BEING LITERARY IN THE WRONG WAY, TIME, AND PLACE: J.M. COETZEE’S YOUTH

Lars Engle
University of Tulsa, Oklahoma

One of the enduring interests of Shakespeare scholars is a period in the mid-1580s, when records of William Shakespeare no longer turn up in Stratford on Avon but the actor and dramatist William Shakespeare has not yet appeared in any of the archives associated with the metropolitan theatres. Was he a provincial schoolmaster? Was he in the service of some great Catholic family, as those who think Shakespeare a Catholic sometimes suggest? Holding horses and polishing props for some company of travelling players? These are known as ‘Shakespeare’s lost years’, and until some second Hotson dives to pluck bright honour from the depths of the archive, we are free to hypothesize about them. For students of J. M. Coetzee, his 2002 work, Youth, sheds an unexpected light on what had been lost years of early manhood, between birth and upbringing in South Africa (illuminated by Boyhood [1997]) and graduate study in English with a thesis on Beckett’s style at the University of Texas (described in an essay included in Doubling the Point [1996]). Coetzee’s personal dignity and the rebarbative austerity he has sometimes shown in interviews, as well as the kind of novel he writes, have on the whole deterred his critics from biographical speculation, but just as the extraordinarily revealing interviews he and David Attwell published in Doubling the Point showed that Coetzee can talk about his writing with a frankness few authors choose to allow – if asked the right questions in the right format by the right person – so Boyhood and Youth have demonstrated that he is willing to answer questions no critic had dared to pose about his early life with startling clarity. But his answers also puzzle
his readers. A response to the puzzlement *Youth* generated can be seen in the *New York Times Book Review* ‘Notable Books’ summary:

YOUTH. By J. M. Coetzee. (Viking, $22.95.) During that period of a man’s life when he is most repulsive to himself and everybody else, Coetzee, at the end of his teens a snob, prude and mama’s boy, devoted immense efforts to becoming a lover and an artist, with results so disappointing at the time he has seen fit to write this memoir in the third person.

I take it as a given that *Youth* presents itself to readers as a piece of sustained irony at the youthful application of an idea about the literary – an idea largely learned in adolescence and then at the University of Cape Town in the 1950s and early 1960s. The irony derives from two sources: first, the ill fit between the grandeur of the youthful John’s idea of the literary and his actual life and times as reported in the work’s present tense narrative, and second, the inferred presence as author – writing however in a way that keeps his current opinions almost entirely to himself – of the 60-year-old J. M. Coetzee, a man with a fully-achieved literary life, who is exposing the youthful John’s idea of the literary very thoroughly as potentially ludicrous but is also being extremely silent about his own attitudes toward it. John is in fact J. M. Coetzee’s first name, and while the John of *Youth* never mentions his surname, it is apparently one that marks him as an Afrikaner: the English employer of Astrid, the au pair from Klagenfurt, looks at John, and ‘her eyes say: we don’t need a graceless colonial here, and a Boer to boot’ (*Youth* 86). Later John wonders, ‘How long will he have to live in England before he has become the real thing, become English? Will getting a British passport be enough, or does an odd-sounding foreign name mean that he will be shut out for ever?’ (103). More encouragement for an identification of the John of *Youth* with the author of *Youth* comes as John finds himself fascinated with the journals of early travelers in Southern Africa like Burchell. John thinks about writing a work that emulates an early traveler’s narrative, ‘not a forgery … a book whose horizon of knowledge will be that of Burchell’s time, the 1820s, yet whose response to the world around it will be alive in a way that Burchell … could not be’ (138). This work sounds very like ‘The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee’ in J. M. Coetzee’s first novel, *Dusklands* (1974). When you add this to the fact that the two share the same birth-year and the same institutional history, it seems overwhelmingly probable that that ‘odd-sounding foreign name’ is in fact ‘Coetzee’.1
Some typical passages from the work illustrate the ironies I am describing and allow analysis of them with the following questions in mind:

First, if J. M. Coetzee ironizes his youthful idea of the literary, has he ever implicitly or explicitly proposed a more mature idea to take its place?

Second, do aspects of the irony, at the expense of his youthful self described in *Youth*, attach to his present self?

Third, is there something particularly colonial or postcolonial about John’s struggle to achieve literariness – perhaps an uncanny repression of colonial identity in the *idea* of the literary, followed by the partial discovery that colonial identity will in fact be at the centre of the literature one is called to write?

For clarity in what follows, ‘John’ is the central character in *Youth*; ‘Coetzee’ is the work’s author.

The young John, after a review of his solitary domestic economy – bean and marrowbone soup, apples in season, extra milk curdling to cheese in a nylon stocking – recognizes that his appearance is unprepossessing and unformed.

