Criticism

Volume 53 | Issue 1 Article 6

2011

Unexpected Cosmopolitans: Media and Diaspora in J. M. Coetzee's *Summertime*

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UNEXPECTED COSMOPOLITANS: MEDIA AND DIASPORA IN J. M. COETZEE'S *SUMMERTIME*

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Summertime: Scenes from Provincial Life III by J. M. Coetzee. London: Vintage, 2010. Pp. 272. £7.99 cloth; $15.00 paper.

South African politics and society in the 1970s are subjects conspicuously avoided and everywhere implicit in J. M. Coetzee's fiction of the decade. A curious debut by any standard, his first novel, *Dusklands,* was published in 1974 by Peter Randall's antiapartheid Ravan Press, a publisher based in Johannesburg that printed books targeting the nation's white minority. In three years, Randall's civil rights would be suspended by the state for his antiapartheid activities; it would take eight years for *Dusklands* to be reprinted by a London press, Seeker and Warburg, and nine for Coetzee to publish a novel, *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), set in a recognizable, contemporary South Africa. The opening gambit of Coetzee's *Summertime* (2009), in contrast, pitches the reader a short series of notebook fragments dated 1972–75 that are as saturated with the gritty details of South African politics, people, and places as the newspapers they frequently reference. Through this constricted spatiotemporal aperture, Coetzee's most recent work offers an occasion to investigate the way reflections on the specific geotemporal location of South Africa in the 1970s unexpectedly reveal the nuanced and conditional nature of Coetzee's globalism.

For a novel that promises in its subtitle, *Scenes from Provincial Life,* to complete his autobiographical trilogy, *Summertime*

Criticism Winter 2011, Vol. 53, No. 1, pp. 127–136. ISSN 0011-1589.

is an abrupt departure. The third-person voice cultivated in *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002), which begin in equally laconic fashion with the lines "They live on a housing estate. . . ." and "He lives in a one-room flat," respectively, has been replaced by a new distancing technique: in *Summertime,* readers are told that the writer J. M. Coetzee has died.[1] Coetzee's "death of the author" is less a play on Roland Barthes than a thought experiment of the kind that gave us the character Elizabeth Costello or a novel like *Dusklands,* with its apocryphal Dutch and Afrikaner archive purportedly by eighteenth-century Boer colonist Jacobus Coetzee. *Summertime* contains a set of interviews and elaborations allegedly collected by a young British academic, Mr. Vincent, framed by notebook fragments. Through this material we develop compelling, selectively counterfactual, versions of Coetzee's life that cut close to the autobiographical bone. The impression we absorb as readers of Vincent's interviews and transcripts is of the young Coetzee as a scraggly failed romantic, a man whose overly cerebral awkwardness clashes with his ambitions to be a physically gifted sexual partner and manual laborer. It is in part because the book reminds us time and time again that Coetzee is a "fictioneer" whom we cannot trust (the book, after all, holds a counterfactual premise as its founding axiom) that the reader is encouraged to follow the literary and historical leads that cast us out along geographic and intertextual trajectories that belie John Coetzee's South African confinement.

Summertime is, as Coetzee's wound-be biographer Mr. Vincent claims, a work that turns our gaze (not to mention Coetzee's own) back to the years in South Africa during which he finished *Dusklands* and conceived much of his early work. But this curiously rewarding fiction succeeds not because of the accuracy of Vincent's instinct that the years 1971–77 are, as he puts it, "an important period of his [Coetzee's] life . . . a period when he was still finding his feet as a writer" (225), but rather because of a more diachronic shuttling across times and worlds brought into relief by *Summertime* as prose fiction. In part, this essay takes seriously Coetzee's many encouragements to look to written work rather than sniff trails from bodies of text to those of writers by situating *Summertime* intertextually; to do otherwise would be to ignore the sound advice given to Vincent by one of Coetzee's former colleagues: "I repeat, it seems to me strange to be doing the biography of a writer while ignoring his writing" (218). More precisely, the ruse of the posthumous biography—here poorly conceived by Mr. Vincent—encourages readers to think in the mode of proleptic eulogy about the phases of Coetzee's career

as a novelist and about his status within the canon.

