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Jane Poyner, ed. *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006. Pp. vii + 246. USD\$35.96 (cloth). ISBN: 0-8214-1686-3.

Reviewed by Jarad Zimble, Wolfson College, Oxford

In certain of his recent works, notably *The Lives of Animals*, *Elizabeth Costello*, and *Diary of a Bad Year*,¹ J.M. Coetzee has confronted readers with difficult questions about fiction's relation to philosophy and to politics. He has thereby enlivened ancient debates about the relative standing of the poet, the philosopher, and the rhetorician. If certain of Coetzee's novels may therefore be said to have challenged or modified the contemporary notion of the public intellectual, the range both of his interests and the means by which he has intervened in several public spheres invites further consideration of his own status. For, over the course of his career, Coetzee has been not only a novelist, but also a literary and cultural critic, a journalist, a reviewer, translator, lecturer, and teacher.

Whether the performance of these various functions makes Coetzee a public intellectual remains open to question. Certainly, his refusal to expand upon the lessons of his novels and his recent use of fiction to circumvent the public display of his own convictions suggest that he is wary of such a role. On the other hand, the intensity of Coetzee's reticence in the presence of interviewers and audiences has not prevented him from speaking more directly in other moments. He has been notably forthright in newspaper articles and scholarly essays in which he has reviewed films, novels, plays, and poetry, and offered critiques of such assorted cultural phenomena as advertising, organized sport, comic books, the science of man, and the language of science. More to the point, in the introduction to his collection of essays on censorship, Coetzee concludes his brief characterization of western intellectuals with the hesitant admission that he is himself "an intellectual of this kind."²

In fact, it is precisely because he has adopted different modes of address in different media, and because each mode has required a shift in conventions of expression, that it is most interesting to ask whether or not, or rather in what ways, Coetzee is a public intellectual. For, in asking such questions, one asks also about the contemporary division of intellectual labour and the conditions of production and dissemination imposed by different institutions and channels of communication. One asks, in other words, not only about what it means to be a public intellectual, but also about the peculiar constraints, pressures, and practices that have come to constitute particular fields of intellectual activity.

The present volume, *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual* does not, for the most part, raise questions of this kind. This is for two reasons. First, the essays collected here are predominantly concerned not with the volume's stated theme but instead with a quite different topic: the ethics of

¹ J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2003); *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007).

² J.M. Coetzee, *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 5.

Coetzee's fiction. Second, even where this is not the case, the tendency among the contributors is to focus exclusively on Coetzee's novels, ignoring his non-fictional works or treating them simply as useful supplements.

This is not to say that the volume is entirely devoid of insights into Coetzee's involvement with the public sphere, or at least some notion of it. On the contrary, in his reading of *Elizabeth Costello*, David Attwell explains how the novel stages the difficulty of finding a position of engagement that does not fall back into the stale rivalries of political confrontation, while Michael Bell explores the thematization in *The Lives of Animals* of moral conviction, which he regards as the wellspring of public action. What is of interest to Bell is not so much the question of whether Coetzee's own principled views align with his characters', but rather how convictions come to be held, how they are communicated, and how far they are conditioned by the unspoken norms of a particular culture. Finally, in the essay that comes closest to investigating the broader social and historical dimensions of Coetzee's career, Peter McDonald describes features of the South African public sphere in which Coetzee operated in the 1970s and 1980s. McDonald is particularly interested in the effects of apartheid censorship on ideas of the literary, and draws on various archival sources to demonstrate the extent to which Coetzee's own defence of the autonomy of literature coincided with these ideas.

The remaining essays in the volume, which are those primarily concerned with the ethics of writing and reading, are best understood as conducting two interrelated debates. The first of these centres on the use of the Levinasian notion of alterity to understand Coetzee's novels. This is advocated in the first place by Derek Attridge, who argues against the reduction of Coetzee's fictions to allegories of particular meaning systems, and in favour of a reading practice that keeps nuances alive and thus remains open to experiences of alterity. With some modifications, this line of argument is followed by Michael Marais and Sam Durrant. Dominic Head, on the other hand, suggests that Coetzee's exploration of properly ethical questions begins only in the aftermath of apartheid, while Rosemary Jolly insists that Coetzee's fictional practice, insofar as it is concerned with actual victims and sufferers, exceeds Levinasian ethics. Going a step further, Elleke Boehmer not only dismisses Levinas but also criticizes Coetzee's representation of women in his novel *Disgrace*.³ For Boehmer, the passivity that Coetzee assigns to female characters — especially those subjected to violence — cannot be redeemed under the sign of an ineffable alterity.

The volume's second and more focused debate, to which the essays of both Jolly and Boehmer contribute, has to do with issues of gender, in particular Coetzee's treatment of his fictional women. Boehmer's highly critical analysis is balanced by the more positive readings of Jolly, Lucy Graham, and Laura Wright. Graham makes the compelling argument that Coetzee's female narrators and protagonists are used to interrogate ideas of authority and origin, though her most illuminating comments come towards the end of her essay, where she reads the postscript to *Elizabeth Costello* as Coetzee's attempt to draw "attention to the importance of women's voices in forging the strategies of the literary avant-garde" (228).

Graham's contribution is one of several that are of relevance to students of contemporary literature and literary theory. As for the mismatch between the volume's stated theme and its actual content, this is less jarring than it might have been, since ethical questions are hardly irrelevant to a discussion of the social functions of the public intellectual. This much is intimated by the editor Jane Poyner in her introduction to the volume. One is tempted nevertheless to ask whether the more suitable title would not have been "J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Intellectual Practice," under which heading many of these essays first appeared as conference papers.

Poyner's attempt to re-contextualize the volume and to explain its pertinence to the idea of the public intellectual is commendable but hindered by two shortcomings. To begin with, there are certain

³ J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1999).

omissions in her overview of relevant literature, in which there is neither mention of Mark Saunders's recent study of the intellectual and apartheid,⁴ nor sufficient discussion of Coetzee's relation to such figures as Émile Zola, Czesław Miłosz, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, not to mention Jean-Paul Sartre, who had such a profound influence on South African writers of the 1950s and 1960s. More significantly, Poyner either ignores or misrecognizes the significance of Coetzee's shifting preference for different modes of address. Having contrasted Coetzee's refusal to explain his fictions with his capacity to write reviews in which he is "less than circumspect in his opinions and in making his dispositions and opinions known," Poyner wonders only whether Coetzee is "guilty of wanting to have his cake and eat it" (5). The reader is left to ask whether this apparent contradiction is not the consequence of reducing all of Coetzee's works to "writing," and thence to "intellectual practice" (2).

In spite of the editor's efforts, and the obvious quality of some of the essays, one cannot but regard this volume as something of a missed opportunity. Although its narrowed focus allows for an interesting set of contrasting arguments about Coetzee's fiction, it also inhibits the widening of scope that might have enabled a genuine innovation in understanding. Poyner's interview with Coetzee, which is included in the volume, does little to dispel the sense of disappointment. Its only significant revelation is Coetzee's suspicion that the resurgence of interest in the public intellectual is tied to the threatened status of the humanities. Since Coetzee has proved his critical acuity often enough, such an observation ought to be taken seriously. One might therefore have welcomed as timely a more rigorous examination of his continued struggle both to articulate and to challenge the limits circumscribing the idea and the work of the public intellectual.

⁴ Mark Saunders, *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2002).