

contribution to the debate in their own right. Scholars and students of English Literature and Theory will find this book to be an illuminating guide to understanding the complex writing of Katherine Mansfield in light of postmodernism.

**Coetzee, J.M (2007). *Diary of a Bad Year*. London. Harvill Secker. 231 pp.**

Reviewed by José Celestino Nóbrega Correia

2007 sees two new books on the market by 2003's Nobel Prize winner, J.M Coetzee. First to appear was *Inner Workings. Essays 2000 – 2005*, followed shortly after by *Diary of a Bad year*. While the former contains a collection of twenty-one critical essays on works by a wide range of internationally acclaimed authors which evidence Coetzee's personal penchant in reading matter, the latter is his second clear break with South Africa as theme and backdrop to his prose fiction. *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) may well have initiated this rupture with the turmoil of post-apartheid South Africa, showing unequivocal signs that the author was veering off an old beaten track to follow a new one. However, and even assuming he had already uprooted from his home country to seek new horizons in yet another country, albeit with a colonial past but less turbulent present than South Africa, *Elizabeth Costello* maintains strong ties with Africa. The severance with South Africa was definitive and a salient feature of *Slow Man* (2005) which opens with Paul Rayment's biking accident in the environs of Adelaide. All the same, the facetious fictional author, Elizabeth Costello, makes a perturbing appearance here too, unexpected and unannounced to the reader and the protagonist whose life she will disrupt.

*Diary of a Bad Year* is divided into two parts, the first made up of thirty-one Strong Opinions corresponding to a period between 12 September 2005 – 31 May 2006, while the second part, equally made up of opinions, though of a somewhat softer and more personal nature, goes by the name of Second Diary. In fact, the way the plot is structured, the entire two hundred and thirteen pages serve as a display window for Mr. C, Coetzee's new *alter ego*'s, opinions as well as those of an attractive Filipina neighbour turned personal typist, and Allan, her unscrupulous boyfriend. The spacing of each page is therefore carefully distributed so as to allow for the three characters to opine. Mr C's strong opinions occupy the first section and bulk of the space; for these are the content of the manuscript which he, as fictional an author as Elizabeth Costello, has hired the attractive, jobless Anya to type for him. It will consequently undergo translation and publication in Germany. Mr C overcomes Anya's initial reluctance to undertake the task by offering her rates per hour she could hardly turn down. In the second section of the page Mr C gives the reader a first person running commentary of his meetings with Anya, starting on the morning he first set eyes on her in the laundry room of the condominium towers where both reside, till she breaks off with Alan and relocates to another town. Finally a third section, again a first person account, offers Anya's side of the story concerning Mr C, who becomes a catalyst in the deterioration of her relationship with Alan, especially after he announces his plans to use Mr C's money to enrich himself. Mr C, whose attraction for her she has not been blind to from the outset, grows on her, but Alan resents her holding down a part-time job that he views as a lecherous old man's ruse to maintain her within his grasp, fuelling the erotic fantasies his decrepit body will never fulfil physically. In this third section, at times, Alan's point of view asserts itself over Anya's.

Each reader will have to decide on the most appropriate reading process to apply to these three discrete but closely interlinked narrative strips separated by lines. One may prefer to read Mr. C's strong opinions till the end of the chapter, return to the beginning to read the second section made up of Mr. C's thoughts till the end of the chapter, and repeat the process with Anya's thought and comments. On the other hand, all the strong opinions could be read individually and at random. The other two sections compile a flimsy narrative which would barely fill a booklet were they to be printed separately from the opinions. This narrative is meant to be read in chronological order, but occasionally contains references to one or other of the opinions that precede them above. *Diary of a Bad Year* does not abide by the traditional structure of a modern-day novel. It champions a wider freedom in the definition of the genre. The strong opinions are, after all, brief essays in disguise which speak of the ills of the real world, attached to a fictional narrative whose characters show no signs of concerning themselves with events beyond the confines of their claustrophobic lives. On two occasions Mr C ventures outside of the residential grounds to sit in a park, where he once coincides with Anya. Otherwise, Mr C and Anya's lives remain confined to the space they inhabit. The narrative deals with the intimate minutiae of life within the private space, whereas the opinions display an array of major issues in the world out there, deliberately kept out.