Summertime is, after all, a far more complex media artifact than Coetzee's early works, one that rewards a materialist approach to its intertextuality, publication, distribution, and nascent reception history even as its formal experiments with the genres of interview and journal fragment invite a literary historical approach to Coetzee as a prose stylist. If Coetzee had managed to publish a book-length work of such starkly personal and political content in the early 1970s, even if it had been cloaked in the trappings of fiction, it would have been received primarily as a political act within a local horizon. More than three decades later and in full knowledge of its counterfactuality, the mimetic, media-saturated details about South Africa that comprise the novel's opening pages become something else entirely: good fiction.

Summertime opens with a journal entry, dated 22 August 1972, in which Coetzee records, in characteristic third-person prose, his response to news of covert killings of African National Congress (ANC) members by the security state, which flatly denies responsibility. Coetzee "reads the reports and feels soiled," wondering, "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). The jarring final sentence is both Coetzee's clever simulacrum of juvenilia—the overly literary tone of an aspiring writer's notes—and a cagy novelist's bid to send critics scurrying for their dictionaries (4). Those with the erudition, diligence, or technologies to navigate Coetzee's referential web will recognize that this particular archaism for the remorse of conscience is an unattributed quotation from Joyce's *Ulysses*. In *Ulysses* the phrase belongs to Stephen Dedalus —another portrait of the artist as a young man—who turns it over in his mind while thinking about his responsibility for his impoverished younger sister, a person he wants both to help and to abandon, in the "Wandering Rocks" chapter. "She is drowning," Stephen reflects, "Agenbite. Save her . . . Agenbite of inwit. Inwit's agenbite. Misery! Misery!"[2] Appearing in *Summertime* right before John Coetzee's first speech to his father, the phrase speaks to the young man's vexed relationship with apartheid South Africa: John is pondering how to "escape the filth" after reading of covert killings of ANC members by South African security forces (4).

Rare words, Coetzee asserts in his dissertation, *The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: An Essay in Stylistic Analysis,* defended in 1969 at University of Texas–Austin, "are points of stylistic density."[3] When young John Coetzee draws on Stephen Dedalus's lament to voice the

pricks of his own conscience regarding his abject response to the injustices of life in apartheid-era South Africa, he activates a rich intertextual and historical link between Irish and South African political culture. If for Coetzee, Joyce (like his onetime protégé Samuel Beckett) offers a mirror and a site of self-recognition, by a similar logic, events in South Africa—in particular the Anglo-Boer war of 1899–1902—catalyzed Irish resistance to the British rule and Joyce's reflections on nationalism. Joyce makes extensive reference to the Anglo-Boer War in Ulysses, where Irish animosity toward the British made common cause between Irish Catholics and Dutch Protestants. Such connections to distant events underscore complex global entanglements at work on the periphery of empire. Haines, the British intruder at Martello Tower, is a direct beneficiary of the war: "His old fellow made his tin by selling jalap to Zulus or some bloody swindle or other," Buck Mulligan reports.[4] Molly's first love dies in South Africa during his service in the British army, and she reflects that her current lover, Blazes Boylan, "could buy me a nice present up in belfast" because "his father made his money over selling horses for the cavalry" in the First Anglo-Boer war.[5] Most importantly, Bloom himself recollects participating in a pro-Boer demonstration protesting the award of an honorary degree to British imperialist Joe Chamberlain, an occasion on which he was nearly arrested.

The rather self-aggrandizing comparisons the young John Coetzee summons by aligning himself with Stephen Dedalus stand in stark contrast with Coetzee's infamous discomfort with celebrity. In Summertime, this modesty erupts in repeated narrative acts of self-abasement, generally centering around (self-)reported failures as a lover ("This man was disembodied" is one variant of a refrain [198]), and in a scrupulous underreporting of his success as an author taking the form of claims that "Coetzee was never a popular writer" (235). From a Nobel Laureate, such self-mortifications are dubious forms of doing penance: the well-oiled distribution and marketing regimes that publish and mediate Coetzee's novel provide ample evidence for viewing them with skepticism. *Summertime* is a book trying both, I suspect, to capitalize on a marquee franchise and to encourage readers to reflect on literary genres and the book form in more engaged terms. Our encounter with the book is highly mediated by a paratextual apparatus involving the market potentials, press releases, reviews, and shortlistings attendant on the release of a Nobel Laureate's newest book. Coetzee's fictional death and infamous reclusiveness ironically call attention to these sites of celebrity.

