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EXHIBITION REVIEW

PATRICIA ÁLVAREZ SÁNCHEZ

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***Coetzee's
Universe in
Black and
White:***

“Photographs
from *Boyhood*”

Nobel Laureate J.M. Coetzee is acclaimed as one of the world's most influential living authors. His fiction occupies a special place in South African literature—it is believed that his first piece of fiction, *Dusklands* (1974), introduced Postmodernism in South Africa—, but his work also transcends any national interpretation. His prose is sharp and rigorous and it engages with complex ideas such as abuse of power, ethical responsibility and animal rights. It is worth mentioning that Coetzee is not only a skilful artist, he is also a quintessential humanist in a comprehensive sense. He is stunningly well-read and an outstanding essayist, literary critic, scholar and translator. His areas of interest obviously include literature, but also linguistics, philosophy, mathematics, music and photography, among many others. As Attwell points out, one of the distinctive hallmarks of Coetzee's novels is that he works with a wide variety of resources, which makes his fiction intermedial and polysemic (2018).

One of these resources, and indeed a very important one, is photography, as images are meaningful in all Coetzee's fiction in different ways, but also in his youthful practice as a photographer. In an interview with Wittenberg, Coetzee tells us that he acquired a mail order miniature camera and later a 35mm Wega (an Italian copy of the famous Leica) and developed a passion for photography at a very young age (2018, 8). Fortunately, some of his readers have now had a chance to see the images he took between 1955 and 1956 in an exhibition that was curated by Hermann Wittenberg and Farzanah Badsha. It was held at the modest but impressive Irma Stern Museum in Cape Town between 25 November 2017 and 20 January 2018. The museum is well worth a visit on its own right, as it holds the permanent collection of the South African expressionist painter and ceramist that is its namesake¹. It was actually the place where she lived and worked for most of her life. It is situated in Rondebosch, the residential suburb in Cape Town where Coetzee lived for a few years, and it is also very close to the University of Cape Town, where the author lectured until 2003.

Apart from a limited preview at a conference in Oxford, the Irma Stern exhibit has been the first and only occasion so far that Coetzee's photographs have been shown to the public. Most of the negatives had not even been printed as positives before the exhibition. They were donated to Wittenberg when Coetzee sold his apartment in Cape Town where they had been in storage for decades. Some of the material was in bad condition, so the negatives were digitally scanned and deposited at the Harry Ransom Centre (Texas), where most of the manuscripts of Coetzee's writings, correspondence, photographs, family memorabilia and research materials can be found. The author, who now lives in Australia, visited the exhibition in January and gave a public reading where he projected a series of these photo-

graphs while he read related extracts from *Boyhood* (1997), his first fictionalised memoir and the one which narrates his life from the age of ten to seventeen—the period during which these photographs were taken. Hence the title of the exhibition: "Photographs from *Boyhood*".

The photographs, printed in different sizes, and beautifully enhanced with white *passe-partouts*, were arranged thematically in the three rooms of the exhibition. They illustrate the time after Coetzee's family had moved back from Worcester to Cape Town, as he tells us in *Boyhood*. They allow us to see, through the author's eyes, a retrospective of his universe, aspirations and concerns at the time: austere portraits of his family and some of his friends, his school life at St Joseph's Marist College—including lessons, sports competitions, pupils and teachers—, self-portraits, a neatly organised bookshelf and books he was interested in—T.S. Eliot, Keats, Rousseau, Russel—, sheet music by Chopin, a record player, a typewriter, and photographs of photographs. The darkroom where he produced his photographs was also reconstructed in the exhibition.

Some of the images, especially those he captured during school lessons, were taken surreptitiously. Others, like for instance his self-portraits, were carefully planned and clearly reveal Coetzee's interest in the camera as an instrument to experiment with. These show different perspectives, and a playfulness with the use of natural and artificial light as one of the most important elements.

J.M. Coetzee's self-portraits. J.M. Coetzee



¹ Stern was a prolific artist and is believed to have introduced European Modernism and Expressionism in South Africa (Harmsen 1985, 240).