What is served as a structural novelty is only so in Coetzee's work; but not in that of Spanish language writers such as Carlos Fuentes or Julio Cortázar to whom this novel, unsuitable as the term may seem, might be considered a personal tribute. In *Diary of a Bad Year* the references to literature in Spanish are abundant: the Latin-Americans, Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges, as well as Javier Marías, a Spaniard Coetzee is reported to have publicly expressed admiration for. One cannot help observing the Spanish flavour of the nickname Anya makes up for Mr. C, Señor C, later cruelly revealed to Mr C by Anya's boyfriend, Alan, to stand for Senior Citizen. Coetzee may have been tempted to use *Don* instead of *Señor*, in allusion to *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, which he claims to have read at least twice. Mr C, whose first name could be John, is also referred to as Juan, perhaps Don Juan to Anya's Doña Inés.

Coetzee affords Mr C, and vicariously himself, the opportunity to air his views about the woes that afflict and shape the world today: the war in Irak, terrorism, the degradation of left-wing politics, the Guantanamo Bay prisoners, paedophilia, the disastrous consequences on scholarship of universities turned business concerns, and even avian influenza. The gruelling passage of cattle through the abattoir before ending up as the fare on our dinner plates is a Coetzee favourite and a topic he dealt with more extensively in *The Lives of Animals* (1999). The cold precision with which he juxtaposes human and animal flesh followed by a relation of the unnecessary stress and suffering to which cattle are submitted is not for the squeamish reader. Such is his power to wield words and evoke unsurfaced horror that even the convictions of the most hardened meat-eater will be unsettled.

From the outset of his novelistic career and throughout his fictional output Coetzee has portrayed sex consistently as a dry affair in which often two fleshless semblances of the human figure interlock in the prurient but pleasureless fulfilment of the biological imperative. In his third-person autobiographical *Youth* (2002) it seems logical for the protagonist to continue to make advances at a cousin's friend simply because "she does not seem to mind being kissed" (128); however there are no joyous recollections of the erotic encounter, which is marred by blood-stained sheets and towels produced by the loss of girl's virginity, a state that completely escaped his notice and that she had proffered no warning about. Shortly after

making love to Bev Shaw in *Disgrace* (1999), David Lurie reflects that “of their congress he can say at least say that he does his duty. Without passion but without distaste either”. Where does Bev, the woman, stand in relation to David, the man, in this act of mutually consented intercourse? “He, David Lurie, has been succoured, as a man is succoured by a woman”. (150) In *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee shows two sides of himself hitherto undisclosed: in the first place, a re-conciliation with sex, which explains the lightness of the sexual overtones he imbues Mr. C’s reveries about Anya with. Hers is a much more down-to-earth attitude which won’t allow her to lose sleep about the fact that Mr C has in all probability taken a pair of her panties. Despite there being nothing amiss with Alan’s sex-drive, Anya admits to deliberate, playful flirtations with Mr C. Her descriptions of her sex life with Alan, her explanation of why she’s not averse to cricket — “It’s nice to see white pants stretched tight across a young male bum” (27) — and the outrageous efforts at editing Mr. C’s opinions when to her mind they lack spiciness make for subtle comedy. Secondly, Coetzee reveals a facet of his talent invariably absent hitherto in an ever burgeoning list of titles: a sense of humour. Anya’s typed improvements of Mr. C’s original handwritten text provide an unwonted hilarity in Coetzee’s writing, for Anya cannot quite comprehend Mr C’s insistence on the flawless spelling of words in a text that will eventually end up being translated into and printed in German, not English. When Mr C checks up on her work, he encounters delightful distortions of his words: “According to Daniel Defoe, I read, the true-born Englishman hates “papers and papery”” or Brezhnev’s generals who sit “somewhere in the urinals” (25). As though seeking to poke fun at his notorious seriousness he has Anya putting him in his place, accusing his opinions of possessing a know-it-all tone.

