

Interview

**Doubling the Writer:**

**David Attwell on his textual dialogue with J M Coetzee**

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**Resumo:** A autora apresenta nessas entrevistas, nas quais ela e David Attwell investigam a natureza da verdade, da realidade e da escrita como interpretada por Coetzee em seu trabalho, cresceram até se tornaram a coleção de ensaios, comentários e diálogos *Doubling the Point*, de 1992 (algo como *Duplicando o Ponto*, sem tradução em português). Como todos os leitores de Coetzee devem saber, *Doubling the Point* tem sido massivamente influente em moldar as definições e as dimensões do pensamento crítico da obra de Coetzee. Em especial, talvez, em moldar o entendimento crítico da contida auto-reflexão e do envolvimento comprometido com as complexidades da representação, elementos que perpassam todo o trabalho de Coetzee.

**Palavras-Chave:** Doubling the Point; Coetzee; Criação e Teoria Literária.

**Abstract:** The author presents in these interviews, in which she and David Attwellc probed together the nature of truth, reality and writing as interpreted by Coetzee in his work, grew into the collection of essays, commentaries and dialogues, *Doubling the Point* (1992). As all readers of Coetzee will know, *Doubling the Point* has been massively influential in shaping the definitions and dimensions of Coetzee criticism, in particular, perhaps, critical understanding of the spare self-reflexiveness and of the concomitant involvement with the complexities of representation that inform Coetzee's work throughout.

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**Key-words:** Doubling the Point; Coetzee; Literary Creation and Theory.

*Two decades ago, from 1989 to 1991, J M Coetzee embarked on a series of interviews with the academic David Attwell. Coetzee was then already the winner of one Booker Prize (for *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 1982) and widely acclaimed, but not yet the internationally lauded author of the late modern condition, and 2003 Nobel Prize-winner, as he is today. He revealingly still considered himself a 'writer-critic'.*

*These interviews, in which the author and the critic probed together the nature of truth, reality and writing as interpreted by Coetzee in his work, grew into the collection of essays, commentaries and dialogues, *Doubling the Point* (1992). As all readers of Coetzee will know, *Doubling the Point* has been massively influential in shaping the definitions and dimensions of Coetzee criticism, in particular, perhaps, critical understanding of the spare self-reflexiveness and of the concomitant involvement with the complexities of representation that inform Coetzee's work throughout.*

*In May and June 2009, on the eve of J M Coetzee's visit to England to read from *Summertime*, the third section of his haunting a-biography, or *autre-biography*<sup>1</sup>, *Scenes from Provincial Life*, Elleke Boehmer, herself a reader of Coetzee, met with David Attwell to talk about his interviews with the author and to explore the nature and range of their influence.*

*Running throughout the conversation like an invisible thread was a shared consideration on the part of the two critics for Coetzee's own reticence. The now twenty-year-old interviews with Coetzee represented an unprecedented time of self-reflexive openness in respect of his own discourse, of his own practice as a novelist. As Attwell implies in his opening remark to Coetzee in the book, *Doubling the Point* might be regarded as an extended preface to Coetzee's always oblique 'autre-biographical' reflections that began formally with *Boyhood* in 1997 and are now rounded off with *Summertime* in 2009.*

**Elleke Boehmer** In this conversation about the genesis and subsequent extensive influence of *Doubling the Point* that we've been looking forward to for some time, I'm keen to explore two key aspects. First, there is your key role in the making of that book — and your role in the shaping of Coetzee, the writer persona. Second, there is the diagnostic and reiterative influence of the book on Coetzee criticism. For obvious reasons, it is fitting that we are carrying out this exploration in the form of an interview.

But first, to begin appropriately enough with a narrative, could you describe the process that led to your conducting these interviews with the interview-averse Coetzee? This is also, of course, a question about the relationship you had with him. It must have been a relationship of some respect and trust?

