

David Attwell, 2015. *J.M Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 272.

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“Why interview me?” (145) protests Coetzee in his private notebook. Whenever asked to comment on his own fictional works, Coetzee is on the defensive. His point is that writing is as revelatory to the writer as it is a product of their creative imagination. We do not just write, it is “writing [that] writes us” (as he observes in *Doubling the Point* 1992, 18). Writer as merely a conduit of creative processes must now renounce her interpretive authority over the work of art. If such reader-response slanted ontology of reading may score some points – many a strong textualist would endorse this authorly self-renunciation – it misses much about what the author’s intention may bring to the reading table. But to dismiss Coetzee as a sort of radical textualist is to overlook some insightful points on the tension between the writer’s life and writing that have haunted his fictional and autobiographical works. If indeed the written text feeds back to shape the writer, one may ask what kind of a writer emerges from this transformative encounter, and how does this transformation inform the writing process in its turn? Issues that Coetzee himself would remain alert to: “All autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography” (391). In an attempt to spell out the tension between Coetzee’s life and fiction emerges the publication under review.

J.M Coetzee and the Life of Writing is not a biography of Coetzee as such. Nor is it a form of intellectual autobiography, like *Doubling the Point*, a seminal collection of essays and interviews with Coetzee edited by Attwell back in 1992. It is rather a critical

biography that attempts to read Coetzee's works and life together. Structurally, the book is divided into thirteen chapters, each placing Coetzee's published and unpublished works in a biographical context (e.g. motherhood, identity, exile, writing in Coetzee's life vis-à-vis selected works) supplemented by a chronology of Coetzee's life and a collection of family photographs and manuscript close-ups.

Attwell's lucid and unpretentious writing makes it an accessible read for the newcomer to Coetzee criticism. But the book is of immense value for the committed Coetzee reader as well, and particularly one that has not had the benefit of searching the Coetzee archive of the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, which stores the handwritten drafts of his novels, interviews, audio-visual materials, and photo albums related to Coetzee's life. In fact, the book's rather short bibliography for a publication of this size owes it to the author's preoccupation with Coetzee papers. Attwell's book is centred on interrogating Coetzee's works in progress and the creative processes undergirding their often knotty and torturous evolution.

The Coetzee that emerges from the manuscripts is a painstaking rewriter of his works. Indeed, the reader is struck by how little remains in the published versions of the novels from their early drafts. Attwell's meticulous analysis of the manuscripts and notebooks as well as historical processes informing the reasons behind the revisions are of immense import to literary historians and theorists alike. It becomes evident from the manuscripts, for instance, that the much-debated issue of otherness of the characters' ethical encounters in *Waiting for the Barbarians* "is a function of editing, of late, tactical omissions: deletion is shown to be central to the process of invention" (124–5), or that Lucy from *Disgrace* was tactically underdeveloped as a character, to list a few.

Attwell takes pains to spell out contexts and processes behind the construction of characters. Coetzee is often caught agonising over plot and character construction. By charting the evolution of the protagonists in-the-making against the historical background of Coetzee's life, Attwell's *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* is more of a biography of Coetzee's characters and works rather than Coetzee per se (although it does provide a comprehensive biographical component as well).

When Coetzee asserts in *Doubling the Point* that "all writing is autobiography" the reader quickly learns he is not kidding. The Coetzee papers expose the extent of the writer's narrative self-reflection coded in his works. If it escapes nobody's attention that diverse iterations of Coetzee's name in his fiction and fictionalised autobiographical works (e.g. Coetzee, JC, John) refer to the man himself, Attwell elucidates Coetzee's more nuanced and encrypted narrative forms of self-staging. Seen in this light, some of Coetzee's

novels may be taken for “autobiographical historical fictions” (198). In so doing, Attwell stands by his original project of historicising Coetzee’s characters: an approach that might appear suspect for a more textually-inclined reader. But Attwell has a point: “But with this knowledge of the background, there is no turning back” (197). And it is at this juncture between fiction and biography that the reader finds Attwell at his most robust. For Coetzee’s staging of the “narrative self” (32) is never final: forever caught up between “self-masking” and “self-actualisation” (27), fiction and confession, autobiography and aesthetic detachment.

In places a rather cursory reading of selected works gives way to baroque overquoting (e.g. a section on *Life and Times of Michael K* in chapter 4), whereas the analysis of Coetzee’s latest works in the closing chapter hardly progresses beyond a mere plot synopsis (which, however, Attwell does not leave without a convincing disclaimer, putting it down to the manuscript being unavailable to the public). But this does not belittle the obvious merits of this publication. It is a substantial work of literary biography and criticism that compliments the extensive body of Coetzee studies and helps secure Attwell’s position as a leading Coetzee scholar.