

J. M. COETZEE, *Scenes from Provincial Life**By Sophie E. Hughes*

Double-page cover articles in the *Times Literary Supplement* such as Stephen Abell's on Coetzee scholarship (February 23, 2011) are a tribute usually reserved for great writers who no longer themselves yield work for review; such writers, to put it crudely, tend to be dead. J. M. Coetzee, of course, falls under neither category: a rare appearance and reading of his novel-in-progress as part of the University of York's international conference on Samuel Beckett this June confirmed both his continued productivity and, if not liveliness, certainly his aliveness.

Substantiating his elusiveness, in his fictional oeuvre, Coetzee is notable for his deft manipulation of grammatical and formal conventions, which, with ethical resonance, moderate authorial authority. In autobiography – arguably the mode in which authorial presence is most ubiquitous – this is no small feat. The distancing effect of the third person present tense in *Boyhood* and *Youth* (the first two works in Coetzee's autobiographical trilogy) goes some way to relinquishing the authority normally vested in the speaking 'I' of autobiography. More radically, in *Summertime*, Coetzee kills off the Nobel Prize winning author, 'John Coetzee' (the death of the "author-ity") and bestows the responsibility of biographical testimony onto five fictional witnesses known to the homonymous author at various stages of his life.

Prolific, ever-popular and yet, since the publication of *Elizabeth Costello* in 2003, employing increasingly oblique means of 'disappearing' from the work, Coetzee can be seen to exist in a dead-and-alive state. Perhaps as a consequence of this shadowy status, it has escaped all notice that Coetzee has had an active hand in *Scenes from Provincial Life*, the re-titled, combined new edition of his autobiographical trilogy. Understandably, republications like these usually yield few reviews, and, thus far, Harvill Secker's marketing push has reaped only one (*The Bookbag*, 13 September). Coetzee – infamously disdainful of the perpetuation of his 'public intellectual' image and of the canon in general – would be amused, perhaps, by the prospect that a new work by a living, Nobel Prize-winning Author (with a capital A) could have escaped the press's attention. For, despite being a republication, *Scenes from Provincial Life* is, in part, a "new" work. In it, the understated author's note tells us that '*Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002), and *Summertime* (2009) [...] have been revised for republication.' Closer inspection reveals this revision to include both omissions and additions to the former two.

More so than the three separate books and by means of its revised status, *Scenes from Provincial Life* gets to the heart of the postmodern (or perhaps just conscientious) autobiographer's main interrogation: 'among the fictions of the self, the versions of the self, [...] are there any that are truer than others?'¹ *Summertime* presents a challenge for the reader as it frequently alludes to topics previously touched on in *Boyhood* and *Youth*, thus prompting the question: Is Coetzee's version of the self as told by Julia, Margot, Adriana, Martin, Sophie, and Mr. Vincent any truer than that told by the unnamed narrator in the third person account in *Youth*? With the new revisions in the republication of these works, Coetzee again usurps any conclusions we might have come to. Instead, *Scenes from*

¹ Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Interviews and Essays*, ed. by David Atwell, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 17.

Provincial Life provokes further enquiry: Is memory so fallible as to be obsolete in the 'history' of a self? What do Coetzee's alterations tell us about the limits of self-knowledge, testimony and language? By what literary authority is the autobiographer vested with the monopoly on truth? Despite the obvious draw to probe into biographical relevance of each amendment, individually they are of little import. The act of returning to and revising an autobiography, on the other hand, is a conscious manoeuvre by Coetzee –one that serves to strengthen his notion that 'what we call the truth is only a shifting re-appraisal [...] there is no ultimate truth about oneself.'²

Perhaps only admirers of Coetzee's intellectual outputs on confession and autobiography will revel in the particulars of his reconsiderations. Nonetheless, for any reader, the bringing together of the trilogy brings into focus more clearly Coetzee's notion of shifting truth, which forms the crux of his autobiographical enterprise. Twenty-four years before the publication of *Summertime*, in his essay 'Confession and Double Thought', Coetzee anticipated his subsequent autobiographical status as 'the confessant [...] prepared to shift his ground with each new reading as long as he can be convinced that it is "truer" than the last one [...] no more than the biographer of the self'.³ The revised *Scenes of Provincial Life* may have no more authority than an account given by one of Coetzee's former biographical incarnations, but the concept of its revision and the sustained integrity of the idea of 'shifting' truth are more pronounced in *Scenes of Provincial Life* than in the individual editions.

© Sophie E. Hughes, 2011
M.A., Comparative Literature
Faculty of Arts and Humanities

² Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, p. 392.

³ Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, p. 273.