As Attwell has mentioned, Coetzee's relationship with the camera was indeed exceptional, and his photographs are the living proof of his experiments with perspectives, shadow and shutter speed, something very unusual for such a young person (2018). An interesting pair of photographs is that of his brother David jumping from a ladder.



J.M. Coetzee's brother David Coetzee in their garden. J.M. Coetzee

The images are a technical experiment in perspective, three-dimensional space and shutter speed, but they also capture a moment of joy shared between brothers.

In addition, the photographs show to what extent Coetzee was being shaped by images as an adolescent and also later in life, and provide new insight into his writings, where photographs play an important role. On the one hand, in one of his interviews with Attwell, Coetzee has admitted that *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) shows the influence of film and photography (1992, 59). On the other hand, as Wittenberg mentions in the interview that follows, images

that appear in his fiction introduce an important moment of revelation of truth. Also Ayala Amir points out that "the ambivalent connection to the truth is but one of several aspects of photography that Coetzee uses, and the shutter image is part of a group of photographic images scattered through his work" (2015, 59). For example, his first novella "The Vietnam Project" (1974) tells the story of an Amer-

ican mythographer called Eugene Dawn and his emotional involvement in the Vietnam War. The protagonist, whom we may call an architect of violence, carries around a handful of photographs of the human suffering in the war, and regularly scrutinizes them wondering how to get beyond the surface of the picture, analysing the effects of torture. Dawn, thousands of miles away from the war², but immersed in the historical circumstances that have caused it, suffers and endures its consequences. At the end of the novel, he loses control over his life and becomes mentally ill. Coetzee probably chooses to include photographs in this story to represent war atrocities and their impact on

² One of them is of a U.S. soldier raping a Vietnamese girl. Another one shows soldiers holding two severed heads of Vietnamese men.

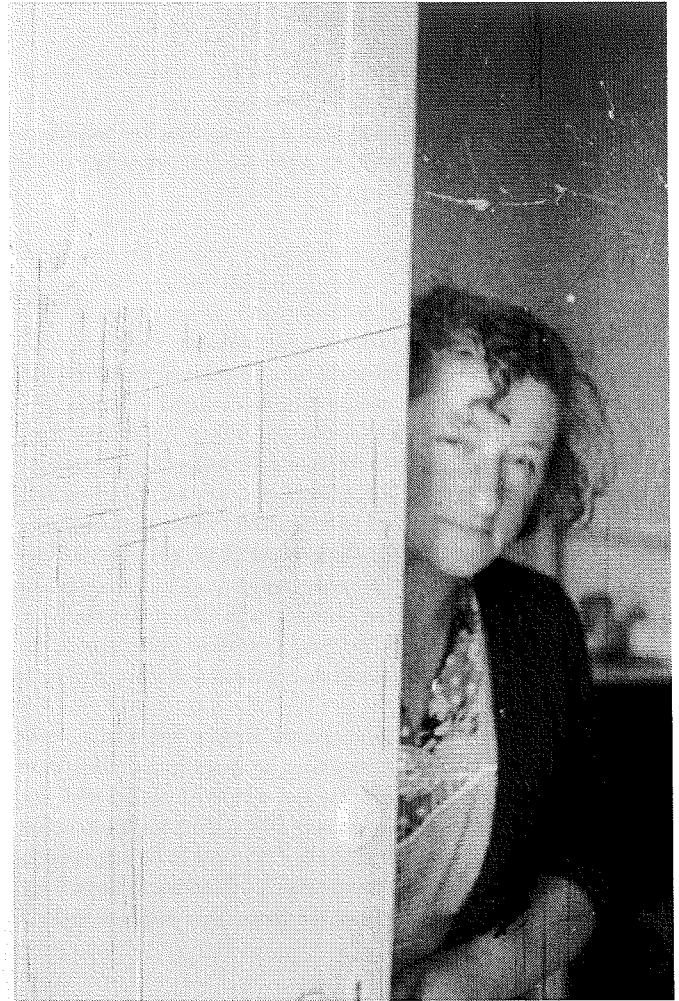
human beings, even on those, like Dawn, who have not been direct witness to them. But the pictures also become, through Dawn's gaze, epistemological sites of suffering and are examples of Coetzee's early engagement with figures of otherness.

