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J.M. Coetzee

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Interview

Abstract

Folke Rhedin interviewed J.M. Coetzee in Cape Town in Autumn, 1982.

J.M. Coetzee

INTERVIEW

Folke Rhedin interviewed J.M. Coetzee in Cape Town in Autumn, 1982.

*One has the feeling that *Waiting for the Barbarians* is written with a greater degree of involvement than *Dusklands*. Would you agree?*

The difference is perhaps that the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is fundamentally a sympathetic person while the two protagonists in *Dusklands* are fundamentally unsympathetic, arrogant or intellectually arrogant and cruel in different ways. So it is difficult to feel close to the narrators in *Dusklands*. It is possible to feel close to the narrator in *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

*I think that these books illustrate our society, our time. We are more or less all of us that administrator in *Waiting for the Barbarians*.*

Not all of us. Unfortunately some of us in very powerful positions are not. Some very powerful people are in the position of the police in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. It is perhaps only a minority of people that stand for that rather muddled and perhaps even doomed position that the magistrate takes up. Because it's riddled with contradictions. On the one hand he wants the ease of the life that he has had. That is an imperial life. It's a life that has been based on conquest. It's just that the sharper edge of conquest isn't visible to him during his particular lifetime. And then he is brought up against the reality of what imperialism is and makes a choice in that situation but it's not a choice that is historically viable, that people can follow on a large scale as a way of life.

No. But does he have a choice?

Well — yes — there is a choice I think, though for someone in his situation it's not easy. It's not difficult for someone in his situation to learn perhaps to turn a blind eye to what's going on. That's the temptation that is the choice. He could turn a blind eye and live out his days in comfort.

But when I say choice, I mean a sort of transcendent choice where you as it were go over the edge to something new.

No, there is no choice for people like that. I understand your question now. There is no choice for people as old as that and as set in their ways as that. Obviously the fact that he's an old man set in his ways reflects other things. You know, hypothetically the choice would be in fact between the police and the empire and what they stand for, and the barbarian way of life. He cannot choose the barbarian way of life although he makes vague gestures in that direction, in the direction of the barbarian girl. But I'm sure you remember that there is a very strong presence of children in that book and there is no saying — although the book doesn't deal directly with it — what those children might do and what sort of life they might lead. They might be able to make choices that he finds impossible.

I felt that in your first book you were suggesting that one way out of our isolation is through love.

I am not sure. The second book has at its centre attempts by a woman who has lived a completely humanly sterile life to make contact on a human plane and perhaps even a plane of love with two people, one man and one woman with whom she has been brought up together in a relation of master and slave. At a certain point she tries to drop the master/slave relationship in favour of a relationship of equality which I think is entirely sincerely intended on her part. But it fails, and it fails because a mere effort of the will is not enough to overcome centuries of cultural and spiritual deformation.

On the part of the others or on her part?

Well, I think on the part of both. She is the one who makes the massive effort to escape, but there's no saying whether she escapes, much in the same way as we can say that the magistrate in the third book makes an

effort, but who is to say that the effort goes far enough. So in one way these people are not trapped in their situation. Or let me put it another way, perhaps they are trapped in their situation but they don't resign themselves to being trapped in their situation. But whether they get out of it in their own lifetime, that is another question.

You have been much abroad so you know that if one comes into contact with two very different cultures, one will be able to see both more clearly and one will discover where one is restricted and where enlarged in one's own country or in the other country. How does being a South African influence your writing?

You mentioned the fear of nuclear annihilation as a continually present reality for a European writer. I think there are other dominating concerns that could be said to be relevant for writers in Europe, for example the meaningfulness of labour. For writers in the United States, there are perhaps slightly different but also profoundly important questions. I think the massive problem that one is faced with is that of finding fictional situations or correlatives in which to confront these questions. Now, the situation in South Africa is different. In a way being face to face with each other in our daily lives, a group of affluent and virtually post-industrial exploiters on the one hand and on the other hand an enormous number of people who live in a world which is effectively nineteenth century, is a situation of naked exploitation. For the South African writer the possible structure of fiction is simpler, much less invention is required, much less massive effort of the imagination than is perhaps required by an European writer. I may be wrong, I may be foolish to say these things, but that is the way it seems from here. So that is you know, if one dares to say it, if it is not too obscene to say it, that is the positive side of the situation.

I think the negative side is a certain obsessiveness, a certain narrowing of horizons. Perhaps a sense that there is an enormous human variety in the world, much more than merely exists in South Africa.

