Jane Poyner, ed., *J.M.Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*

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REFERENCES

Jane Poyner, ed. *J.M.Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*. Edited by Athens: Ohio UP, 2006. ISBN: 13-978-0-8214-1687-7

- 1 Some years ago I attended a conference at which the keynote address was given by J.M. Coetzee. His topic was “What is a Classic?” Like myself, not many of his listeners would have been expecting the writer to illustrate his argument primarily by reference to the composer Johann Sebastian Bach. The following day at a highly theoretical session devoted to Coetzee’s own work, a North American scholar was explicating the phallic symbolism he claimed to have detected in *Foe*, when a somewhat bemused Eastern European, who was attending a conference in the West for the first time, leaned across to me and whispered “Is this the same Coetzee who spoke yesterday?” At the time I was much amused, but in retrospect his innocent question seems entirely justified. For surely like many of Coetzee’s readers he was merely expressing the degree of unsettlement, indeed mystification, he felt when confronted both by the enormous range of the author’s scholarly interests and by the considerable intellectual challenges his work poses. Reading *J.M. Coetzee* one wonders whether some of the critics do not occasionally find themselves in the same position. Perhaps that is why the contributors to this volume seem to pose more questions than they can reasonably answer.
- 2 The volume brings together stimulating contributions by a distinguished group of critics, most of whom have previous work on Coetzee to their credit. It is particularly noteworthy for its focus on later post-apartheid works such as *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), in which the author experiments with forms of literary discourse that resist traditional genre categorisation. Included in the book is a typically evasive interview with the author in which he declines to comment either on

academic criticism (which he says he does not read much) or on contemporary South African literature (which he claims not to know well enough) and confirms that moving to Australia has “opened up new possibilities” for his writing, while failing to indicate what these might be.

- 3 The editor identifies “the ethics of intellectual practice” as Coetzee’s major concern, and assures the reader that it will take account of the impact he has had both on South African literature and on postcolonial and cultural studies – but not apparently on South African society. This omission seems odd in view of the implication in the book’s title that Coetzee may be considered a “public intellectual.” But, as David Attwell states: “Coetzee is not a public intellectual in the most widely accepted sense of the term.” He may be a South African and he may have spent most of his career living and working under apartheid, but he never spoke or wrote directly on South African affairs even at the height of the state of emergency of the 1980s. Indeed, he himself seems sceptical of the usefulness of the term, whose currency he deprecatingly ascribes to “people in the humanities [...] trying to carve out a niche for themselves in the body politic.” While hardly a “public intellectual” in the sense that Nadine Gordimer is, he is indubitably much concerned with the ethics of the intellectual, and in the figure of Elizabeth Costello he “fictionalizes the writer-as-public-intellectual.” Some critics wonder why the author has chosen to express himself through the persona of an elderly, radical female academic, while others question the extent to which Costello’s outspoken views on such matters as human beings’ treatment of and relationship to animals may be identified with Coetzee’s own. The novel which has recently generated most contentious discussion in Coetzee’s oeuvre is, of course, *Disgrace*, the work whose reception apparently triggered the author’s departure for Australia. Rosemary Jolly convincingly reads Lucy’s reaction to her rape not as an “acceptance of punishment for the historical burden of apartheid” but rather as a comment on “the epidemic of violence against women in South Africa.” Similarly, Elleke Boehmer is worried by the implication that “the ground on which a new society is brought into being” and reconciliation achieved appears to be the continued silent suffering of woman, “as ever, barefoot and pregnant, and biting her lip.”
- 4 This noteworthy addition to the ever-growing number of studies devoted to the writing of J.M. Coetzee profits greatly from its double focus on the author’s concern with the ethics of intellectual practice and of his own writing. As such, it provides a rewarding challenge for the reader.

AUTHORS

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