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David Marcus

DIARY OF A BAD YEAR

by J.M. Coetzee

Viking, 2008 240 pp \$24.95

J.M. COETZEE made an early career out of ambivalence. Restrained and impersonal, he mined the caverns of despair from the safe distance of allegory and literary appropriation. *Life and Times of Michael K*, his 1983 Booker Prize winner, tracked the itinerant life of a slow-witted gardener in the sparse prose of Kafka. *Foe*, a work of revisionist and feminist genius, challenged the rugged masculinity of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* by inhabiting the voice of an imagined female companion. *Master of Petersburg* occupied not only the melancholic timbre of a Dostoevsky novel—it was, after all, about the great master—but also the stilted Victorian English of a Constance Garnett translation.

Over the past decade, however, Coetzee has adopted an increasingly direct and confessional style. Once dedicated to ectomorphic reticence, he has now allowed himself the fattier tissues of biography. Beginning with his second Booker Prize winner, the 1997 *Disgrace*, he has spoken through a series of half-selves. Reclusive and dissatisfied, the protagonists of *Disgrace*, *Elizabeth Costello*, and *Slow Man* laid bare the moral and psychological crises of a midlife colonial: shame and guilt foremost, but also the persistent anxieties of physical and sexual decline.

At first glance, *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee's most recent entry, seems to follow this "late" tendency toward novelized autobiography. A book of journal entries, it maps the tortuous cartography of Coetzeean doubt through a near biographical stand-in: the

eponymous John C, author of *Waiting for the Barbarians* and recent émigré from South Africa to Australia (a migration Coetzee himself made in 2002).

But this newest work also serves as an indictment of his late style—and a return to ambivalence. Narcissistic, didactic, structurally and politically overwrought, it appears to contain, and warn against, all of the difficult and cumbersome qualities of his last two novels. *Diary of a Bad Year* is confession without redemption, solipsism without sympathy, narrative play without much story; and one of its lasting qualities is the ambiguity of its message: Is Coetzee writing rueful self-parody? Or is this uneven book written in earnest? Are we to take Coetzee's alter ego seriously when he writes, in a tendentious aside, that "if I heard that some American had committed suicide rather than live in disgrace, I would fully understand"?

DESPITE ITS NAME, *Diary of a Bad Year* is not a single journal but a compendium of three. The first, a set of political essays titled "Strong Opinions," contains John C's ruminations and grumblings over avian flu, Machiavelli, Al Qaeda, fan mail, Guantánamo Bay, bodily decline, pedophilia, and competition, while the second and third are the personal diaries of John C and his typist, Anya.

At first the story appears conventional. A reclusive novelist in the wane of his career meets an attractive young woman. Though no longer capable of much but love's "metaphysical ache," he enlists her to transcribe a collection of essays in the hope that her presence will give new lease to his isolated life. From there a predictable comedy of misunderstandings ensues in which he lectures her on high art and morality and she tutors him on life and its hard knocks.

For a novelist who has, in previous novels, been so carefully attuned to the psychosexual

abuses of men toward women, it is odd that here Coetzee cannot produce a convincing female perspective. Not only is Anya emotionally and intellectually facile, but the voice of her diary entries is often gratingly contrived. "As I pass [John C], carrying the laundry basket, I make sure I wiggle my behind, my delicious behind, sheathed in tight denim. If I were a man I would not be able to keep my eyes off of me. Alan says there are different bums in the world as there are faces. Mirror, mirror on the wall, I say to Alan, whose is the fairest of them all?"

More compelling are the journal entries of John C. Wintry and unemotional, John C is a man whose art is devoid of "generosity, fails to celebrate life, lacks love." A self-proclaimed "sobrietary," he is most catalyzed by the cool, musical geometry of Bach and the stoical introversion of Kierkegaard. When he is brought to tears, near the end of the novel, it is neither from Anya's departure nor her boyfriend's mockery but a late-night reading of *The Brothers Karamazov*.

"So why does Ivan make me cry in spite of myself?" he asks. "The answer has nothing to do with ethics or politics, everything to do with rhetoric. In his tirade against forgiveness Ivan shamelessly uses sentiment (martyred children) and caricature (cruel landowners) to advance his ends. Far more powerful than the substance of his argument, which is not strong, are the accents of anguish, the personal anguish of a soul unable to bear the horrors of this world."

It is fitting, then, that the anguish that pervades *Diary of a Bad Year* does not lie in the self-analysis of John C or Anya's diaries but in the rhetoric of its essays. *Diary of a Bad Year* is a novel about the failure to understand—oneself and the world—and it is only in the tentativeness of John C's essays that one comes to know him as a tortured, marginal individual caught between skepticism and vision.