What will cure him of babyhood, make him into a man?
What will cure him, if it were to arrive, will be love. He may not believe in God but he does believe in love and the powers of love. The beloved, the destined one, will see at once through the odd and even dull exterior he presents to the fire that burns within him. Meanwhile, being dull and odd-looking are part of a purgatory he must pass through in order to emerge, one day, into the light: the light of love, the light of art. For he will be an artist, that has long been settled. If for the time being he must be obscure and ridiculous, that is because it is the lot of the artist to suffer obscurity and ridicule until the day when he is revealed in his true powers and the scoffers and mockers fall silent.

His sandals cost two shillings and sixpence a pair. (3)

If it has ‘long been settled’ that John is to be an artist, we might ask, how long? When was it settled, and by what? It was not settled at the end of *Boyhood*, the work to which *Youth* is something of a sequel. (In the U.S., in fact, *Youth* has a subtitle identifying it as the second in a series of ‘Scenes of Provincial Life’ – though, perhaps to avoid insulting the British public in whose country much of the work takes place, this subtitle does not appear in
the London edition.) I will return to this question and attempt to answer it later in this essay, but it is not treated as a question requiring any sort of answer in the work. Rather, the commitment to a life in art is too deep to be negotiable; all else must give way to it; it is explored with a kind of frankness that would be reckless if it were ever uttered in speech. At the same time, the tight juxtaposition of the two-shilling rubber sandals that come off in the rain with the moment when the scoffers and mockers will fall silent is surely comic and intended to be comic. Yet, if we laugh, we join the mockers and scoffers. Even if we have in principle no reluctance to join such a group, our knowledge of J. M. Coetzee's other writings offers testimony that John's belief in a day when he would be revealed in his true powers was in some sense appropriate.

Dull and odd-looking as John may be, he is not celibate. Sex and love are major preoccupations. But sex too, even sex on Clifton Beach with a beautiful woman he has just met, is wrapped up with art in ways that both invest sexual relations with potential significance and interfere with self-abandonment in particular cases.

In fact he is not carried away. Not only is there the matter of the sand, which gets into everything, there is also the nagging question of why this woman, whom he has never met before, is giving herself to him. Is it credible that in the course of a casual conversation she detected the secret flame burning in him, the flame that marks him as an artist? (5)

John doubts that Jacqueline detects his inner flame, and he turns out to be right. When Jacqueline reads what he has been writing in his diary about her, she moves out.

[H]is first try at living with a woman has ended in failure, in ignominy. He must return to living by himself, and there will be no little relief in that. Yet he cannot live alone for ever. Having mistresses is part of an artist's life: even if he steers clear of the trap of marriage, as he will certainly do, he is going to have to find a way of living with women. Art cannot be fed on deprivation alone, on longing, loneliness. There must be intimacy, passion, love as well.

Picasso, who is a great artist, perhaps the greatest of all, is a living example.... Out of the passion that flares up anew with each new mistress, the Doras and Pilars whom chance brings
to his doorstep are reborn into everlasting art. That is how it is
done. What of him? Can he promise that the women in his own
life ... will have a similar destiny? He would like to believe so,
but he has his doubts ... he is no Picasso. He is quieter, gloomier,
more northern. Nor does he have Picasso’s hypnotic black eyes.
If ever he tries to transfigure a woman, he will not transfigure
her as cruelly as Picasso does, bending and twisting her body
like metal in a fiery furnace. Writers are not like painters
anyway: they are more dogged, more subtle. (11)

We imagine the mature Coetzee at work on a passage like this one, and we
practical question also arises. What is he working with? If Youth is to be
believed, John is a diarist; he does not regard his diary as part of his art,
perhaps, but it appears to be far and away his most copious form of writing.
When Jacqueline complains of what is in the diary, John responds, ‘You are
not going to stop me from writing!’ (8), and later in the work, when John is
realizing that work at IBM in London is destroying him, he writes ‘Over the
past year his handwriting has, beyond his control, been growing smaller,
smaller and more secretive’ (105).2 Thus it seems not improbable, indeed
quite likely, that Coetzee, in writing Youth, works with a text written by a past
self in front of him, a past self whose inner life it is his task, with mordant
intensity, to transmute from the first person, past tense normal for diarists
into the third-person present-tense that will efface all evidence of double
consciousness. The transmutation will also bring into focus historical
differences between what people thought in the late 1950s and early 1960s
and what they think now — for instance, about Picasso’s relations with women
or about women in general in relation to art. Thus Coetzee foregrounds the
ways John’s art beliefs are wound up with what we would now call sexism:3