Another of his central characters, Paul Rayment in *Slow Man* (2005), is a retired French photographer who takes pride in a collection of some valuable old photographs of Australian miners. He uses them to insert himself in the history of Australia, the country that welcomed him as a child and where he has spent most of his life, but they serve a different purpose as well. The novel tells us that Paul suffers a bike accident and that he has his leg amputated, which forces him to be taken care of by a Croatian nurse. He somehow takes responsibility for her teenage son, and shows him his collection of rare photographs. In spite of their value, the boy takes one of the images and replaces it with a digitally doctored copy, where he has substituted two people with members of his own family. According to Wicomb, "through substitution Drago inserts the Croatian immigrants into the Australian national memory so that the photograph literally binds the past with the future" (2009, 14). My interpretation is also that Coetzee seems to be telling us that pictures are only one representation of the story and the story can be replaced or reinvented, producing an alternative truth.

Photographs are again important in *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), a recent philosophical novel that narrates the story of a gifted child named David, who becomes a truly passionate dancer at an Academy of Dance. This peculiar school is run by the virtuoso Juan Sebastian Arroyo and his beautiful wife Ana Magdalena, who is described as a graceful spirit. But there is also a character named Dmitri, who gains importance throughout the novel and declares himself to be infatuated with her. As a worker for the art museum next to the Academy, Dmitri spends a considerable amount of time at the "Academia" and David develops a true bond with him. The photographs of women cut off out of pornographic magazines, which Dmitri keeps and shows to David, depict him as a despicable character, unworthy of such a relationship. In addition, he claims to have had a romance with Ana Magdalena, something readers would find difficult to believe considering that he has no inner noble qualities. But again, the photograph he keeps of her in her youth—together with her love letters—is a proof of their relationship.

Moreover, the pictures in the exhibition are also revelatory in themselves as they suggest possibilities and landscapes, which Coetzee later developed in his writings. They mostly tell us about his life as an adolescent, and this is the most obvious connection one can make when observing them. Therefore, they also interact with his first fictionalised memoir, as the title of the exhibition suggests. It is probably not a surprise that several of the exhibition's photographs focus on Coetzee's mother, Vera, when she was in her early forties, and this is actually where the exhibition starts. They capture her in her daily routine (knitting, flicking through a newspaper, reading

to her second child David, and sleeping), or just absorbed in her own thoughts.



Vera Coetzee: the author's mother: at their kitchen's door.
J.M. Coetzee

As Coetzee tells us in *Boyhood*, he truly venerated his mother as a child: "He cannot imagine her dying. She is the firmest thing in his life. She is the rock on which he stands. Without her he would be nothing" (1997, 35). However, he also needed to distance himself from her overwhelming constant solicitude. His hidden admiration for her is also obvious at the speech he gave at the Nobel Banquet where he remembers her and ironically asserts: "[F]or whom, anyway, do we do the things that lead to Nobel Prizes if not for our mothers?" (2003). There is also one image of his father, Jack (Zac) Coetzee, being told off by Vera's Aunt Aunie. Coetzee probably took this photograph secretly. His feelings towards his father were ambivalent at a very young age. Jack Coetzee had been a great absence for him during the first years of his life, as he had left his pregnant mother and him in difficult circumstances to serve in the war in 1942. When the war ended and Jack returned home in 1945, Coetzee was very proud of his father's war service, but soon discovered that he consumed large quantities of alcohol, was

unable to keep a steady job, and incurred in endless debts (Kannemeyer 2013, 75).