Fame literally frames the novel in the U.S. edition, where the top and bottom lines of text tout Coetzee's star status as a Nobel Prize winner and the author of *Disgrace* (1999) and provide generic guidance by categorizing *Summertime* as "fiction." With its bold chiaroscuro of black-and-white text echoed in the image of a symbolically resonant anonymous male form, the U.S. cover trades on the gravitas of the Nobel and seeks to capitalize on the synergy of Summertime's publication just after the release of the 2008 film of *Disgrace* (dir. Steven Jacobs, starring John Malkovich). The UK edition deploys a more mimetic image of the Karoo, evocative of the scene in Margot's narrative where she and her cousin John Coetzee spend a night stranded in his broken-down Datsun pickup before being rescued by Hendrick, a resident colored laborer, who passes by with a donkey cart.

Coetzee's "death" is an artful dodge to the question of whether responsibility for the book's branding and preening within global Anglophone prize/commodity culture lies with author or publisher. *Summertime* was released in October in Britain (to capitalize on market synergy of its Man-Booker shortlisting) and December in the United States (where it coincided fortuitously with the holiday book-buying season) after the prerelease of sample materials in the *New York Review of Books* in July 2009.[6] Scrupulous care, however, is apparent in Coetzee's titling, with its invocation of the blues and race; the book's subtitle, meanwhile, *Scenes from Provincial Life,* insists upon its status as a sequel. Coetzee's publisher, the Harvill Secker imprint of Random House, heir to the group that brought out Coetzee's early work in Britain, is keen to perpetuate the concept of *Summertime* as the completion of a trilogy. These elements serve as potent reminders that *Summertime* is not Mr. Vincent's book, or at least it is not the book he describes himself as writing: "a serious book, a seriously intended biography . . . on the years from Coetzee's return to South Africa . . . when he was still finding his feet as a writer"—a book for which the transcribed interviews we read would constitute raw material (225).

Within the interviews, Vincent emerges as an untrustworthy custodian at best of stories about Coetzee. He rewrites one interview as a narrative in the subject's voice (an intervention he describes as "fairly radical") and then reads it back to her while recording her protestations and disapproval (87). Vincent is an academic of mediocre creativity, a younger man who has never met Coetzee; he ignores repeated rejections of his methodology, including the suspicion that his work won't amount to "anything more than women's gossip," as one of Coetzee's academic colleagues puts

it (218). Coetzee's handling of Mr. Vincent as a framing device is deft, however, especially when it comes to mapping mobility. Vincent traverses the globe from Northern England to Paris, São Paulo, Ontario, South Africa, and back (Australia and the United States are notably absent from the list), gathering material and interviewing Coetzee's sexual partners, a female cousin, and two academic colleagues.

Clever narrative conceit that he is, Vincent's seemingly infinite travel budget may strain the bounds of verisimilitude, but it does an excellent job of mapping the sheer range of diasporic trajectories traveled by onetime white South Africans. The book's insistent geographic mobility reminds us of the myriad routes and modes of interconnection and displacement that constitute Coetzee's global world, which overlaps and diverges from those of his increasingly international readership. Simultaneously, from its supposedly posthumous vantage point, *Summertime* reminds us of the persistence with which Coetzee has been drawn to the effects of displacement and homelessness in his novels, where migrations cook up a rich brew of longing, uncertainty, and necessity. While his early novels were often drawn to explore limit conditions of suffering and oppression through characters like Jacobus Coetzee, Magda, Michael K, and the barbarian girl, since the 1980s the characters Coetzee depicts have tended to be those whose displacements foster unexpected cosmopolitan connections and are drawn from the broad middle zone between abject refugee and empowered members of a global elite. In the last decade in particular, Coetzee's most fascinating characters have been his minor exiles: Marijana Jokic and her Croatian family to whom Paul Rayment becomes attached in *Slow Man* (2005) after they have fled the Balkan war, for example, or Anya, the sexy Filipina who Coetzee imagines as the amanuensis of his "Strong Opinions" in *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007).

In *Summertime,* the most intriguing voices belong to two such unexpected cosmopolitans: Julia Kis, the daughter of a Hungarian Jew who takes Coetzee as a lover and whom Vincent interviews at her home in Kingston, Ontario; and Adriana Nascimento, a Brazilian who found her way to South Africa from Angola and who makes no effort to hide her loathing for Coetzee. On the one hand, Coetzee remains consistent in his belief that the private life of a writer could and probably should be dismissed as irrelevant information: "I am not concerned in this essay with the views of the historical Samuel Beckett," Coetzee explains to his readers at the outset of his dissertation, before pressing into what he

terms a "stylistic" analysis that uses computer science and a quantitative, statistical approach to analyze literary works.[7] Coetzee's career would take an obvious and intentional turn away from this early, clunky investment in what has become the digital humanities, but forty years later, the notion that the writer's life is of "only biographical interest," as the young Coetzee puts it, remains a guiding star in his aesthetics.[8] The taxonomic imagination that inspires Coetzee's dissertation, however, has transformed in his fiction into a series of complex systems that explore relationships between author, text, and character.