Women do not have the sacred fire (there are exceptions:
Sappho, Emily Bronte). It is in quest of the fire they lack, the
fire of love, that women pursue artists and give themselves to
them. In their lovemaking artists and their mistresses experience
briefly, tantalizingly, the life of gods. From such lovemaking
the artist returns to his work enriched and strengthened, the
woman to her life transfigured. (66)

This technique of transferring the implied convictions of an author,
convictions often set down in past tense and often in first person, into a
globalising third-person present that makes eternizing claims, claims which can be both ringingly eloquent and also put before the reader to be skeptically scrutinized, is one that Coetzee frequently employs as a reviewer, especially when he is getting to what he thinks the heart of another author’s message. An example from his essay on Breyten Breytenbach in *Stranger Shores* (2001):

Thus Breytenbach links the two themes of his ethical philosophy: bastardy and nomadism. Just as the bastard sheds his self and enters into unpredictable mixture with the other, so the nomad uproots himself from the old, comfortable dwelling place to follow the animals, or the smells of the wind, or the figures of his imagination, into an uncertain future.

Coetzee also uses this technique as an essayist, for instance in his account of Rene Girard’s mimetic rivalry in the essay on Erasmus in *Giving Offense* (1996):

Desire, then, does not know itself. It proceeds from a lack. What the desiring subject lacks, and ultimately desires, is fullness of being. The model is adopted as model because it appears endowed with superior being....

Model becomes rival, rival becomes obstacle. In fact, a spiraling dynamic is set in train: the more model transforms itself into obstacle, the more desire tends to transform obstacle into model. (255–6)

Again, one can see how present-tense third-person for Coetzee serves to highlight for him the certainties or God-terms of others – certainties he does not need either to refute or espouse once they have emerged with such clarity as if by themselves.

Now it would surely be presumptuous to say that *Youth* is an extended book review or interpretative summary of J. M. Coetzee’s unpublished diaries. We do not even know for certain that such diaries exist. Derek Attridge has discussed how third-person present-tense narration in *Boyhood* estranges that work from the temporality of confession, and certainly the effect in *Youth* clearly at the very least involves a parallel estrangement from the direct acknowledgement of continuity of selfhood between John and J. M. Coetzee – a continuity that is, however, strongly suggested by their names and life-histories and that I have been assuming throughout. Attridge, in fact, suggests that ‘in both *Boyhood* and *Youth* the power of this exposure of the self, of
this drive for truth, can be felt only if the author of the words we read is identified with the “he” of the narrative. Margaret Lenta comments that “the love-hate relationship of narrator and reader with protagonist” is central to the effect of the work. But neither Lenta nor Attridge mentions the possibility that Coetzee is rewriting diaries in *Youth*. Nonetheless, given that this kind of use of third-person present-tense is an intellectual habit as well as a narrative strategy for Coetzee, the idea that *Youth* rewrites the young John Coetzee’s own life-writings in order to clarify, expose, and open them to judgement seems worth entertaining.

*Youth* is rich in hints about where John’s ideas about the literary life come from. In Cape Town, John reads Pound’s letters:

> Obeying his daimon, Pound has sacrificed his life to his art. So has Eliot, though Eliot’s suffering has been of a more private nature. Eliot and Pound have lived lives of sorrow and sometimes of ignominy. There is a lesson for him in that, driven home on every page of their poetry – of Eliot’s, with which he had his first overwhelming encounter while he was still at school, and now of Pound’s. Like Eliot and Pound, he must be prepared to endure all that life has stored up for him, even if that means exile, obscure labour, and obloquy. And if he fails the highest test of art, if it turns out that after all he does not have the blessed gift, then he must be prepared to endure that too: the immovable verdict of history, the fate of being, despite all his present and future sufferings, minor. Many are called, few are chosen. For every major poet a cloud of minor poets, like gnats buzzing around a lion. (20)

Thus for John, Eliot, as for many of Coetzee’s generation, was an early overwhelming influence – and not just Eliot the poet by this time, but also Eliot the canon-making evaluator of the status of others. Keats was evidently another, perhaps even earlier, passion until he was banished by acerbic comments from modernists (themselves, as the language hints without making clear whether John is aware of this, under the influence of the Victorian Pater):

Eliot and Pound are trying to revitalize Anglo-American poetry by bringing back to it the astringency of the French. He is fully in accord. How he could once have been so infatuated with Keats as to write Keatsian sonnets he cannot comprehend. Keats is like watermelon, soft and sweet and crimson, whereas
poetry should be hard and clear like a flame. Reading half a dozen pages of Keats is like yielding to seduction.

