

## Autobiography of an Other

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**Resumo:** O autor analisa o problema da autobiografia do outro na obra de Coetzee, em particular em *Summertime* (*Verão*). Em *Verão*, está ligada às questões de intimidade. A figura de John Coetzee, como é descoberto através das entrevistas, é caracterizado pelo fracasso afetivo e erótico, um homem que era tanto tão reservado ou cujos esforços na intimidade eram afetados demais por um excesso de formalidade e racionalidade. Enquanto que não há nada de necessariamente problemático sobre tal denunciada autor-revelação, é um dos vários aspectos de *Verão* que é difícil de ser reconciliado com as expectativas de gênero da autobiografia do artista. É razoável que se espere um retrato do e pelo artista, uma autobiografia do autor, mas na maioria do tempo as entrevistas lançam pouca luz sobre o escritor *como* escritor, focando, ao invés disso, sobre um número de relações pessoais que são elas próprias menos do que reveladoras de um personagem central.

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**Palavras-Chave:** Autobiografia; ficção; formalidade e racionalidade; autor como personagem; *Verão* de Coetzee.

**Abstract:** The author analyses the issue of autobiography of the other in Coetzee's work, especially in *Summertime*. In *Summertime* it is linked to questions of intimacy. The figure of John Coetzee, as discovered through the interviews, is characterized by affective and erotic failure, a man who was either too reserved or whose efforts at intimacy were too stilted by an excess of formality and rationality. While there is nothing necessarily problematic about such excoriating self-disclosure, it is one of a number of aspects of *Summertime* that is hard to reconcile with the genre expectations of artist autobiography. It is reasonably expected a portrait of and by the artist, an author autobiography, yet for the most part the interviews shed very little light on the writer *as* writer, focusing instead on a number of personal relationships that are themselves less than revealing of the central character.

**Key-words:** Autobiography; fiction; formality and rationality; author as a character;  
*Summertime* by Coetzee.

No one wants to be part of a fiction, and even less so if that fiction is real.”  
 (Paul Auster, *The Locked Room*)

Susan Barton is a pathetic figure. The pathos of *Foe*'s central character derives from her situation: a woman seeking to authenticate her (female) castaway experience through the surrogacy of Daniel Foe (male, writer). Her quest to have Foe “return to me the substance which I have lost” (p. 51) leads her into a self-defeating attempt to convince of her substantiality by way of a war of words with Foe. The novel plays out a contest, the outcome of which is already known by the reader; the real-world endurance of the novel *Robinson Crusoe*, we understand, attests to the triumph of Foe in shaping Barton's raw material to meet his own proto-literary requirements. These are requirements coincident with the gendered demands of the 18<sup>th</sup> century publishing industry. Susan Barton's “female castaway narrative” will be recast as Robinson Crusoe's story, while she will be reshaped as the questing mother in search of her missing daughter in *Roxana*.

We call the novel metafictional because Susan Barton's quandary – how to gain substance through language – is a “problem” for all fictional characters that reflects on the nature of fiction itself. (Such as there is a problem, of course, it is really a problem for readers and writers, not characters.) For Barton, her struggle is with the demands of convention, social and literary; Foe is her adversary more for what he represents than who he is. The historical status of Daniel Defoe as a founder of the modern novel shows how a man in his time and place could be at once developer and gatekeeper of nascent literary conventions. Susan must engage with him because as a woman in a society so patriarchally dominated she has no other obvious path available to substantiate her castaway experience. If we imagine Susan to be a real person, then her constrained situation, only able to bring her obscure past

to life through the words chosen by a writer, mirrors the constraint of all characters. In the world in the novel, the diegesis, Susan is reliant on Daniel Foe to substantiate her existence through nothing more substantial than words. But then, as the shifting narrative voice alerts us, Foe too is being written, transformed from a real historical person into a fictional construction. The real control, of course, is exercised by that inhabitant of the outermost ontological level: the author, J. M. Coetzee.