**David Attwell** I hope so. I would be reticent, though, about claiming that I have played a role in shaping what you call the writer persona, because it would no doubt have developed without my participation. There is also, of course, a certain public persona – the recalcitrant, reclusive refusenik – which *Doubling the Point* hasn't managed to shift, which I find very strange. But, to come to your question about the book's origins, one thread of that story lies with Coetzee and would be his to tell. I do know that, following the publication of *White Writing*, he was asked by Harvard University Press to consider publishing another collection consisting of linguistic studies and criticism, unrelated to South Africa. Coetzee wasn't keen, as I understand it, because he felt he had put much of that work behind him, but he offered a counter-proposal, which was to make a selection and interleave it with a series of conversations exploring the connections between the fiction and the non-fiction; to begin an intellectual biography of sorts. If the volume has contributed something, then I would argue it is not a persona so much as a narrative, the beginnings of an intellectual biography.

The story of the book's origins that is mine would go like this. In an act of precociousness, as research students will commit, I sent Coetzee a proposal for a dissertation on his work that I had developed under Bernth Lindfors in Austin, Texas, along with some questions. (There hadn't been a monograph on Coetzee yet — Teresa Dovey's was the first to appear, shortly after this.) I was emboldened to write to him because, when I was lecturing at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), the historically black university in Cape Town, he had supervised (with sympathy and genuine interest, I think) my MA thesis on the critical formations at work in African literary studies in the period immediately after independence. That we had met on the cricket field in staff clashes between these institutions may also have helped to some extent.

His response, correctly, was to ask whether I ought to be seeking his collaboration. But he went on to link my work with a strand of criticism he was trying to

distance himself from — the kind of ideology-critique that saw fiction as secondary to historical discourse. His reaction to this dominant position in South African (English-language) literary culture of the 1980s is now well known.

In the frame of mind I was in, I thought I had addressed that problem in the proposal. My South African mentors (the ones I had chosen from amongst my teachers) were Marxists (Lukacsians and Althusserians), but I realised early on that I would have to break with them in a particular sense if I was to understand the historical subtlety of Coetzee’s fiction. That is to say, the ways in which South African Marxism construed the relationship between narrativity and history were simply inadequate to the self-reflexive complexities of Coetzee’s writing. Graduate school in North America proved helpful in this regard, introducing me to theory’s dependence on linguistics, to structuralism, poststructuralism, semiotics and, importantly, to the kind of Marxism that could engage with that intellectual environment — Fredric Jameson, in particular. His argument that the real is inaccessible to us except via forms of textuality passed through the political unconscious, seemed to me an accurate description of how Coetzee’s fiction worked.

So with all this behind me, and feeling I had little to lose, I wrote back to Coetzee to answer his gentle rebuttal, re-stating my case in more ample terms, but without any expectation that he would change his mind about answering my questions.

**EB** I strongly recall the predominance of that point of view in the 1980s in the South African academy; the difficulty of getting away from, or finding epistemological routes around, ideology-critique.

**DA** It was around this time that Coetzee gave the talk at the *Weekly Mail’s* Book Fair in Cape Town in 1987 which was published as ‘The Novel Today’. I remember asking him at that event, in what sense was he uncomfortable with historical discourse when his fiction was so full of it? He seemed slightly taken aback and I regretted its terms, but I think in essence it was the right question to ask.

I’ll never know exactly how these exchanges influenced the subsequent course of events, but soon afterwards Coetzee wrote to ask whether I would be interested in working with him on the book he was discussing with Harvard, that is, the book that

became *Doubling the Point* (there was no title as yet). I doubt that he was impressed with my arguments; more important, I suspect, was the fact that we had had a reasonably constructive disagreement. It was only later, when we got into the dialogues, that his position on respecting the counter-voices in the creative process fully emerged. What he wanted to avoid, I think, was having to work with an amanuensis. This is the part of the story that, in retrospect, pleases me most — the fact that the book grew out of a disagreement. It was an impulsive, risky, but generous invitation on his part; on my side, it was good fortune.