He would be more secure in his discipleship to Pound if he could actually read French. (21–2)

Once again, as with the two-shilling sandals, the opening sentence of the next paragraph brings one crashing comically down out of the realm of aesthetic judgment and into the particular difficulties of being John. While some of these difficulties are intellectual – his gradual coming to awareness that he is not that good at mathematics, his inability to master Romance languages – they centre, as we have already observed, on a nexus of eros and art. This nexus also includes, a bit less insistently, questions of morality and politics as well. John views politics as a somewhat paralyzed spectator; much of his life in England is part of a project to de-South Africanize himself, yet he compulsively returns to his South Africanness: ‘South Africa is a wound within him. How much longer before the wound stops bleeding?’ (116). But his commitment to lyric art does not insulate him from narrative politics, much as he may wish it to. Just before he leaves Cape Town, John is summoned from a mathematics tutorial to witness what appears to be the African workers’ march on Parliament led by Philip Kgosana on 30 March 1960.?

Thousands upon thousands, the column of men winds its way up the hill. It does not look like an army, by that is what it is, an army called into being of a sudden out of the wastelands of the Cape Flats. Once they reach the city, what will they do? Whatever it is, there are not enough policemen in the land to stop them, not enough bullets to kill them. (38).

Coetzee records almost invisibly the betrayal of the 23-year-old Kgosana – who was assured of a meeting with the Minister of Justice if he asked the marchers to return home, then arrested when he returned for the meeting – by having John quote newspaper accounts: ‘defused, they say, by the good sense (for once) of the police and the co-operation of march leaders. The government, they say, would be well advised to sit up and take note. So they tame the event, making it less than it was’ (39). This seems an instance, on Coetzee’s part, of a Tacitean narrative style, something John feels a pull towards even as a student aspiring to lyric:

They read Tacitus in translation: dry recitals of the excesses and outrages of the emperors in which only the inexplicable
hurry of sentence after sentence hints at irony. If he is going to be a poet he ought to be taking lessons from Catullus, poet of love, whom they are translating in tutorials; but it is Tacitus the historian, whose Latin is so difficult that he cannot follow it in the original, who truly grips him. (23)

John’s commitment to art often abruptly trumps, or rescues him from, his interest in political action, as during his uneasy visit to the fringes of a Committee for Nuclear Disarmament rally during the Cuban Missile Crisis; indeed, at times like these Coetzee seems to be foregrounding the utility of a commitment to art in distracting one from the confusions of politics:

It is the first mass meeting he has ever been to: fist-shaking and slogan-chanting, the whipping up of passion in general, repel him. Only love and art are, in his opinion, worthy of giving oneself to without reserve. (85)

The treatment of personal morality vis-à-vis art is equally complex. For example, when house-sitting for his professor Guy Howarth, John reacts aversely when drunken Marie climbs into his bed:

He has read Henry Miller. If a drunken woman had slipped into bed with Henry Miller, the fucking and no doubt the drinking as well would have gone on all night.... What is he going to do once he is in Paris or London? Is he going to persist in not playing the game?

Besides his horror of drunkenness he has a horror of physical ugliness.... Does an artist’s life entail sleeping with anyone and everyone, in the name of life? If one is finicky about sex, is one rejecting life?

Another question: What made Marie, from New Zealand, decide he was worth getting into bed with? Was it simply because he was there, or had she heard from Howarth that he was a poet, a poet to be? Women love artists because they burn with an inner flame, a flame that consumes yet paradoxically renews all that it touches. When she slipped into his bed, Marie must have thought she would be licked by the flame of art, and experience an ecstasy beyond words. Instead she found herself being pushed away by a panic-stricken boy.... He knows that to condemn a woman for being ugly is morally
despicable. But fortunately, artists do not have to be morally admirable people. All that matters is that they create great art.... (30)

John’s meditation on this event moves through it to the life of the artist, against which he judges himself and finds himself wanting. At the same time he is aware that his commitment to this life can absolve him from other concerns. The continuation makes it clear that artists are not exactly beyond good and evil. But they need to exercise a particular kind of tolerance toward contemptible impulses in themselves:

Normal people find it hard to be bad. Normal people, when they feel badness flare up within them, drink, swear, commit violence. Badness is to them like a fever: they want it out of their system, they want to go back to being normal. But artists have to live with their fever, whatever its nature, good or bad. The fever is what makes them artists; the fever must be kept alive. That is why artists can never be wholly present to the world: one eye has always to be turned inward. As for women who flock after artists, they cannot wholly be trusted. For just as the spirit of the artist is both flame and fever, so the woman who yearns to be licked by tongues of flame will at the same time do her best to quench the fever and bring down the artist to common ground. Therefore women have to be resisted even when they are loved. They cannot be allowed close enough to the flame to put it out. (30–31)

This is ironic, surely, especially in its return to the sexist myth of the self-immolating muse. But in part it approximates one of the mature Coetzee’s stronger meditations on the nature of art. I quote at some length from Giving Offense, Coetzee’s 1996 contemplation of censorship:

All writers under censorship are at least potentially touched by paranoia....