In *Summertime*, J. M. Coetzee's third volume of fictionalized memoirs, we meet a character, Senhora Nascimento, who, in the course of being interviewed, learns that she may have been the inspiration for Susan Barton. This news fails to interest her greatly – she knew Coetzee but was repelled by him, she has read none of his work. Instead of enjoying the reflected glory of being muse to a now acknowledged master, she expresses skepticism that he could possibly have been a “great writer” at all:

to me, frankly, he was not anybody. He was not a man of substance. Maybe he could write well, maybe had a certain talent for words, I don't know, I never read his books, I was never curious to read them. I know he won a big reputation later; but was he really a great writer? Because to my mind, a talent for words is not enough if you want to be a great writer. You have also to be a great man. And he was not a great man. He was a little man, an unimportant little man. (p. 195)

The tables are thus turned. The putative “real” model for a Coetzean character casts doubt on the substantiality of the writer himself, not in spite of but because of his mastery of language. In her estimation, his reliance on language, a system of abstraction, appears to have disabled something more important, more direct, more visceral. For Senhora Nascimento, a dance teacher, what is lacking is made evident by the awkward way he inhabits his body: “in my profession, rather than just listen to words, we like to watch the way people move, the way they carry themselves. That is our way to get to the truth, and it is not a bad way. Your Mr Coetzee may have had a talent for words but, as I told you, he could not dance .... *he could not dance to save his life*” (p. 198). Dance, she claims, “is incarnation” (p. 199), but Coetzee is

“disembodied” (p. 198). She suggests that his “disembodiment” denies the possibility that he was a great man, and this in turn counts against the likelihood that he was a great writer, the two things, in her mind being necessarily linked. The key, it seems, is to marry words, and the ideas they represent, to corporeality, to embody them.

The idea of embodiment is explored elsewhere in Coetzee’s novels. In *Elizabeth Costello* the question of embodiment – embodiment and language; embodiment and ideas – arises frequently. In *Summertime* it is linked to questions of intimacy. The figure of John Coetzee, as discovered through the interviews conducted by his biographer Mr Vincent, is characterized by affective and erotic failure, a man who was either too reserved or whose efforts at intimacy were too stilted by an excess of formality and rationality to effectively connect with those to whom he was drawn. While there is nothing necessarily problematic about such excoriating self-disclosure – it is commonplace in confessional autobiography – it is one of a number of aspects of *Summertime* that is hard to reconcile with the genre expectations of artist autobiography. If we equate *Summertime*’s John Coetzee with the attributed author on the cover, then we might reasonably expect a portrait of and by the artist, an author autobiography, that gives us access to the man behind the fiction and elucidates the impulses and influences that led him to become, and to develop as, the writer we so admire. Yet for the most part the interviews shed very little light on the writer *as* writer, focusing instead on a number of personal relationships that are themselves less than revealing of the central character.

For many readers, we might suppose, author autobiography interests for the possibility that it will help close the gap between the writer’s fictional works and the man himself. To put this in terms of the language of embodiment, we seek to better understand how to connect the writer’s fictional words – words that are disembodied through fiction’s disavowal of a simple and direct relationship between author, via narrator, to characters – with the embodied author. Here too, intimacy is a central concern; the reader desires a more direct, intimate relationship with the writer and – if we consider why a writer might be motivated to expose some of his personal life to his readers – perhaps the writer desires a more intimate relationship with his readers too. Yet it quickly becomes apparent when reading the trilogy of Coetzee’s

“memoirs” – *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* – that any desire for this level of intimacy is unlikely to be satisfied. The use of third person, present tense narration is the most immediately problematic feature, Coetzee writing of John as “he” rather than “I”. In *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Derek Attridge suggests that this operates as a distancing mechanism that

prevents the interminable spiraling of confession by short-circuiting it before it even gets going. The use of the third person implicitly dissociates the narrative voice from the narrated consciousness, telling us that this was another person, that we are reading, to use Coetzee’s term, an *autrebiography*, not an autobiography. At the same time, the use of the present tense both heightens the immediacy of the narrated events and denies the text any retrospection, any place from which the writer can reflect on and express regret about (or approval of) the acts and attitudes described. (p. 143)

The “interminable spiraling” here refers to the thesis of Coetzee’s essay “Confession and Double Thoughts” in which “Coetzee demonstrates the structural interminability of confession in a secular context” (Attridge 142). The effect, Attridge suggests, is to refuse the reader “the comfort of metanarrative judgments” requiring instead the reader “to take responsibility for judgments on” (p. 143) the protagonist of these works.

