

Review of J. M. Coetzee, *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays, 1986-1999* by J. M. Coetzee, Viking

'Defoe to Rilke to Oz to ...' in the Boston Sunday Globe, September 2, 2001
by Kai Easton

When J. M. Coetzee became the first author to win the Booker Prize a second time – for his eighth novel, “Disgrace” (1999), and previously for “Life & Times of Michael K” (1983) – his reputation as one of the most significant writers of our time was firmly secured. In addition to the Bookers, the South African novelist has won numerous other awards for his fiction. Equally, as Distinguished Professor of Literature at the University of Cape Town, he has made his mark as a scholar.

Coetzee’s substantial critical output so far has been collected in three books: “White Writing” (1988), a study on landscape, language and South African literature before World War II; “Giving Offense” (1996), which addresses writing and censorship, both in South Africa and farther afield; and his intellectual autobiography, “Doubling the Point” (1992), a selection of essays and interviews, edited by David Attwell, which represents a broad spectrum of his nonfiction.

This fourth work, “Stranger Shores,” comprises 26 essays and reviews on writers and books from the 18th to the 20th century, ranging from Defoe and Dostoyevsky to Kafka and Borges, Rilke and Rushdie, and Oz and Mahfouz. There are also chapters on South African literary and political figures, including Alan Paton, Helen Suzman, and Nadine Gordimer.

This is indeed a dazzling collection of essays from a writer of great intellect, whose superb prose style and facility for the nuances of language and translation make for engaging reading. The question is: Is it a charting of literary influences and interests, or are these simply commissioned reviews, introductions, and afterwords?

Without a preface or introduction from the author, it is hard to say how involved Coetzee was in his own book. There is no commentary, aside from a list of acknowledgements that duplicates the list of sources in the back. From the publisher’s blurb we get a sense of the range of content, but no rationale for the project. Has it been published for its timeliness, to capitalize on Coetzee’s Booker success, to mark his 25 years as a novelist and the end of a millennium?

All but the chapter on Samuel Richardson’s “Clarissa” have previously been published, several of them as reviews for the New York Review of Books.

As it turns out, everything but the essay on Marcellus Emants is from the 1990s. There are no overlaps with his previous collections, but there are some omissions. “The Novel Today” (1987) and “The Great South African Novel” (1983) are brief articles on writing that might have justified the first decade of the subtitle’s time frame. On the other hand, the book’s main title might have been complicated by their inclusion, since they are primarily about the local literary scene at a certain historical juncture. For this reason, the closing chapter, a review of Noel Mostert’s magisterial history of the South African Cape, “Frontiers,” seems oddly placed.

“What Is a Classic?,” a response to T. S. Eliot’s essay of the same title, opens the collection and is a perfect introduction to the scholarly path the young Coetzee is to follow. In the article he tries to analyse what it is about certain writers and musicians that defines them as “classic.” An autobiographical strand in the essay updates the story we are told in Coetzee’s 1997 memoir, “Boyhood.”

Coetzee describes a formative moment when, at age 15, in his suburban Cape Town garden, he hears for the first time the music of Bach and undergoes what he calls “the impact of the classic.”

Italo Calvino’s posthumous book of essays, “Why Read the Classics?” (2000), shares a common thread with “Stranger Shores.” Both Calvino’s and Coetzee’s fictions are learned, allusive, often metafictional; both authors would appear to have a similar respect for the classic, writing essays on many of the canonical European writers.

There is thus a missed opportunity for Coetzee’s 1993 essay “Homage” in this collection, which has so far appeared only in “The Threepenny Review.” As the title indicates, Coetzee is acknowledging his literary indebtedness to a number of writers: Ezra Pound, William Faulkner, Rilke, Robert Musil, Ford Madox Ford, and – not least of all – Samuel Beckett, about whom he wrote a doctoral dissertation in 1969. What is it about Beckett that made Coetzee want to write about him? His answer: “It comes down to a certain dancing of the intellect that is full of energy yet remains confined, a dancing on the spot.”

Some years ago in the South African press, Coetzee was called “the Beckett of the Boland,” and then, another novel or two later, the “Kafka of the Karoo.” (The Boland and the Karoo are in the Western Cape.) These descriptions go some way toward explaining what it is to read Coetzee as a novelist and critic. The intertextual links can be seen, for example, between his essays on Defoe and Dostoyevsky and his novels “Foe” (1986) and “The Master of Petersburg” (1994). There is much in “White Writing” (on travel writing and exploration, on the pastoral, particularly the farm novel) that resonates with his early fiction, “Dusklands” (1974) and “In the Heart of the Country” (1977). His recent book of nonfiction edited by Amy Gutmann, “The Lives of Animals” (two Tanner Lectures presented as fictional narratives at Princeton University on poetry, philosophy, and animal rights [1999]), shares a story with “Disgrace,” while the protagonist in the former work, Elizabeth Costello, appears in “What Is Realism?” (1997) and “The Novel in Africa” (1999), both originally presented as lectures and subsequently published though not anthologized here.

While one is curious to know how this book actually came about, it certainly provides a greater audience with a chance to read Coetzee as a literary essayist, to see how Coetzee the novelist responds to other writers and books, and to venture a guess as to where his interests might lie. As he says in “Homage”: “In the process of responding to the writers one intuitively chooses to respond to, one makes oneself into the person whom in the most intractable but also the most deeply ethical sense one wants to be.”

In the end, this is a magnificent collection of substantial and incisive essays and reviews from one of the world’s leading novelists and critical thinkers. It is both for admirers of Coetzee’s fiction and for those who wish to read about a number of literary greats across the shores.

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