By 1972, Coetzee had himself completed a circuit of the Anglo-Atlantic world that spanned most of a decade, beginning with his northward migration to Britain as a computer programmer and followed by stints in Austin, Texas, and Buffalo, New York, as a graduate student and young professor, respectively. While his own migrations, including his emigration to Adelaide, Australia, in 2002, circulate within the Anglophone world and the former settler colonies, his characters take readers through travels in the pull of no obvious gravitational center either linguistically or geographically. Whereas a postcolony/metropolis axis dominates much of the postcolonial canon from Tayeb Salih to Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith, Coetzee's cosmopolitans tend to eschew the world's major metropoles and follow oblique trajectories through nations, regions, religions, and languages.

In *Summertime,* the young Coetzee's rather shameful return to South Africa and his father's home becomes legible in terms like those of Stephen Dedalus's failed telemachia as Coetzee invokes the self-imposed exiles of modernists like Joyce and Beckett. Coetzee's alternate take on the old chestnut of center and periphery recalls his unsettling position as a former white South African not easily assimilable to the disciplinary boundaries of postcolonial studies. As Coetzee's work has grown in readership and migrated from the "provinces" of his boyhood to the university center, Coetzee's globalism helps call attention to the issue that much of what goes under the heading of postcolonial theory is oppositional allegory that generates, more often than not, reductive readings. That Coetzee legitimately belongs on the syllabi of courses in postcolonial literature, the Australian novel, and philosophy of mind testifies to Coetzee's status as arguably the most important voice in Anglophone literature. Writers like Coetzee and characters like Julia Kis and Adriana Nascimento, moreover, remind academics that the most important contribution of postcolonial studies may be the way it directs attention to power, sovereignty, and identity in diverse places, texts, and lives.

Coetzee's work registers deep ambivalence with the nation-state, which is under pressure simultaneously from tentative universals (all suffering beings), nonstatist collectivities (ethnicity, religion, language), and substatist regional affinities. In *Summertime,* Coetzee juxtaposes attachments fostered by geographic mobility and unexpected cosmopolitan networks with what I have been describing as a Homeric longing for *nostos,* here identified with Coetzee's regional affinities to the Karoo and Western Cape regions of South Africa. In the intertextual register through which *Summertime* filters apartheid, we can see Coetzee simultaneously as Stephen and as Bloom; as Oedipus, whose unintentional crimes have polluted his homeland; and as Lear, who has given up his kingdom to wander in his old age. And there's the rub: *Summertime* vividly depicts the way homelessness and apartness are conditions Coetzee sees as his fate and birthright as a white South African of a certain generation, tainted by a complicit relationship to apartheid that fosters a guilt his fiction and prose consistently describe in religious terms. *Summertime*'s Martin puts it more legalistically, in wording conditioned by the endless televised inquiries of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As Coetzee's double—in *Summertime* Martin has obtained the teaching appointment at the University of Cape Town that was Coetzee's at the time—Martin claims that both he and John Coetzee shared an "attitude toward South Africa . . . [that] our presence . . . was legal but illegitimate . . . grounded in a crime, namely colonial conquest, perpetuated by apartheid" (209). While his novels tend to avoid overt racial signifiers—consider Michael K and Melanie Isaacs, ambiguous nonwhites in a race-mad culture—Summertime carefully records the stratifications of apartheid society: its police state killings, "temporary white" racial designations, and criminal bureaucracy.