As a skeptic, John C is consumed with the task of reasoned deconstruction. Coolly anthropological, his essays take aim at the political and societal assumptions—statehood, language, sexual mores, competition—that have led to current systems of power and repression. But as a visionary, he is prone to declinist jer-

emiads. A cultural and political pessimist in the vein of Spengler, John C writes of contemporary Australia as if it were interwar Europe. "As the material foundations of 'old' social relations erode before my eyes, these relations take on the status of manners rather than of living cultural reflexes. Australian society may never—thank God!—become quite as selfish and cruel as American society, but it does seem to be sleepwalking in that direction."

In fact a favorite victim of disparagement is this selfish and cruel America—a country so beset by malevolence and a corruption of heart that it draws, in John C's mind, comparison to Nazi Germany. "Impossible to believe that no [American] has yet plotted to assassinate these criminals in high office," he writes in a section entitled "On National Shame." "Has there perhaps already been a Stauffenberg plot?"

What makes these essays so troubling, however, is neither their misanthropy and cultural pessimism nor even their dark view of American society (there may, even, be some truth to these visions)—but their fervid, near prophetic tenor. Here is John C in a short entry titled "On Curse":

The drama being played out before our eyes is of a ruler, George W. Bush . . . whose hubris lies in denying the force of the curse on him . . . In the outrages he and his servants perform, notably the outrage of torture, and in his hubristic claim to be above the law, the younger Bush challenges the gods, and by the very shamelessness of that challenge ensures that the gods will visit the punishment upon the children and grandchildren of his house . . . The impious one brings down a curse upon his descendants; his descendants curse his name."

ONE MUST BE careful not to find John Coetzee the novelist in John C the diarist. Like Philip Roth, Coetzee has, over the years, shown himself to be a master of autobiographical disinformation. Though confessional in tone, his late novels—and two "fictional" memoirs, *Boyhood* and *Youth*—wed biography to fiction, historical fact to fantasy. There is a world of merging forms—lectures, essays, interviews—in which the psychological truth of both the real and the fictive coexists.

Like them, *Diary of a Bad Year* dwells within a realm of blurred distinctions. Through John C's essays and diary entries, we come to know an older, more marginal Coetzee: John C, born in 1936, is four years older, and though a novelist and former professor of literature, he is a less celebrated talent. "The role I play nowadays," John C observes, "is that of distinguished figure (distinguished for what no one can quite recall), the kind of notable who is taken out of storage and dusted off to say a few words at a cultural event . . . and then put back in the cupboard."

Coetzee goes even further in his challenge of the traditional novel. Rather than have one narrative follow the next, he organizes *Diary of a Bad Year* vertically, stacking the different journals one on top of the other so that they all reside, like layers of a wedding cake, on a single page. A perennial skeptic of realism, he has reduced his novel to its barest, most friable foundations and revealed to all its deceptions and artifice. Unafraid to bare a sleight of hand, he wants to remind us of the deep gulf that divides the limited tributary of realism from the vast river of reality.

And this is *Diary of a Bad Year's* overarching paradox. As a work of ideas, it is perhaps Coetzee's most explicitly political. But as a narrative work, it is his most oblique. It is precisely in this duality that the novel survives as a work of art. By framing his portrait of John C so indirectly, Coetzee can retain a salving dose of complexity as he treads, in the words of Lionel Trilling, "the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet." "Where would the art of fiction be if there were no double meanings?" Coetzee asks in *Elizabeth Costello*. "What would life itself be if there were only heads or tails and no in between?"

THIS DESIRE FOR ambiguity is, in part, an inheritance from Coetzee's great master, Dostoevsky, a writer who aspired, in Coetzee's words, to have "no dominating, central authorial consciousness, and therefore no claim to truth or authority only competing voices and discourses." But Coetzee's ambivalence toward authority—both in literature and politics—can also be traced to his six decades in South Africa.

Born in 1940, Coetzee was eight years old when the National Party came to power and instituted apartheid rule. A precocious, sensitive child, he was acutely aware of the increasing brutality of the South African state. But as a member of the white ruling class, he was also conscious that in the chaotic aftermath of apartheid, the cruel power structure could be reversed and the first regime's victims might become the second's perpetrators. This was, after all, one of the great moral catastrophes of Western colonialism in Africa: it taught its victims to rely on the same violent force used to oppress them.

This fear of power—and of its violent, authoritarian tendencies—has made Coetzee into a reluctant anarchist, an individual deeply skeptical of both the politics of the status quo and the antipolitics of radical change. "If I were pressed to give my brand of political thought a label," he writes in *Diary of a Bad Year*. "I would call it pessimistic anarchistic quietism. . . . Anarchism because experience tells me that what is wrong with politics is power itself; [and] quietism because I have my doubts about the will to set about changing the world."

In many ways, this anarchistic quietism determined the way Coetzee protested apartheid. Unlike André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, and Nadine Gordimer, who often engaged directly with militant anti-apartheid movements, Coetzee demurred from affiliation, choosing instead the slow, lonely work of literary and critical writing.