**EB** So good fortune took the shape of a series of gradually unfolding dialogues. It's interesting that, despite what you were saying just then about Marxist mentors, in the book you are the one who tends to introduce the subject of theory, and the names of prominent deconstructive theorists – Lacan, Derrida, Foucault – almost as if you are authorising the topic for the both of you. Coetzee, by contrast, likes to exemplify by referring to the practice of other authors — Beckett, Ford Madox Ford, Hardy and so on. It is in fiction that he appears to feel an irresponsibility towards the obligation to mean. And yet, as you point out to him, his novelistic practice is profoundly informed by poststructuralist thinking. What this comment is beginning to probe, I guess, concerns the kind of feint and parry in which your dialogue involved you. What were the discursive mechanics of your exchanges? Were they largely drafted out in writing or were they *live*? How did you record or track the interviews? And, a further question that interlocks with this one, in what ways did you then edit them?

**DA** My raising the possibility of his indebtedness to certain politically-inflected poststructuralist theorists was actually an attempt to meet him halfway. That he chose to respond not in theoretical terms at all, but by shifting the terrain to fiction, was unexpected but instructive. But yes, the prior exchange I've described took place for the most part in writing — and that may have been important in preparing for the dialogues themselves.

The process of creating the book began with his sending me all the extant non-fiction, unsifted. I read it, read it again and began reading some of his reading, to begin making sense of it all in my own terms. When I was ready, I would propose a cluster of

essays and shorter items on a particular theme. He would respond to the selection by drafting notes, recalling the resonances of the essays and their situatedness in whatever story of their genesis might suggest itself. I took these notes, drafted questions, trying to reprise the notes and open new angles. He would respond with more text, then I would send more questions and so forth, until we felt the conversation had reached a natural conclusion. Then we would start on another theme and cluster. So it went on.

So, yes, as you will gather from that, the conversations were live, very much so, but they happen not to have been directed into a tape recorder. I've no doubt they are more searching for that. By this stage, there had already been a number of published interviews, some reasonably successful, others definitely not so. We both knew that the conventional live interview wouldn't work; in fact, he had a principled objection to it which is discussed in the dialogues at one point. We did it all in writing, passing envelopes back and forth. The live discussion, to sustain that distinction, was over the process, not the substance, but the interviews were no less intense.

**EB** From what you say, then, the exchanges were both live and in writing. This is intriguing. Perhaps these dual or interwoven media induced a kind of creative intensity or density on both sides, but interspersed with intervals to take stock, reflect back? Which leads me to ask, were you aware, while writing out and rewriting the interviews, of yourselves as being written, of being mutually written, whether by your student-teacher relationship or your mutual reading experiences, or by your shared writerly lives? You remember that at the beginning of the first interview Coetzee observes 'everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it' (7)?

**DA** That's quite possible. There's a peculiar wrinkle in the process of writing and rewriting that I've been describing, which may interest you. We were working with incompatible word processors; he was on Microsoft, I was on Apple, in that period when they refused to talk to each other. This meant that I would have to key his responses into the developing text. One might think this would be immaterial, but it became important to my side of the encounter, having to inhabit that voice, as it were, one which often challenged mine. At a certain point when the conversation became

fairly taut, he expressed some concern about this, in real sympathy. And, yes, there were one or two moments when I felt reluctant to go on. What kept me going was a clear sense that the process was more important than my feelings about it, that the right thing to do was to ride it out.

As regards that question you asked about whether we edited ourselves, in a way this became secondary to the main process of working our way through the interviews, of choreographing them but, in short, yes, we did edit the interviews in preparing the final manuscript, but lightly. A probing reader might find something to discuss in the editing, but my sense is that the editing was inconsequential; for better or worse, we felt we should live with what emerged.

**EB** You seem to suggest that Coetzee was fully involved not only in pitching the voice, but also in setting the agenda of the interviews, in determining the topics to be explored and the protocols of exploration, the critical ball-park or game-plan, as it were? At one point, in the opening interview to *Doubling the Point* (19), Coetzee suggests that dialogue might provide a way of accessing his purpose in writing — an access that the monologue of his writing does not permit. Would it be possible at the end of the day to say *who* steered that mutual weaving together of fiction and scholarship that you've begun to sketch, the interviewer or the interviewee?