The term “*autrebiography*” comes, as Attridge suggests, from Coetzee himself, in one of the interviews with David Attwell that intersperse the essays in *Doubling the Point*. As Coetzee uses it in that context, it suggests the distance between a person remembering his past and the younger self he remembers, a distance sufficient to render that younger self “other” and therefore appropriately spoken of in the third person. In line with this logic, as Coetzee’s recollection draws nearer to the present from which he narrates, he changes person: “*he* now feels closer to *I*: *autrebiography* shades back into autobiography” (*Doubling*, p. 394). Margaret Lenta draws on this evidence to support a claim that reviewers who treated *Boyhood* and *Youth* as novels rather than autobiography on the basis of their third person narration

had got it wrong. Yet although she is adamant that the works are not wholly fictional, she does allow that they may be accounted autobiographical fictions with a consequent variation to the pact between author and reader. Nevertheless she remains convinced that, in the earlier two Coetzee volumes under consideration, his “primary loyalty” is “to the facts of his young life” (p. 161). This is in contradistinction to works such as Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* that are presented as novels even though they can be demonstrated to draw heavily on the facts of the author’s life, in which the author’s primary loyalty is to the novelistic “thesis”. Lenta ventures a number of reasons for Coetzee’s use of third person present tense, but if there is a “thesis” to the two works it is the one common to much author biography: “the presentation of the protagonist as embryo artist” (p. 159).

If this is a supportable claim for *Boyhood* and *Youth*, it does not fit so well with *Summertime*. Here the disruptions that prevent simple identification between author and protagonist are much more overt and pronounced, even though the biographical intention is stated in the work and the subject is explicitly identified as John Coetzee, writer of the novels *Dusklands*, *Foe*, and others. The biography is now explicitly mediated by a third party, Mr Vincent, who is researching a posthumous biography of Coetzee. His approach is to interview a rather idiosyncratic group of former acquaintances. There are numerous pointers to Vincent’s intrusiveness and unreliability, and his earliest interviewee, a South African academic friend and colleague of Coetzee’s named Martin challenges his method at the outset of the project. Noting that Vincent seems to be bent on chasing those who had intimate personal relationships with Coetzee, he discerns with distaste the prurient drive behind the selection process (a supposition bolstered by the interviewer’s “angling” (p. 215) attempt to dig dirt on relationships Coetzee may have had with his students), and warns of the risks of giving vent to people with “axes to grind” (p. 217):

Shouldn’t that give you pause? Are you not inevitably going to come out with an account that is slanted towards the personal and the intimate at the expense of the man’s actual achievements as a writer? Will it amount to anything more than – forgive me for putting it this way – anything more than women’s gossip? (p. 218)

Obviously this forms a counterpoint to Nascimento's view, alluded to earlier, that to adequately assess the writer we must know the man as he lived his embodied life. Two critical poles, then, are offered from within the work: that the writer's words are all we need to know the writer; and that the writer's life as lived is crucial evidence in the attempt to understand the writings.

The question about embodiment, though, seems confounded by the level of distortion that *Summertime* injects into the author/subject equivalence proper to autobiography. As Jonathan Dee notes in his *New York Times* review, we can discover, "not from the book itself — that much of Coetzee's self-portrait in "Summertime" is substantially falsified." The autobiographical signals are disrupted by fictional signals, indicating that at some level the fiction is playing with, and therefore encouraging the reader to think about, assumptions that underpin the autobiographical pact. This is a point that many reviewers seem clear on, even if they do not give much voice to what the implications of this strategy are.

Katha Pollitt, also reviewing in the *New York Times*, accedes: "I'm not sure why Mr. Coetzee gives us an invented past. Perhaps he is warning us against lazy assumptions about the connections between books and life, fiction and autobiography." Lazily, she makes no effort to explore this thesis. Many other reviewer also puzzle over the generic status of the "novel/memoir" without giving too much thought to what this confusion might *yield* from a reader's perspective, settling instead, on the assumption that whatever the level of truth in the depiction of events, these can be tied back into an assessment of Coetzee's life. Justin Cartwright, for instance, having acknowledged Coetzee's "tricksy" genre-plays, still has no problem in extending from the views ascribed to John Coetzee the character to the actions of J. M. Coetzee the writer:

Significantly, we discover that John Coetzee identifies himself not with the broader South Africa, but the beleaguered Afrikaner minority of the Cape. The African majority is forever inaccessible to him and his inner world. It's a brave admission; I imagine he now lives in Australia, among

other reasons, so he doesn't have to subscribe to empty sloganising about the Rainbow Nation.

Like Pollitt, Cartwright does not seem particularly interested in the possibilities and challenges that this “tricksiness” might provoke. Even if he identifies as “*The question to be asked about this book [to be] – is it a novel?*” (emphasis added), his response is immediately dismissive: “Personally, I don't care.”

What remains largely unexamined by these critics is the very notion of selfhood and its relation to language. Whatever position they take towards the confused generic status of *Summertime*, most of the reviews I have considered seem to rest on some familiar and comfortable assumptions. There is a writer in the real world who presents himself to the world as J. M. Coetzee (formal) or John Coetzee (informal). He writes fictions in which he makes up characters for which he creates pseudo-lives, or fragments of them. He may also write about himself, other real people he has known and the events of their lives. Sometimes he blends the facts of life writing with the fiction of pseudo-life creation. The main point of triangulation in the triage required of the reader who would distinguish fact from fiction is J. M. Coetzee himself, a real person with a real past which has some relationship with both the fact and the fiction, although more directly and unproblematically with the former.