Why should censorship have such contagious power? ...

The self, as we understand the self today, is not the unity it was assumed to be by classical rationalism. On the contrary, it is multiple and multiply divided against itself. It is, to speak in figures, a zoo in which a multitude of beasts have residence,
over which the anxious, overworked zookeeper of rationality exercises a rather limited control. At night the zookeeper sleeps and the beasts roam about, doing their dream-work.

In this figural zoo, some of the beasts have names, like figure-of-the-father and figure-of-the-mother; others are memories or fragments of memories in transmuted form, with strong elements of feeling attached to them; a whole subcolony are semitamed but still treacherous earlier versions of the self, each with an inner zoo of its own over which it has less than complete control.

Artists, in Freud’s account, are people who can make a tour of the inner menagerie with a degree of confidence and emerge, when they so wish, more or less unscathed. From Freud’s account of creative work I take one element: that creativity of a certain kind involves inhabiting and managing and exploiting quite primitive parts of the self. While this is not a particularly dangerous activity, it is a delicate one. It may take years of preparation before the artist finally gets the codes and the keys and the balances right, and can move in and out more or less freely. It is also a very private activity, so private that it almost constitutes the definition of privacy: how I am with myself.

While this is, of course, a richer meditation on the nature of art and the unconscious than John’s, and one which largely avoids moral issues, it still closely resembles in its basic account of the artist’s special relation to their own impulses what John affirms about the fevers artists need to entertain rather than expunge. Moreover, when Coetzee goes on to discuss the process further, it comes close to a description of the relation between Coetzee and John in *Youth*, a process of partial collaboration, partial destructive exposure, of a ‘semitamed but still treacherous earlier version of the self’:

Managing the inner selves, making them work for one (making them productive) is a complex matter of pleasing and satisfying and challenging and extorting and wooing and feeding, and sometimes even of putting to death. For writing not only comes out of the zoo but (to be hypermetaphorical) goes back in again. That is to say, insofar as writing is transactional, the figures *for whom* and *to whom* it is done are also figures in the zoo: for instance, the figure-of-the-beloved. (*Offense* 38)
And indeed, when Coetzee goes further to describe the violence censorship does to this delicate internal relation between the artists and their inner menageries, both his elaboration of the role of the beloved and his elaboration of the role of the censor resonate with *Youth*, reminding us, on the one hand, of John’s humiliating experiences with women and, on the other, of the ways in which his young self seems somehow incapable of pleasing, satisfying, living up to the expectations of his mature self:

Imagine, then, a project in writing that is, at heart, a transaction with some such figure of the beloved, that tries to please her (but that also tries continually though surreptitiously to revise and recreate her as the-one-who-will-be-pleased); and imagine what will happen if into this transaction is introduced in a massive and undeniable way another figure-of-the-reader, the dark-suited, bald-headed censor, with his pursed lips and his red pen and his irritability and his censoriousness – the censor, in fact, as parodic version of the figure-of-the-father. Then the entire balance of the carefully constructed inner drama will be destroyed, and destroyed in a way that is hard to repair, since the more one tries to ignore (repress) the censor, the larger he swells.

Working under censorship is like being intimate with someone who does not love you, with whom you want no intimacy, but who presses himself in upon you.

*(Offense 38)*

In his youthful sexual life, John has this experience of unwelcome intimacy from both sides, and unwelcome sexual intimacy is of course a major theme in Coetzee’s novels, above all in *Disgrace* (1999). But it should also be noted that in *Youth* John’s continued, reiterated desire to find a woman to be lover and muse – the desire that helps make him an unsatisfactory partner for the women he actually meets – is very much what the mature Coetzee describes when he treats writing projects as ‘a transaction with some figure of the beloved, that tries to please her (but that also tries ... to revise and recreate her as the-one-who-will-be-pleased)’. Consider John in his London loneliness:

Saturday and Sunday evenings are the worst....

His hope is that from the featureless crowds amidst which he moves there will emerge a woman who will respond to his glance, glide wordlessly to his side, return with him (still
wordlessly – what could their first word be? – it is unimaginable) to his bedsitter, make love to him, vanish into the darkness, reappear the next night (he will be sitting over his books, there will be a tap at the door), again embrace him, again, on the stroke of midnight, vanish, and so forth, thereby transforming his life and releasing a torrent of pent-up verse on the pattern of Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus*.

A letter arrives from the University of Cape Town. On the strength of his Honours examinations, it says, he has been awarded a bursary of two hundred pounds for postgraduate study. (*Youth* 52)

There is a tap on the door, but it opens a narrow chilly path to becoming an English professor rather than the warm gates that will release a pent-up torrent of poetry.

