

J.M. Coetzee Reads from New Work

On Friday 21 December 2012 the acclaimed novelist J.M. Coetzee visited UCT to give a reading of recent work. It was the first time the Nobel Prize-winning author had returned to UCT in a formal capacity since emigrating to Australia in 2002, and the excitement around this special occasion was reflected in the company that turned out to attend the reading: current and past students of literature and creative writing at UCT; writers and booksellers; academics from a range of departments at UCT, UWC, and the University of Stellenbosch; administrators; a diversity of friends and admirers. The event was opened by Professor Raj Mesthrie of the UCT Department of Linguistics, who handed over to Associate Professor Carrol Clarkson, HoD of the English Department, author of a recent critical study of Coetzee (*Countervoices*), and founder of the Coetzee Collective. Clarkson warmly welcomed Coetzee back to his alma mater and reminded everyone of the significance of the occasion: the privilege of hosting the 2003 Nobel laureate in literature, whose work (particularly since 2006 with the founding of the Coetzee Collective) has sparked an extraordinarily vibrant culture of research and teaching and conversation among postgraduate students in literature at UCT ... and beyond the festivity of the occasion, the rare and intimate experience of *being read to* in person by the writer whose work we had all in one way or another individually and in solitude devoted hours to. Sitting in the venue (Leslie Social Science lecture theatre 2D) before Coetzee began his reading, one experienced a strange and exhilarating sense of being part of a rankless collective, a living readership in which title and age and occupation had no relevance ... there was the academic who had written a book on Coetzee, there a group of doctoral students, there some ex-undergrads, a famous poet, ex-colleagues, aspiring writers, the Deputy Vice Chancellor, the Dean, parents, adults – all waiting to be read to, children again. Clarkson emphasised this point in her introduction, and since she didn't know what Coetzee would be reading (she had in mind extracts from his correspondence with the American novelist Paul Auster), it was something of a coincidence that Coetzee's reading opened with a scene of a child learning to read.

The extract Coetzee read was taken from a work in progress, a novel due to be published in 2013, *The Childhood of Jesus*. The extract broadly concerned the education in the ways of the world of a five-year-old boy David by a man named Simon. Much of the narrative Coetzee read consisted of question-and-answer dialogue between the man and boy that was humorous for the innocence of the boy's questions and the trials of patience the man undergoes in answering them. To each of the boy's questions the man replies with as simple and clear an answer as possible, yet each answer begets another question. The persistence of the boy's questions – what is value? what is a fable? what is the variable *X*? why are the stars like numbers? – challenges the man's powers of explanation, for each answer he gives defers

meaning to a new example and each example implies a conclusiveness the boy will not accept. "Because that's how the world is," is how the man curtails the boy's potentially endless chain of whys.

What is fresh in this story in relation to Coetzee's other novels is the young child's co-operative relationship with a man who is not his father. From as early as his second novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), Coetzee has favoured anguished introverted characters ageing or old before their time caught in power struggles with absent or surrogate parents or children; his later work is dominated by the figure of the acclaimed writer resisting the claims made upon his or her personal life by others. In *The Childhood of Jesus* the narrative formula of a child's ignorance of the world recalls the protagonist of Coetzee's 1983 Booker Prize-winning novel, the simple-minded Michael K; but in the recent text education rather than survival seems to be the uppermost theme. In the full text of *The Childhood of Jesus* one hopes for an exploration of Coetzee's recent public thoughts, on receiving an honorary doctorate at Wits University, on the importance of male educators.

Coetzee is a fine public reader, and his audience audibly enjoyed the humour in the extract he read. At times the question-and-answer structure of the man and boy's dialogue became wearying to listen to because of its repetitive nature. But the repetition illustrated other things too: the myriad assumptions about the world normally invisible in ordinary adult life; the limits and provisionality of any single explanation of a phenomenon; the limpid, highly attentive quality of Coetzee's language, steeped in ideas; the interesting places and problems to which a child's stubborn curiosity about the world can lead.

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