**DA** Well, dialogue was built into the point of departure and conception of the project. The comment you refer to shows his genuine willingness to allow the process to take its course, without preconceptions. We had an agreement about the process, but not its outcomes.

If there was any agenda-setting, as you put it, it came, as I recall, largely from my side. The themes and clusters came out of my reading of his non-fiction, after all. But let me try to clarify something important to the process here. I was writing a dissertation which became the book *J M Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, published by California University Press in its *Perspectives on Southern Africa* series a year after *Doubling the Point*. It mattered to me that the series had published people like A C Jordan, Albie Sachs, Jeff Peires, Brian Willan and others — all this was locally rooted, historically situated, counter-cultural, progressive work. That was my context. *Where* I worked also



mattered; UWC was a politically volatile institution, a university already living the future, as it were. What I wanted from my book was an answer to the question of how to address Coetzee's fictionality in a contextual way, how to bring the postmodern narrativity and the historicity together. This led to my description of Coetzee's writing as situational metafiction.

**EB** You were both, we might say, feeling your way through postmodern metafiction and towards historical situatedness, though from different, but not overly distant angles. Would that be a way of putting it?

**DA** Possibly, although in the dialogues you will find him resisting my efforts to re-historicise. For that I make no apology. For the present exercise, the point is that Coetzee and I did not share an agenda, strictly speaking. If he had one, I believe it was minimal — open-ended, and in tune with his understanding of the creative process. I had an agenda, but in my world not having one was a liability.

I'm not concerned about defending the agenda, necessarily, but in the terms of the process it was important that I had one. I could not have engaged in the dialogues at all if I had not first developed a reading of his work. It was a counter-intuitive thing; the interviews didn't feed my thesis and book. Rather, it felt like the reverse, that is, I had first to develop the arguments in what became the book *J M Coetzee* in order to be able to put the questions to him that then entered the book that became *Doubling the Point*. The two projects were mutually reinforcing but not in the way one might assume. Coetzee only saw *J M Coetzee* when it was published. In the preface I said I didn't know whether it was a tribute or a betrayal and I'll never be entirely sure.

**EB** If any critical interpretation potentially represents a betrayal, as you imply, could I ask whether there were there any particular resistances, any no-go areas, laid down in advance of the dialogues? Could we speak of there being in any sense a contract for what Coetzee at one point calls the 'textualization' of his work in *Doubling the Point* (63)? Pushing this further, in the Introduction you talk about the chronological arrangement as opposed to a possible thematic organisation of the book. This seems to imply, as do other allusions and citations in the interviews and essays, that these pieces



can be seen as some form of addendum or hypertext to a Coetzee autobiography or autre-biography, though one he had not yet at that point started writing (or so we assume). For example, he is interested in the essays in the inevitable loss of historical fullness on which postmodern autobiography must be predicated (Coetzee 29). He also talks about ‘the massive autobiographical writing-enterprise that fills a life’. To paraphrase Coetzee, we expose truths of the self even in propagating lies about our life. Are there grounds for considering these interviews, woven together with the essays as they are, some sort of auto/biographical overture?

**DA** This was not biography, in any ordinary sense; it was intellectual biography, therefore there weren’t any no-go areas or restrictions. Towards the end of the project, some autobiographical reflection begins to emerge and it was interesting to see it developed properly in *Boyhood*, but the dialogues focussed on the intellectual life. The only piece of volatile text that was left out was ‘The Novel Today’. I put it to him that it should be included but he demurred, I suspect because he felt that it was too present-tense, possibly too embattled. It was, however, obviously important, for these very reasons, and it does enter the text in being *referred to* — so it’s not expurgated. Sadly for him, though I haven’t checked any citation index, next to *White Writing* it may be his most quoted piece of criticism. This is a measure of what a gruelling business being a South African writer can be; for someone with such a refined sense of positionality, and a citizen of world-culture, it can be a confinement.