If the relation between artist, muse, past selves, and censor prefigures or echoes John’s relation to his women, does it not also prefigure John’s relation to the author of *Youth*. For Coetzee the author, John would, obviously, be a semitamed past self, one who is being challenged and at times seems close to being ‘put to death’. Thus John makes sense as part of the inner menagerie given his partial opportunity to express himself. But in another way John is to Coetzee as the writer is to the censor in Coetzee’s parable, particularly if, as above, we imagine *Youth* as a revision of John’s diaries.

When Jacqueline read John’s diaries, she walked out on him after informing him of how unsatisfactory he was: her words were: ‘I’m really disappointed in you, John. You may be very clever – I wouldn’t know about that – but you have a lot of growing up to do’ (*Youth* 9).

Is not this perhaps part of Coetzee’s reaction to reading John’s diaries as well? (It may be relevant here to remember that Eugene Dawn in *Dusklands* works in his Vietnam think-tank for a supervisor named Coetzee whom he cannot satisfy.) Is it not, however, possibly another part of Coetzee’s reaction to John to be discovering or evoking or remembering in John the germs of what in his mature vision makes Coetzee Coetzee, in such remarks as the one about the writers needing to cherish, not cure, their fevers?

At this point I want to return to a topic I broached earlier: the question of where John got his ‘long-settled’ commitment to art. There are two references in the novel, both quite unemphatic, to a moment of transformation. The first comes with respect to John’s musical ambitions, in contrast to those of his friend Paul:
Paul has studied the violin since childhood but has never got very far with it. He seems quite content to the play the same little gigs and minuets as a decade ago. His own ambitions as a musician are much larger. In his flat he has the piano that his mother bought when at the age of fifteen he began to demand piano lessons. (Youth 15)

The second comes when John in London complains of the inexorable affection his mother manifests by sending him a weekly airmail letter:

Each week a letter arrives from his mother... How can he make her accept that the process of turning himself into a different person that began when he was fifteen will be carried through remorselessly until all memory of the family and the country he left behind is extinguished? (98)

Fifteen is well before the period in John’s life dealt with in Youth and well after that dealt with in Boyhood. It would be a plausible year for the ‘overwhelming encounter’ with Eliot’s poetry, but such an encounter would not lead to demands for piano lessons.

In fact we have another account of Coetzee’s (rather than John’s) fifteenth year that goes a long way toward explaining the deep-seated commitment to art so relentlessly explored in Youth. Coetzee’s 1991 essay ‘What Is a Classic?’ frames itself as a meditation on T.S. Eliot’s 1944 Presidential Lecture to the Virgil Society in London, also entitled ‘What Is a Classic’. Coetzee sees Eliot’s essay as a kind of culmination of a long project in self-transformation Eliot had carried out since moving to London before the First World War. It is, as Coetzee sees it, a distinctively colonial project, though Eliot would not use that term for it. Ambition, among other things, impels one to the centre from an English-speaking periphery – the aspiration to adopt the centrality one’s birthplace denies one epitomized in the title of Rob Nixon’s study of V.S. Naipaul, London Calling. But Coetzee, though well-aware that Eliot had been fiercely ambitious and that his 1944 presidential lecture represented a kind of fulfillment of ambition, casts the feeling of alienation from one’s homeland in a different light.

‘Born in a half-savage country, out of date’, Pound called his Hugh Selwyn Mauberley. The feeling of being out of date, of having been born into too late an epoch, or of surviving unnaturally beyond one’s term, is all over Eliot’s early poetry,
from 'Prufrock' to 'Gerontion'. The attempt to understand this feeling or this fate, and indeed to give it meaning, is part of the enterprise of his poetry and criticism. This is a not uncommon sense of the self among colonials – whom Eliot subsumes under what he calls provincials – particularly young colonials struggling to match their inherited culture to their daily experience.

To such young people, the high culture of the metropolis may arrive in the form of powerful experiences which cannot, however, be embedded in their lives in any obvious way, and which seem therefore to have their existence in some transcendent realm. In extreme cases, they are led to blame their environment for not living up to art and to take up residence in an art-world. This is a provincial fate – Gustave Flaubert diagnosed it in Emma Bovary – but particularly a colonial fate, for those colonials brought up in the culture of what is usually called the mother country but in this context deserves to be called the father country. (Stranger Shores 6–7)

