad Year*, or even *Elizabeth Costello*, both tired and tiresome in those moments when she is most clearly ventriloquizing Coetzee's beliefs" (2011: 145).

In sum, the common denominator of all Coetzee's narrative practices and techniques is politics which, as asserted in *Diary of a Bad Year*, quoting Aristotle, is

“built into human nature, that is, is part of our fate, as monarchy is the fate of bees” (Coetzee 2008: 9). Admitting this, the novel under focus introduces itself as automatically political, reminding of George Orwell’s ‘Why I Write’ and the famous statement: “[...] no book is genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.” (1981: 310) If everything is political, then striving for systematisation is futile. Faithful to this principle, in his *Diary of a Bad Year*, J. M. Coetzee does not aim at an archival systematisation of contemporary politics as we know it. Neither does he attempt to write political literature – a pleonastic phrase. Instead, he reasserts the notion that politics is a contaminant structurally impossible to remove from either life or art, while strategically turning politics into literature. In so doing, under the cover of fictionality, he reconstructs truths about political truth construction.

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