**EB** Still on the subject of self-textualisation, when thinking back to *Doubling the Point* in the intervening years, have you ever had occasion to notice that Coetzee’s responses to you, or the perceptions that he relayed, were informed, even if in oblique ways, by what he was writing at the time, *The Master of Petersburg*, say? Or perhaps the question goes deeper. In work after 1991, when the interviews were completed, can we detect forms of writing back to these dialogues between the two of you? For example, his remarks on the failure of love in South Africa in the Jerusalem Prize speech, though they of course precede the interviews, could be said to lay down some of the groundwork for *Disgrace*.

**DA** I don't think there's evidence for such writing back. My untested impression is that *The Master of Petersburg* was written much later, under quite different pressures, both personal and contextual. *Age of Iron* was completed during a break in the dialogues, but I don't see any obvious connections. I do think that, as you have noted already, if the dialogues played any role in the subsequent work, it would have been in providing occasions for autobiographical reflection.

**EB** So far we have mainly explored that first aspect I was interested in drawing out at the start of our conversation — your role in shaping *Doubling the Point*. I'd now like to move on to the second focus of interest, the influence of the book on the unfolding shape and direction of Coetzee criticism. You can't be unaware that every critic on the planet who discusses Coetzee, as well as many of his readers, have recourse to your interviews with him, especially given his reluctance to give interviews. Could you describe how it is to be locked into what might in effect constitute a repeat-back loop? Here we find ourselves reading Coetzee through Attwell reading Coetzee; we regard him through the lens of your former critical perceptions of Coetzee developed in the interviews with him. Coetzee's statement in the interview on 'Autobiography and Confession' that 'the body with its pain' is a standard, 'a counter to the endless trials of doubt', resurfaced countless times in critical commentaries on *Disgrace*, also on parts of *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man*. So do you experience anything resembling a playback loop, or are we simply saying that Coetzee is nothing if not consistent in his themes? I'm aware that the question demands a fair degree of critical self-reflexiveness.

**DA** Yes, a hazardous question, but let me venture an answer. Reading criticism published after 1992 doesn't strike me as a case of being locked into a feedback loop. Rather, I see a growing, increasingly interdisciplinary community of readers (many of them young, surely a healthy situation, who are able to take the core questions of Coetzee's oeuvre and continually throw new light on it, though they may of course be assisted by the commentary of *Doubling the Point*.) What are the core questions? I would suggest a certain inescapable orientation to language, certain positions on the representation of the self, an unfulfilled longing for meaning and a searching inquiry

into the connections between writing and suffering (suffering understood as both an ontological and a cultural condition).

I don't use the word community lightly; there are surprisingly few serious schisms amongst Coetzee's critics, and the whole field is founded on the repudiation of a remarkably insubstantial group of statements about his supposedly irresponsible politics. Every major critic revisits these statements and launches a more sympathetic reading.

**EB** We are now approaching the end of our conversation, so it's time to raise last things. I have just two. First, do you think you have significantly revised or gone back on any of the observations you laid before Coetzee in the course of the dialogues? There's that central idea you sketch of his engagement, though in self-aware, artful and postmodern ways, with South Africa's violent history. Do you continue to think that during his time in South Africa he achieved this kind of engagement, in part through his linguistic 'turn'? And then, finally, is there anything you omitted to raise with Coetzee in 1989-91, that given the opportunity now, twenty years on, you would still like to ask?

**DA** You put it very well; the self-aware, artful, engagement with South Africa's violent history. I still think that is the basis of the oeuvre, although it may not be the end-point. And I don't see the linguistic turn as ever having implied a turning-away from history. As to your final question, yes of course, there is lots of unfinished business. Fortunately, though, in an expanded sense, that community has joined in the dialogues and it's a relief that I don't have to think about shouldering them myself.

**EB** Thanks so much for your time, David. It's been a pleasure talking to you.

<sup>1</sup> In a later interview with David Attwell (Coullie et al 2006), Coetzee himself explored 'autre-biography' as a term to describe the fictionalised part-autobiography he had developed in work like *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002).

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Note:

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