John in Youth strives – literally in the case of his candidate muses – to embed his vision of the artist’s life in his own experience, but continually fails. The failure continues, worsens even, when he leaves South Africa for London, following Goethe’s imperative from the West-Östlicher Divan that serves as the epigraph to Youth: ‘Wer den Dichter will verstehen / Muss in Dichters lande gehen’. John is certainly someone who ‘blames [his] environment for not living up to art and take[s] up residence in an art-world’ or attempts to do so. In fact, the second paragraph in the quotation describes John better than it does the young T. S. Eliot. And Coetzee goes on to describe how ‘the high culture of the metropolis’ can ‘arrive’ for a young colonial in a way that is almost as unsummoned as an alien abduction. He tells this story about himself, as part of an attempt to answer ‘no’ to a question he poses later in the essay: ‘Is being spoken to across the ages a notion that we can entertain today only in bad faith?’:

One Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1955, when I was fifteen years old, I was mooning around our back garden in the suburbs of Cape Town, wondering what to do, boredom being the main problem of existence in those days, when from the house next door I heard music. As long as the music lasted, I was frozen, I dared not breathe. I was being spoken to by the
music as music had never spoken to me before.

What I was listening to was a recording of Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*, played on the harpsichord. I learned this only some time later, when I had become more familiar with what, at the age of fifteen, I knew only – in a somewhat suspicious and even hostile teenage manner – as ‘classical music’. The house next door had a transient student population; the student who was playing the Bach record must have moved out soon afterward, or lost his/her taste for Bach, for I heard no more, though I listened intently.

I do not come from a musical family. There was no musical instruction offered at the schools I went to, nor would I have taken it if it had been offered: in the colonies classical music was sissy.

And then the afternoon in the garden, and the music of Bach, after which everything changed. A moment of revelation which I will not call Eliotic – that would insult the moments of revelation celebrated in Eliot’s poetry – but of the greatest significance in my life nevertheless: for the first time I was undergoing the impact of the classic.

(‘What is a Classic’ 8–9)

This experience appears to be what made John John. And it is not something he sought; it is something that happened to him. Coetzee emphasizes this strongly, because he seems committed to the idea that the classic can actively call some to its service, rather than simply existing as an aspect of cultural privilege and the formations that accompany that privilege. Coetzee also goes on in the essay to emphasize that his experience in the garden reached beyond or through music to be an encounter with artistic form – in doing this he uses the present-tense assertions he tends to favor, as I suggested above, at key moments of exposition:

In Bach nothing is obscure, no single step is so miraculous as to surpass imitation. Yet when the chain of sounds is realized in time, the building process ceases at a certain moment to be the mere linking of units; the units cohere as a higher-order object in a way that I can only describe by analogy as the incarnation of ideas of exposition, complication, and resolution that are more general than music. Bach thinks in music. Music thinks itself in Bach. (‘What is a Classic’ 9)
Given this experience, John – who here, by virtue of this autobiographical testimony from J. M. Coetzee, merges to a considerable degree with his author – has an intimation of artistic success that he can transfer from music to poetry, and that, in the course of his stay in London, he begins to consider transferring from poetry to prose:

The musical impulse, once so strong, has already waned. Is he now in the process of losing the poetic impulse? Will he be driven from poetry to prose? Is that what prose secretly is: the second-best choice, the resort of failing creative spirits? (Youth 60).

Prose, though, turns out to be local: the prose John wants to write has to be South African prose, and this hints at what will be the end of John’s search for the life of the poet: a return to his own land and to a fiction grounded in his experience of that land. We may note here that Goethe’s aphorism, ‘Wer den Dichter will verstehen, muss in Dichters lande gehen’, cuts two ways. The young John read it as an imperative to go to London, one of the places where poets live. But the poet John really wishes to catch or understand is himself. And to do that he will be required to go back to his own land.

Youth has seemed to many a novel-memoir of almost unrelieved gloom. I have, I hope, illustrated that it is quite funny (in this following the leads of Lee, Lenta, and Attridge), but that, more importantly, it holds up for inspection a process of provincial election by art that the mature Coetzee, in more nuanced forms, avows as his own and as indeed part of the nature of art. The formal distance between author and protagonist maintained by third-person present-tense narrative not only masks the adult Coetzee’s amusement, shame, and regret at young John’s Eliotic posturing and his Eliotic failures in relationship, but also can mask, and for some readers has masked, the extent to which the adult Coetzee takes seriously the process of election by art. Two events at the close of the work that bear on these matters give Youth the faintest touch of an upbeat ending. The first is patterned after the experience with Bach in the garden in ‘What is a Classic?’:

In the window of a second-hand bookseller off Charing Cross Road ... he spots a chunky little book with a violet cover: Watt, by Samuel Beckett, published by Olympia Press. Olympia Press is notorious: from a safe haven in Paris it publishes pornography in English for subscribers ... It is hardly likely
that Samuel Beckett, author of _Waiting for Godot_ and _Endgame_, writes pornography. What kind of book, then, is _Watt_?