When Coetzee rose to prominence in South Africa and abroad, many found fault with his rarefied distance from "on-the-ground" politics. How can an individual who opposes apartheid not engage in active resistance? How can he deny the moral negligence of inactivity? In her 1983 review of *Life and Times of Michael K*, Gordimer raised precisely these questions. "No one in this novel has any sense of taking part in determining [the] course of [South African] history; no one is shown to believe he knows what that course should be. The sense is of ultimate malaise: of destruction. Not even the oppressor really believes in what he is doing, anymore, let alone the revolutionary. This is a challengingly questionable position for a writer to take up in South Africa It denies the

energy of the will to resist evil.”

Coetzee’s ambivalence, however, is more than misanthropic cynicism. Motivated by a deep-seated skepticism toward both the politics of order and the chaos of revolt, Coetzee doubts not the ability to resist evil—but the ability to resist the violence that comes from such opposition. “When madness climbs the throne,” he wrote in his 1990 novel *Age of Iron*, “who in the land escapes contagion?”

Instead, Coetzee believes that the most successful means of opposition come through more critical methods. In a society where language, economics, and rule of law are constructed for and by the powerful, the most potent form of resistance is deconstructive—to “criticize and encourage criticism of the foundations of [one’s] own belief systems.” This is opposition as the slow, skeptical dissolution of power and ideas; intellectual engagement as a form of rugged moral self-interrogation; and for Coetzee, a literary psychologist, this has meant not only documenting the external function of power in apartheid South Africa but also its internal nihilism. “[Apartheid] set for itself

the task of reforming—that is, deforming and hardening—the human heart,” Coetzee wrote in *Giving Offense*, his 1996 study of censorship, and “if we want to understand it, we cannot ignore those passages of its testament that reach us in the heart-speech of autobiography and confession.”

This is precisely the task Coetzee has set for himself in *Diary of a Bad Year*. Having grown tired of “the evocation of the real,” as John C puts it, Coetzee has limited himself to more cardiographic investigations. Despite its cumbersome form, his novel’s underlying desire is to untangle the knotted heart-speech and emotions of our bipolar age. John C’s bad-faith politics, his inclination to hyperbole, his caricature dealings with younger women, his hollow, nearly will-less existence are all brought forth in an effort to unfurl the entangled torture of an aging, isolated male novelist.

By contriving these qualities, Coetzee draws from his portrait of John C an entire cultural mood. Caught within the paroxysms of our time, many intellectuals have become too susceptible to its overheated rhetoric. Here is playwright Harold Pinter serenely extrapolating the complex relationship between truth and drama in his 2005 Nobel address, and then denouncing Tony Blair as a war criminal. Here is novelist Martin Amis responding to one *Independent* (UK) reader’s question by coolly warning, “Remember the axiom: the danger of terrorism lies not in what it inflicts but in what it provokes,” and then answering another with, “Here’s a good one (though I can hardly claim it as my own): the phrase is ‘fuck off.’” Here is philosopher Jean Baudrillard writing about the limitations of knowledge and moral judgment in *The Spirit of Terrorism* and then condemning the West, in particular the United States, for its self-destructive system of power. “The West,” he wrote, “has become suicidal, and declared war on itself. . . . [The collapse of the Twin Towers] came about by an unpredictable complicity, as though the towers, by collapsing on their own, by committing suicide, had joined in to round off the event. In a sense, the entire system, by its internal fragility, lent the initial action a helping hand.”

With *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee is not only capturing the anxious discontent of his

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own “late” style but that of many of his contemporary intellectuals. This is an era overwhelmed by political failure—one in which “the outrage and the shame is so great,” writes John C, “that all calculation, all prudence, is overwhelmed and one must act, that is to say, speak”—and if this novel comes to us as overwrought and, on occasion, exhausting, then it is a consequence of our own alienating, polemical selves.

IN A NOVEL haunted by Dostoevsky, it is only appropriate that the desperate and often irrational specter of loneliness emanates throughout the book. Like his predecessors—from the nearly mute Michael K to the didactic Elizabeth Costello—John C is a man tortured by his desire to escape the cloistered narrowness of his existence, and his anxious visions are, above all else, the twisted love songs of a postcolonial Prufrock. “Love,” John C confesses near the end of the novel, “[is] what the heart aches for.”

Love may be what John C and Anya’s hearts ache for but it certainly is not what they are given. Near the end of the novel, the journal entries begin to lose their distinction, often melding into discursive streams of consciousness. Some entries are left blank; others fill out entire pages; a looseness of form dominates; and as the book ends, the narrative bifurcates: On top we are provided with a last essay on the ethical power of literature while below, in the space once dedicated to both John C and Anya’s personal diaries, Anya has taken over completely. Having suffered the humiliating defeats of romance and age, John C has retreated. It is not clear whether this last act of reticence is one of exhaustion or of mortality, but as the reader approaches the last sentence, John C, for the first time, is silent. ●

DAVID MARCUS is *Dissent*’s online editor and assistant book editor. He last wrote on the politics and novels of the Hungarian dissident George Konrád.

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