

“Mister Prod, Mister Nudge”: a review of J.M. Coetzee’s *Summertime*

Mahdi Teimouri

J.M.Coetzee. *Summertime*. London: Viking. 2009. 266 pages. ISBN 9780143118459.

J.M.Coetzee’s most recent work, *Summertime* (2009) is his third fictionalized autobiography or memoir preceded by *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002). In *Boyhood*, Coetzee, using third person point of view, relates the story of a boy’s childhood brimming with contradictory and ambivalent feelings toward his father whom he imitated but deep-down hated and a mother, he adored and sometimes mischievously hurt. *Youth*, also narrated in the third-person uncannily resembles James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in its depiction of the struggles of a young writer who is finding his feet in the bustling London of 1960’s. Coetzee’s protagonist like Joyce’s experiences self-exile.

Summertime was shortlisted for The Man Booker prize in 2009 but failed to bring Coetzee’s third prize of this kind after *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) and *Disgrace* (1999). *Summertime* covers the period “from Coetzee’s return to South Africa in 1971/72 until his first public recognition in 1977” (225). It consists of a series of interviews conducted by a Mr. Vincent who has undertaken to write a posthumous biographical account of the renowned Nobel Laureate J.M.Coetzee. To this end, he who has never seen or talked to Coetzee “in the flesh” (226) travels around the globe to locate those who have known the famous writer. Thus, the interviewees are those who have been in touch with him or have come to make his acquaintance within the 70’s.

The book begins with a series of dated notes by the late Mr. Coetzee written in the manner of his earlier fictional autobiographies *Boyhood* and *Youth* and ends with undated fragments written likewise. Within this range of writing there are five interviews arranged in an unchronological sequence. Some interviews are not strictly speaking interviews because they have been recorded or done before and now Mr. Vincent reads their “dramatized” versions to the interviewees. Despite the objections made by the interviewees to the tampering and distortion of what they had said, the final draft or the printed text only includes the objections and not the corrections. In a sense as Thomas Jones says “What he [Mr. Vincent] is actually doing, of course, is making them all speak in his voice”.¹

The people who are interviewed are Julia, Margot, Adriana, Martin, and Sophie. We learn of Mr. Vincent’s objective in the first interview when we are informed of Mr. Coetzee’s death.

Julia, the first interviewee, is a disaffected wife when she meets Coetzee and despite herself gets involved with him. She suspects that her husband is cheating on her and to her chagrin she finds out that she is correct. Her love affair with the young John reveals to her that “at the age of twenty-six [her] erotic life had barely begun” (39). Her liaison with Coetzee offers her a new chance to roam the so far unexplored realm of sexuality. Their relationship however is brought to an abrupt end when Coetzee one night brings a tape by the composer Schubert and “wanted to make love... to co-ordinate [their] activities to the music, to the slow movement” (68). Julia is dissatisfied with the grotesque sexual ritual and in a flurry of anger asks him to stop the ridiculous business. A row follows in which Julia rebukes Coetzee for his high-mindedness. Coetzee leaves feeling dismayed. In the end, Julia’s husband, Mark, stumbles upon a used condom beneath the bed and learns of Julia’s carryings-on with John Coetzee. This leads to their splitting up after a while.

Margot, Coetzee’s cousin and childhood friend, talks about a family gathering on Karoo where relatives come together to spend a few days for Christmas on the farm. This “dramatized” version of the story previously related by Margot, reminisces about Coetzee’s infatuation with Karoo which was earlier described in *Boyhood*. Margot’s story happens around the time Coetzee has returned from the U.S. Seen as a defector and a loser he is not very cordially welcome by the relatives in their annual gathering. Like Julia’s story, Margot’s also contains moments of embarrassment and awkwardness for the young Coetzee insinuating his thoughtlessness and improvidence.