Variety in what sense?

Things one has never guessed at, the things one does not know about. Our positions are not exactly the same in this sense that few visitors from abroad to this country would say that South Africa is merely living through a historical crisis that Europe passed through in the late nineteenth century and in a sense therefore the historical situation of South Africa is irrelevant. I think few people would say that. Whereas I think

there is a temptation and, I think, a profoundly mistaken temptation, for someone coming out of a situation like this to visit, let's say, a country like Denmark or the Netherlands and say that the situation that people face in the Netherlands is unimportant, it is historically unimportant.

But don't you think that is due to the fact that coming here you have an answer, history gave an answer to this situation, it has passed in Europe. And that makes it perhaps, as you say, easier for writers to write about it. You can see the nineteenth century from the twentieth century but where do we go to see the twentieth century? We are at the frontier of our time in Europe.

Yes. That is why it seems to me the situation of the novelist in Europe is more difficult and the effort of imagination required from him much greater than for someone working within South Africa.

When you wrote your first novel, Dusklands, were you back in South Africa, or did you write it in Europe?

No, I wrote most of that in the USA.

I see. From the point of stylistics and structure it seems to me much more complicated, more experimental, than Waiting for the Barbarians.

Yes. You are quite right.

Had that something to do with your being in America?

I don't think so. I may be wrong. What makes me suspicious of my own analysis is that I am very well aware that the favourable response that I have had, particularly to the second and third books, has come from two quarters. It has come first of all from people whose thinking is politically and historically fairly radical and, secondly, it has come from a fairly middle-of-the-road literary establishment. And I am not at all in contact, in this country or overseas, with literary people or literary thought which is formally more radical or more experimental. So it is quite possible, it seems to me, that I might continually be getting a kind of reassurance from a readership of two kinds which isn't fundamentally interested in formal radicalism.

That's what makes me suspicious of my own responses, but nevertheless I would say that the comparative formal inventiveness of the first book didn't really have much to do with the fact that it was written in the

United States. No. I think I would like to be working in a more formally inventive way. And I am feeling a certain dissatisfaction, particularly with this fourth book with limitations of traditional form. But I haven't got beyond the stage of being dissatisfied to a stage of actually doing something positive about it.

May I also say in connection with this that I do actually feel a great deal of isolation, a great sense of isolation from what might be happening on the borderlines of fiction, because that kind of work doesn't get to South Africa, and I feel an ignorance there which I would like to mend.

Do you think it is possible to write within such a restricted society and yet transcend the form?

You ask as a general statement? My temptation is to say that despite the fact that all of a sudden you have a Gabriel García Márquez coming out of Colombia, nevertheless it is easier if you don't have to do it all by yourself. It is obvious that a subject matter doesn't, to use your words, prevent one from transcending a situation.

That isn't the problem. I think the problem is always created by the limitation of the form itself to deal with, to contain the new possibilities. I tend always to think that formal revolution and whatever the correlative of formal revolution is at the level of material go hand in hand. So, you know, I come up with a very dull sounding answer that I don't think that it is necessary, that one shouldn't be condemned to being a minor writer because one is a provincial writer, but it is certainly easier to do major work if you have a wider view than a merely provincial view.

Do you feel that you are also tied down — in a positive sense — by your South African situation? Reading the first and the third book I have a very strong feeling of an effortless way of creating a background which ties back to nature, the geography of this part of the world. Do you feel such an attachment?

I do believe that people can only be in love with one landscape in their lifetime. One can appreciate and enjoy many geographies, but there is only one that one feels in one's bones. And I certainly know from experience that I don't respond to Europe or the United States in the same way as I do to South Africa. And I would probably feel a certain sense of artificial background construction if I were to write fiction set in another environment.

Do you then think that the South African writers who left South Africa were cut off as it were? Do you think you could face such a loss and still write the way you do, do you think you could adapt to it?

I don't think there is any problem about that. You know, one doesn't have to be in contact with that landscape, with that world. Think of the case of someone like Nabokov who has made a whole lifetime's career out of a nostalgia for Russia. Nor would I go so far as to say that the only landscape that can mean anything to you is the landscape into which you were born. But I do think there can only be one.

Do you think it can change?

I think that it is possible to be born in South Africa, to have no particular attachment, to emigrate to Europe and to find in England let us say the landscape that really suits you.



J.M. Coetzee. Photo: Geraldine Farley.