The next sentence makes clear that this experience is not only random, but also sensual as well as intellectual – something already intimated by John’s response to _Watt’s_ shape and colour:

He pages through it. It is printed in the same full-bodied serif type as Pound’s _Selected Poems_, a type that evokes for him intimacy, solidity. He buys the book and takes it back to Major Arkwright’s. From the first page he knows he has hit on something. Propped up in bed with light pouring through the window, he reads and reads.

_Watt_ is quite unlike Beckett’s plays. There is no clash, no conflict, just the flow of a voice telling a story, a flow continually checked by doubts and scruples, its pace fitted exactly to the pace of his own mind. _Watt_ is also funny, so funny that he rolls about laughing. When he comes to the end he starts again at the beginning.

Why did people not tell him Beckett wrote novels? How could he have imagined he wanted to write in the manner of Ford when Beckett was around all the time? (155).

In Burchell’s travel narrative John finds a subject. In Beckett’s _Watt_, found by accident, something no one had told him about, he discovers a style (intimated by his student reading in Tacitus) – and what will turn out to be an academic topic. He also laughs for what I believe is the first time in all of _Youth_. And to go with these acquisitions, he gains literal clarity of vision and realizes how much his mystifications have owed to a blurriness in his view of things. Some of his idealizations, he suggests, derive from defensive formations constructed against the threats of the unclear. Compare this passage on playing cricket from _Boyhood_, in which a schoolboy’s difficulties batting anticipate many of the trials of art, with passages at the end of _Youth_:

Cricket is not a game. It is the truth of life. If it is, as the books say, a test of character, then it is a test he sees no way of passing yet does not know how to dodge. At the wicket the secret that he manages to cover up elsewhere is relentlessly probed and exposed. ‘Let us see what you are made of’, says the ball as it
whistles and tumbles toward him. Blindly, confusedly, he pushes the bat forward, too soon or too late. Past the bat, past the pads the ball finds its way. He is bowled, he has failed the test, he has been found out, there is nothing to do but hide his tears, cover his face, trudge back to the commiserating, politely schooled applause of the other boys. *(Boyhood 54)*

At the end of *Youth*, John realizes that his eyes are giving him trouble:

He visits an ophthalmologist and comes away with a pair of black horn-rimmed spectacles.... [L]ooking out through the window he is amazed to discover he can make out individual leaves on the trees. Trees have been a blur of green ever since he can remember. Should he have been wearing glasses all his life? Does this explain why he was so bad at cricket, why the ball always seemed to be coming at him out of nowhere? *(154)*

Five pages on, at the opening of the last chapter, he plays cricket with Englishmen while wearing his new glasses:

He is into his third summer in England. After lunch, on the lawn behind the Manor House, he and the other programmers have taken to playing cricket with a tennis ball and an old bat found in a broom closet. He has not played cricket since he left school, when he decided to renounce it on the grounds that team sports were incompatible with the life of a poet and an intellectual. Now he finds to his surprise how much he still enjoys the game. Not only does he enjoy it, he is good at it. All the strokes he strove as a child so ineffectually to master come back unbidden, with an ease and fluency that are new because his arms are stronger and because there is no reason to be frightened of the soft ball. He is better, much better, as a batsman and as a bowler too, than his fellow players. How, he asks himself, did these young Englishmen spend their school days? Must he, a colonial, teach them to play their own game? *(159)*

Given this the title of this essay must itself be ironized. Part of the point of Coetzee’s book is that, if you want to be literary, the wrong place can turn out to be the right place, and the wrong way can turn out to be the right one. His
provincial trajectory, summoned by fairly unmediated versions of the classic, actually fits a mythical vision of artistic vocation at least as well as it does an interpellation into a position in the self-reproducing apparatus of metropolitan high culture. Even though the John of Youth is surely interpellated from Cape Town to London by the voice of cultural opportunity, his crucial experiences of art are intensely personal, largely unsummoned, and private; they are not easily assimilated to a postmodern myth that most artistic careers can be explained by power-seeking artists following clues dropped by the self-replicative institutions of the dominant culture. Youth can thus be seen as J. M. Coetzee’s idiosyncratic contribution to the theory of the postcolonial artist’s vocation.

NOTES

1. Gillian Dooley draws similar conclusions from some of the same evidence in ‘Alien and Adrift: The Diasporic Sensibility in V. S. Naipaul’s Half a Life and J. M. Coetzee’s Youth’.
2. See also p. 61.
5. Attridge, J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading (161).
7. See Leonard Thompson, A History of South (210). For a more detailed account, see Joseph Lelyveld, Move Your Shadow.

WORKS CITED