Adriana, the third interviewee, is a fiery Brazilian dancer who becomes familiar with Coetzee through her daughter. She has lost her husband after he was attacked at work by thieves. In the absence of her husband, Adriana feels more anxious about the future of her children “watching over them like a hawk” to “keep them out of trouble in this strange country” (158). She is concerned about her daughter’s excessive attention to her “Extra English teacher”, Mr. Coetzee. She disapproves of Coetzee’s misleading influence on her. After inviting Coetzee to her house she realizes that Coetzee is a “kind of examination coach” to her daughter, Maria Regina at school. Adriana who considers learning English as a practical means of social and educational progress for Maria Regina, resents Coetzee’s idealistic and impractical “philosophy of teaching”. However, as it later dawns on Adriana, Coetzee has fallen in love with her. He keeps sending love-letters to Adriana which are kept unread and unanswered by her. Fearful of Coetzee’s “untoward” conduct on Maria Regina, Adriana finally manages to remove her from the school. In Adriana’s words John Coetzee is illustrated as a “weak” and immature “boy” who needed someone “to

give him lessons in love” (168-172). This comment conforms to the way Margot describes John as “a young child” who “is neutral in matters of sex” (101).

Martin is the next interviewee who has met Coetzee on the day when they were both invited for a job interview at the University of Stellenbosch. He does not provide much about Coetzee.

The last person interviewed is Sophie a former colleague at the University of Cape Town. She used to teach French. Together with Coetzee, they taught a joint course on African literature.

The aggregate impressions conjure a vivid but fictional picture of John Coetzee as a socially inept person particularly in communicating with the opposite sex. Such a picture falls drastically short of expectations about a noble and prestigious writer. This begs the question why Coetzee exercises such a self-depreciation. Jonathan Dee answers this question by asking “Doesn’t being a great artist demand, or at least imply, a certain greatness of spirit as well?”² Probably the reclusive John Coetzee is pricking us not to be taken in by appearances.

Another way of looking at this matter is to say that Coetzee in *Summertime* attempts to do away with himself in a suicidal gesture both in the sense that he depicts himself posthumously through a fictional Mr. Vincent, and also by means of a candid, straightforward characterization of himself from the point of view of others whose open and direct remarks on Coetzee wreak havoc with the idea of reverence associated with a respectable person. Each interview reveals different aspects of Coetzee’s life and personality. The picture that we get is not overall a favorable one. Coetzee is often characterized as immature, inexperienced, improvident, visionary, and an inept idealist who falls short of the most basic rules of human relationship. He is often described as cold and reserved. Interestingly the interviewees attribute certain personal qualities to Coetzee’s fictional alter ego or doppelganger that are shared by some of the factual Coetzee’s protagonists. They usually include the estrangement that exists between characters and their world, their body and their feelings.

In some ways *Summertime* contains some of the noticeable features of Coetzee’s previous works. Whether it is a fictional autobiography, an “anti-autobiography”³ or a “meta-review”⁴ this mongrelized genre constitutes intensification, amplification, and furtherance of some of the key characteristics of Coetzee’s earlier fictional works namely the question of authorial voice, representation, and truth. *Summertime* obviously follows the same agenda that Coetzee has drawn up for himself in his earlier works such as *Foe* (1986), *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), *Slow Man* (2005) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007):

an obsession with undermining the authority of authorship and laying bare the devices involved in the construction of narrative. If we could tease out two important obsessions in Coetzee oeuvre they would certainly be his repeated re-visitation of the question of authority (who speaks for whom and who has the right to do so and what this right implies) and the question of the other which is predicated on the idea of authority. This is substantiated by the Nobel Prize announcement which highlights Coetzee's life-long commitment to the other as a writer "who in innumerable guises portrays the surprising involvement of the outsider".⁵

In his most recent venture Coetzee takes his obsession to extreme and in not a quite unfamiliar gesture places himself at the center of scathing critical scrutiny by those who graphically question his exceptionality. As Katha Pollitt remarks: "The barbed joke of *Summertime* is that the four women not only found the John they knew lacking as a person, they are also only mildly interested in his work".⁶