Some of the images are also dedicated to books he was interested in. One of them captures Aunt Aunie’s library with “shelves full of books” (1997, 107). There is also a photograph of his own library at the time, which included books by important philosophers such as Descartes, Hobbes, Kant, Locke, Pascal, Plato, Spinoza and Rousseau, among others. It is astonishing to see what he was reading when he was still a teenager.

There is also another important subject that captivated his gaze: his school life at St. Joseph College, the Catholic school he attended in Rondebosch. There are quite a few class portraits, which obviously indicate the importance school had in his life at the time. In the interview with Wittenberg, Coetzee mentions he participated in a photography club at his school and was indeed the driving force behind it (2018, 10). Most of these images focus on school lessons, teachers and schoolmates, one of whom was his lifelong Greek friend Nick Stathaki, with whom he shared a passion for sports (Kannemeyer 2013, 41). *Boyhood* suggests that, despite his outstanding academic progress, he felt himself to be an outsider; still, this is also the place where, according to the images, he developed a passion for cricket and many pictures are dedicated to this activity.

Two meaningful photographs depict the landscape of Voëlfontein, the farm where he spent long holidays up to about his twelfth year and where he played with the coloured boys (Kannemeyer 2013, 45)³. Voëlfontein has played an essential role in Coetzee’s life as he mentions in *Boyhood*: “He has two mothers. Twice-born: born from woman and born from the farm. Two mothers and no father” (1997, 96).

The family’s farm was situated in the Karoo region, a barren semi desert of the country’s interior plateau in South Africa, where farmers settled down and managed to live off the land and practiced subsistence farming up to the early 1930s. This idea of an idyllic landscape where human beings can practice an economy—or even a philosophy—of subsistence is a subject Coetzee develops in his early novel *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983). Indeed, Coetzee has extensively written on the landscape and his relation to it. On accepting the Jerusalem Prize, he spoke of the colonizers’ failure to truly love South Africa, “not just Africa the rocks and bushes and mountains and plains but the country and its people” (1992, 61). Worth mentioning is his story “Nietverloren” (2002) where Coetzee expresses his disappointment at economically oriented farming in the arid region of the Karoo.

Moreover, his photographs also portray his ethical awakening to otherness. They demonstrate relationships of power and servitude, a subject that Coetzee has brilliantly analysed in his fiction. South Africa was, at the time, a country where unmovable roles were assigned by skin colour. There were two coloured families on his family’s farm and they lived separately. Some of the images in the exhibition capture two of their members, Ros and Freek, in different scenes; they illustrate Coetzee’s interest in—and to a certain extent, fascination with—his family’s labourers and their lives. In one of them they are at the Strandfontein beach in Cape Town. The blackness of their suits and hats makes a beautiful contrast to the whiteness of the sand.



Voëlfontein, Coetzee’s family’s farm in the Karoo region. J.M. Coetzee



Ros and Freek cleaning offal with a younger man as a young girl looks on, Karoo farm. J.M. Coetzee

³ In South Africa, the term “coloured” refers to people of mixed race.

In another photograph Ros and Freek have probably slaughtered an animal, as described in *Boyhood*, and are cleaning offal.

Coetzee, the prolific artist, continues to be engaged in different academic and cultural activities. In 2013 he was the curator of the sculpture project "Cripplewood"; in 2015 he published his correspondence with the psychotherapist Arabella Kurtz, and this year he has closed the Poetry Festival in Granada and published *Siete cuentos morales* (2018) in Spanish first. While he admitted in Wittenberg's interview that he was interested in photography because "it was a manly activity, in contrast to such effeminate activities as composing

poetry or playing the piano" (2018, 8), it somehow does not come as a surprise when we read in Kannemeyer's biography that this was an interest he has cultivated for many years. Indeed, when he was studying at the University of Cape Town, he acquired a better quality camera that he used for a long time. There is also a letter from Knight that explains he still had a passion for photography back in 1962, after he had moved to England with his wife Phillipa Jubber (Kannemeyer 2013, 136). If we are lucky, we may have a chance to discover more of his photographs and analyse his creative relationship with the camera sooner than we think. It would surely be another opportunity to explore his universe in black and white.



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