As Coetzee argues in the essays of *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988), the claims of racial justice quickly expose white South Africans' identification with an unpeopled landscape as a nostalgic veneer. But rising to a challenge that is both ethical and generic, Coetzee frequently addresses his fiction to longings for homeland and homecoming. Skipping across this particular thematic archipelago from *Summertime* to his 1977 novel *In the Heart of the Country* yields a fugue on embodied and spiritual ties to landscape. "I want to be buried here," Coetzee's cousin Margot remembers him saying in Vincent's "dramatized" version of her interview in *Summertime* (87). John Coetzee's slightly morbid claim evokes Lucy Lurie's more determined subsistence in *Disgrace* on

the land in the Eastern Cape, where she sustains a postapartheid ad hoc existence with Petrus, her former black tenant. Lucy's solution to the problem of how to live "in this time and this place, this place being South Africa" harkens back to the similar negotiations in the different time and place of Michael K's subsistence on the veldt.[9] Casting further back, Michael K is staged against the unstable preapartheid race relations that govern Magda's grim frontier life in *In the Heart of the Country.* Being at home in the Karoo, feeling that the landscape "touches one's soul" (as John Coetzee puts it to Margot in *Summertime*), is similarly consonant with the Coetzee of *Boyhood,* who loved "every stone . . . every bush, every blade of grass" of Voëlfontein, his grandfather's farm.[10] Cutting across race and time, Coetzee's work captures characters whose relationships to their times and places bear the paradoxical brands of forsakenness and consecration.

If Coetzee's political response to apartheid in *Summertime* can be described as oppositional but quietist, his aesthetic response tends toward abstraction. For John Coetzee, apartheid brings Beckett to mind: John's fragments record frustration with how "the whole sorry, murderous show . . . [of apartheid has] moved into the endgame, and everyone knows it" (12). *Summertime* thus encodes the way fictions, especially those of Joyce and Beckett, filter Coetzee's perceptions of political histories at an existential rather than causal level. It is at this conjunction between a symbolic approach to narrative and a theological reading of politics that I see Coetzee's interest in religion cohere throughout his career. A journal entry dated 31 May 1975, around the time Coetzee was at work on *In the Heart of the Country,* shows the aspiring novelist playing the confident theologian:

> If Jesus had stooped to play politics he might have become a key man in Roman Judea, a big operator. It was because he was indifferent to politics, and made his indifference clear, that he was liquidated. How to live one's life outside politics, and one's death too: that was the example he set for his followers. Odd to find himself contemplating Jesus as a guide. But where should he search for a better one? (12–13)

Coetzee's reading of Christianity avoids ritual and theology in favor of thinking narratively and structurally about plot, characters, and actions. Reading in this way is both abstract—in that it tends to generate functional equivalences between Roman Judea and apartheid South Africa, between Christ and John Coetzee—and historically specific. In 1975 as much as

in 2009, Coetzee speaks of religion from outside its organizations and with trepidation; an undated note following the aforementioned fragment discussed shows Coetzee admonishing himself to "[a]void pushing his interest in Jesus too far and turning this into a conversion narrative" (13).

In *Summertime*'s coda of undated fragments, however, familial rather than political bonds are drawn to the core of the project. *Summertime*'s emotional energy inheres in the dynamic of father and son and more specifically in the question of what kind of care is owed to the suffering beings brought close to us by right of birth or accidental encounter. Like Aiden Phillips of *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), Coetzee's father in *Summertime* is diagnosed with cancer and undergoes a laryngectomy. Whereas for Elizabeth the proximity of death produces an opportunity for physical caritas, *Summertime* closes with the young John Coetzee faced with a decision: whether to "abandon some of his personal projects and be a nurse" or to announce to his dying father "*I am going to abandon you. Goodbye*" (265–66, original italics). For the Coetzee of *Summertime,* there is no question: for John Coetzee the agenbite of inwit is primarily rhetorical; he will undoubtedly refuse to play Antigone to his father's Oedipus, or even Kent to his father's Lear.

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NOTES

1. In this sentence I quote from the first sentences of both *Boyhood* and *Youth* to highlight the novelty of *Summertime* (J. M. Coetzee, Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life I [New York: Penguin, 1998), page 1, line 1; and *Youth: Scenes from Provincial Life II* [New York: Penguin, 2003], page 1, line 1).
2. James Joyce, Ulysses, Gabler Edition (New York: Vintage, 1986), page 200, lines 875–80.
3. John Maxwell Coetzee, "The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: An Essay in Stylistic Analysis" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, January 1969).
4. Joyce, *Ulysses,* page 1, lines 156–57.
5. Ibid., page 18, lines 403–4.
6. J. M. Coetzee, "From 'Summertime': 'Undated Fragments,'" *New York Review of Books,* 16 July 2009.
7. Coetzee, "English Fiction of Samuel Beckett," 3.
8. Ibid.
9. J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 112.
10. J. M. Coetzee, *Boyhood,* 80.