Coetzee's style of writing cannot be pigeonholed into fixed conventional literary forms. Coetzee's illusive writing, no less than his social elusiveness, partakes of a slipperiness that cannot be pinned down. From his earliest writings he has manifested the desire to experiment with different forms of writing which hybridizes and blends conventional narrative styles with the purpose of problematizing the verifiability of fiction against the background of the historical records. In his adamant and arduous experimentation with the genre of novel he has fictionalized historical documents (*Duskland* (1974), blurred fiction and philosophy (*Elizabeth Costello*), rewritten fiction (*Foe*), fictionalised a novelist (*The Master of Petersburg* (1994) and cast himself in the role of a character in his autobiographies narrated from the third-person point of view. Besides emphasizing his dismissive attitude toward historical verification in all these literary forays and innovations Coetzee seems to be throwing into relief the problematic of authority and authorship.

What distinguishes *Summertime* from Coetzee former works is its emphasis on the total elimination of this authorial privilege. This is done by assigning the task of complier-cum-writer to a Mr. Vincent and engaging in a dialogue with the others. Thus Coetzee hollows himself out to be embodied through the narratives of others. Retrospectively, Coetzee's previous writings seem as stepping stones to the creation of *Summertime*. While in *Diary of a Bad Year*, *Boyhood*, *Youth* there is an attenuated relationship between the fictional Coetzee (Coetzee as the text conjures up) and the factual or existent Coetzee, in *Summertime* this connection gives way to a chain of associations and impressions. *Summertime* evolves into a story about the story of Coetzee. The "disembodied" Coetzee is to emerge out of the improvised dialogues "may not be true to the letter, but it is true to the spirit" (32). *Summertime* is

more about others than Coetzee because he is more of “a minor character” than a major one. This tendency to obfuscate fictional and factual sides comes to a head in *Summertime*. It is in *Summertime* that characters take the liberty of “making up dialogues”, where they speak of the need “to strike a balance between narrative and opinion” because one needs more than opinions “to bring a life-story to life” (216). Probably it is in the last interview (in the order of sequence) that the truth about the fine line between history and fiction is openly mentioned by Mr. Vincent when his authority to write about Coetzee is questioned by Sophie:

Mme Denoël, I have been through the letters and diaries. What Coetzee writes there cannot be trusted, not as a factual record – not because he was a liar but because he was a fictioneer. In his letters he is making up a fiction of himself for his correspondents; in his diaries he is doing much the same for his own eyes, or perhaps for posterity. As documents they are valuable, of course; but if you want the truth you have to go behind the fictions they elaborate and hear from people who knew him directly, in the flesh.
(225-6)

Published posthumously *Summertime* is an obituary for the fictional alter ego and a death toll to the existent Coetzee. Coetzee, as comically described by Julia, is “Mister Prod, Mister Nudge” (30) in that through *Summertime* he pokes the readers to jolt them out of the complacency of “lazy assumptions about the connections between books and life, fiction and autobiography”.⁷

Notes

¹ Jones, Thomas. Rev. of *Summertime*, J.M.Coetzee. *The Observer* 6 September 2009.

² Dee, Jonathan. “J. M. Coetzee, a Disembodied Man.” Rev. of *Summertime*, J.M.Coetzee. *The New York Times* 27 December 2009.

³ Thomas Jones.

⁴ Meek, James. “All about John.” Rev. of *Summertime*, J.M.Coetzee. *The Guardian* 5 September 2009.

⁵ “The Nobel Prize in Literature 2003- Press Release”.
http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/press.html.

⁶ Pollitt, Katha. “Any Relation to Biography Is Pure Fiction (In A Way).” Rev. of *Summertime*, J.M.Coetzee. *The New York Times* 31 December 2009.

⁷ (*ibid*)