

## Commentaries and Readings

COETZEE, John Maxwell. **Inner Workings: Essays**, 2000-2005. London: Harvill Secker, 2007. 304 p. ISBN: 978-0-670-03865-7.

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“Austro-Hungary is no more. I do not want to live anywhere else [...] I shall live on with the torso and imagine that it is the whole” (p. 79). This quotation from Sigmund Freud’s diary appears in an essay on the Austrian writer, Joseph Roth, in John Maxwell Coetzee’s latest collection of critical essays. Coetzee has never displayed much enthusiasm for post-colonial studies, but his latest collection of critical essays, the first since *Stranger Shores* (2001), and the first since his voluntary exile from post-apartheid South Africa to Australia, reveals a new interest in post-colonial themes. As was the case with his earlier volume the majority of the essays first appeared in the *New York Review of Books*, but the new collection shows a marked shift in interest away from Africa towards the wider world, to central Europe, the United States, South America and the West Indies. More than a third of the essays in the earlier collection dealt with African authors and topics, but only one essay in the new collection, a study of South Africa’s other literary Nobel laureate, Nadine Gordimer, does.

Almost half of the essays in this volume deal with authors who wrote in German, and the theme of translation, which was apparent in *Stranger Shores*, and is the topic of a recent essay by Coetzee that has been published in three places, runs through the whole book. Many of the authors he considers here, who wrote in German, were from the cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual, Austro-Hungarian Empire. Many of them were Jews (Italo Svevo, Bruno Schulz, Joseph Roth, and Paul Celan), who, like Freud, regretted the end of an empire where they had a relatively secure place as members of one among many ethnic groups. Many of them lived through and wrote about the consequences of the First World War, and the rise of the mono-lingual nation state in central Europe, which shattered old empires and paved the way for the rise of fascism and the Holocaust.

Coetzee’s interest in the Jews and Judaism dates back to his schooldays when he chose to identify with

the persecuted Jewish minority in anti-Semitic South Africa, a reflection, perhaps, of his own sense of marginality as an English-speaking Afrikaner from a non-Nationalist background. Three of the five essays on writers from the United States are also by Jewish authors (Saul Bellow, Arthur Miller, and Philip Roth) – the essay on Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* relates closely to the European themes of fascism and the end of empires, exploring them in the context of the United States, a preoccupation of Coetzee’s from his first work *Dusklands* to his latest *Diary of a Bad Year*. South American readers will find much to ponder in the essay on Gabriel García Márquez’s *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* – not least a fascinating digression on Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*.

Readers of critical essays by major novelists will always look for insights into the authors’ attitude to writing and their methods of work. Coetzee’s highest praise is reserved for V. S. Naipaul, an anglicized West Indian author who is no favourite of students of post-colonial studies – “the prose of *Half a Life* is as clean and cold as a knife” (p. 277). The most apparently heartfelt comment on authorship in this collection comes from the essay on Philip Roth and relates, perhaps, to the underlying theme of translation:

[...] the stories we set about writing sometimes begin to write themselves, after which their truth or falsehood is out of our hands and declarations of authorial intent carry no weight. Furthermore, once a book is launched into the world it becomes the property of its readers, who, given half a chance, will twist its meaning in accord with their own preconceptions and desires (p. 229).

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