In *Elizabeth Costello*, via the fictional author and alter ego, Coetzee imparted lessons. Calling a chapter a lesson, aside from an interesting literary game, implies that the author holds himself up as a master of sorts, a self-appointed guru, someone who holds the key to life’s dilemmas which he will share with his followers. Anya questions Mr C’s opinions because she deals with him *vis-à-vis*. More often than not these queries of hers take place in her mind and not in a direct confrontation. However, the relationship between the author and the reader is defined by the existence of the book itself. Once on paper and enclosed within two covers these views turn intractable and monolithic; their rigidity accepts no modification. An author shielding behind an *alter ego* cannot have an egregious error pointed out to him, or be hauled over the coals for affirmations some may view as little short of heresy. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee has once again availed himself of someone, Mr. C, to bear the brunt of critique should it be forthcoming. Neither query nor invalidation is possible when we lack someone to address as the genuine holder of these views. Knowing this, Coetzee permits Anya to dissent, play the devil’s advocate, but his condescension, softened by his sexual interest in her within the restrictions of the platonic, is as obvious as her philistinism. Unfortunately, Anya’s own opinions are neither quite as overwhelming nor do they embrace the candescent issues that interest intellectuals. In short, she is no match for him. She is unperturbed by Mr C’s ideas, written, she believes, by a literary eminence for politicians, and naturally, far removed from the concerns that determine her own life. As “students” at the receiving end of Elizabeth Costello’s master lectures, her “lessons”, we were not given a chance to lift a finger in order to ask a question. The process is repeated with Mr C’s strong written opinions, one-way utterances of personal and subjective conclusions that we can absorb in silent reading without having anyone to present our objections to. Anya can do what the reader cannot: act as interlocutor and debunk the inflexible conclusions of Mr.C’s reflections. What originally

comes across as an exploitative and intellectually unbalanced relationship between Mr C and Anya, is evened out by Anya's capacity to remain unintimidated by the intellectual chasm that separates them. Echoing the reader's own reticence, she asks herself, and the reader sides with her: "Who listens to my opinions?" Coetzee cleverly takes this into account and, before the reader can grow too exasperated, takes digs at himself, making him aware that the author, anticipating some objections, does not allow himself to be lionized beyond critique. Through Anya he shows us his awareness of the negative reaction the reader may be having to this one-sided affair: "Señor C has opinions about God, the universe and everything else. "He records his opinions (drone drone) which I dutifully type out (click click) and somewhere down the line the Germans buy his book and pore over it (ja ja)" (101)

Coetzee has endowed his Mr C — first initial J— with a biography closely resembling his own. Born in interior Cape Province, South Africa, but relocated to Cape Town, emigrated to Australia, the successful novelist and critic has hanging in his bedroom what Anya describes as "a framed scroll in some foreign language with his name in fancy lettering with lots of curlicues and a big red wax seal in the corner" (47) which we assume was picked up in Stockholm in 2003. One may be forgiven this assumption when Mr C lays claim to the authorship of novels bearing the same names as Coetzee's. But just when the most plausible next step is for the reader to be deceived by the similarities into justifying the autobiographical fallacy, Coetzee supplies the necessary differences to deter him from reaching hasty conclusions. Mr C is older, childless and lives alone. And so, while author and protagonist coincide in details like having undergone their schooling at the Marists, Mr C differs from Coetzee in that it was a sister he once had and not a brother. Curiously enough, Coetzee's female *alter ego*, Elizabeth Costello, too had a sister. The encounter of the two women on African soil, one worldly, the other spiritual and altruistic, makes for one of the more fascinating "lessons" in the eponymous novel. Should the strange language Anya sees on the scroll in the bedroom not be Swedish instead of Latin, or is it merely another of the author's many artifices in the cat-and-mouse games he plays with the reader? Games involving his family name and history were incorporated into his fiction in *Dusklands*; Paul Rayment the protagonist of *Slow Man* (2005) living in a suburb of Adelaide with a penchant for biking rings true of the author. Nonetheless the *alter egos* are growing so close to their creator that one wonders whether his next literary game will consist of creating one so identical to his own persona that we will no longer be able to distinguish his fictional work from the two autobiographical episodes he has already produced, namely, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* and *Youth*.

Judging by the essays to which Coetzee has turned his critical eye in *Inner Workings. Essays 2000 – 2005*, his choice of literature is very catholic. Among these essays is one on García Márquez's *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* and another on Philip Roth's *The Plot against America*. Mr C's relationship with Anya brings to mind a number of the world's top authors who portray in recent works the nostalgia for bygone days of greater sexual prowess. García Márquez's ninety-year old hero spends sleepless nights lying beside a fourteen-year-old virgin whose deflowering he is physically incapable of undertaking. Roth's protagonist of *Everyman* passes from a carefree, overactive sex life to one in which age and heart disease put a damper on any antics his still febrile imagination can conjure up at the sight of a young girl jogging by. A compatriot and ex-colleague of Coetzee's, André Brink, has, in *The Rights of Desire*, a disconcerted Ruben Oliver bemoaning the indignities imposed on a willing mind by a body in the rapid process of defunction: the ever-burning presence of desire never to

attain fulfilment! Brink makes a second attempt at the tandem of the older man with a waning libido and the desirable young woman in *Before I Forget*. In an effort to make up for his failure to possess Rachel, Chris Minaar makes us accompany him through his own personal, nostalgic journey to the past of women galore and an ever reliable member. In *Slow Man*, Paul Rayment's infatuation with his Croatian day nurse foreshadows the relationship between Anya and Mr C. Rayment's accident forces him into a situation of physical dependency which develops into emotional dependency. Mr C's contracting Anya's services is a deliberate act that springs from the desire she provokes in him, her presence too taking the guise of an obsession. Unlike Brink's Chris Minaar, Mr C does not regale us with a Don Juan-like account of his conquests. In fact, we learn surprisingly little of the erotic cavorting of his younger days. But Mr C reveals to us like none of the other protagonists of the fore-mentioned works the frustration of feeling the stirrings of youth in one's blood stymied by the failings of a decrepit body. "I seem to have grown obsessed, to the extent that a man can be called obsessed when the sexual urge has dwindled and there is only a hovering uncertainty about what he is actually after, what he actually expects the object of his infatuation to supply" (89).

A wordmonger of Coetzee's stature dispels any doubts that may prevail among those who cannot conceive of verbal fineries produced in what they persist in viewing as the backwater of the metropolis: the ex-colonies. He continues to whittle his sentences down to the most essential combination of subject predicate, discarding cumbersome modifiers. Having shed all excessive fat, the bone of Coetzee's prose has only the choicest lean adhering to it. He always produces the sensation that concepts acquire a more profound import thanks to the aptness of the words with which they have been posited. Similarly with Coetzee's strong opinions! Regardless of whether we, like Anaya, hesitate to agree with them, we are sucked into his train of thought by the preciseness and clarity of his exposition. Could anything less be expected from a literary master and Nobel Prize winner? The excellence of the prose, especially that employed in the opinions section, inclines the reader to conclude that *Diary of a Bad Year* is more than just yet another novel about an elderly gentleman fantasizing about a younger woman.

***Orígenes del feminismo: Textos ingleses de los siglos XVI al XVIII.* Ed. Lidia Taillefer De Haya Madrid: Narcea, 2008. 256 pp.**

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*Orígenes del feminismo* is a ground-breaking volume which compiles not only feminist names but also social and historical contexts that back up women's (re)actions throughout history. Focusing on the period that goes from the sixteenth up to the eighteenth century, its novelty lies on its intimate narrative tone, and on its bringing to scene original texts mostly unknown for the Spanish speaking public.

Once more, Lidia Taillefer offers us new insights into the world of Gender Studies; in this case, these are related to the origins of feminist thinking through the presentation of almost unknown documents written five hundreds years ago. This complete and reader-friendly volume collects texts written by women who were pioneers in the world of Linguistics and Education, and who vindicated their democratic rights by using their written force. Their