The appeal of the “real writer” in this network of relationships is fairly obvious. This figure makes meaningful such quests as the search for an authorial intention behind what may at times seem rather opaque fictions. Our interest in and admiration for powerful writing understandably generates an interest in its creator, the intelligence from which the work originates. Insofar as we identify with some aspect of a writer's work, we may anticipate some convergence between that writer's sensibility and our own. If we can anatomise the writerly life (what literary and social influences, what original impulses, what time of day he sits down to write, with what implements...) perhaps we might emulate him or at least learn more about the mechanics of mastery. These are the sorts of fascinations and obsessions routinely on show in interviews and at question-times in literary festivals, events that

offer the reader an opportunity to at least feel he has more intimate (because physically proximate) access to the writer, when the writer comes out from behind the shield of his books, his published words, and speaks words straight from the heart, embodied words so to speak. Yet although Coetzee does make appearances at public events, he generally seems disinclined to engage in these sorts of discussions, preferring more and more simply to read from his work. For the reader who sees fiction as a kind of puzzle, the solution to which is best (perhaps even only) known to the author, this must be frustrating, and indeed this frustration seems evident in many of the formulations that accuse Coetzee of reclusiveness and hostility towards interviewers. This approach seems to be predicated on the notion of the real person as someone in command of not only his writing, but of all the forces that are harnessed in its generation. There stands the writer with a full understanding of what his work is about, where it came from and what it means, teasing us by limiting (or even completely denying) our access to the information that could make full, *correct* sense of the work for us. If he chooses to speak to us in non-fictional words, tell us sincerely offered, verifiable truths, then he can enlighten us, disambiguating his fictional words. No wonder there is a desire to learn more about the writer, and to learn more directly about him, about his real life, when he could so readily complete this puzzle for us.

An alternative view can be drawn from the Coetzee we engage with in language. In the opening interview in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee reframes David Attwell's question about autobiography as "a question about telling the truth" (p. 17), distinguishing "truth to fact" from "a higher truth." While the notion of truth to fact may seem relatively unproblematic, noting that untruth can be as much an act of omission as commission, and noting that all narrative is necessarily selective, Coetzee points out that "to call autobiography – or indeed history – true as long as it does not lie invokes a fairly vacuous idea of truth" (p. 17). Instead, he prefers to suggest a different kind of truthfulness which is plainly unverifiable, relying as it does on the writer's intuition: "As you write – I am speaking of any kind of writing – you have a feel of whether you are getting closer to 'it' or not. You have a sensing mechanism, a feedback loop of some kind; without that mechanism you could not

write” (p. 18). In *Elizabeth Costello* this becomes Costello’s substitute for the idea of belief, the writer’s act of faith or “fidelities” in trying out words: “... to send out a word into the darkness and listen for what kind of sound comes back. Like a foundryman tapping a bell: is it cracked or healthy?” (p. 219). This plainly is not, indeed cannot be, a guarantee of “truth to fact”. Instead we might think of it as truth to self, for this is what Coetzee suggests is being sought in all writing, whether fiction or non-fiction: “...in a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it. The real question is: This massive autobiographical writing-enterprise that fills a life, this enterprise of self-construction... does it yield only fictions? Or rather, among the fictions of the self, the versions of the self, that it yields, are there any that are truer than others? How do I know when I have the truth about myself?” (p. 17). The question of distinguishing fact from fiction is dismissed as vacuous; instead the question is a personal one for the writer: what *sounds* true? Note, however that this assessment is not simply carried out by testing the sounding out against a fully formed self (with a perfectly attuned ear); “everything you write... writes you as you write it.” This is a continuous exercise in auto-construction, a perpetual refinement of sense and self.

The risks of such an enterprise are solipsism and self-delusion. What will alert the writer to a poorly attuned ear? What prevents a true self, constructed in such a way, being true only to the self that undertakes the construction, not to others? Coetzee has resisted attempts to encourage him to investigate the bases of his writerly purpose – the desires that drive him – suggesting that it will do him no good to expose the light of critical rationality to impulses that are perhaps necessarily obscure. To Attwell he says,

The truth is, at this stage of our interchange I probably know as little about my purpose, which lies in the present, as about the drives and desires, lying in the past, that I am now returning to. Desire and purpose are on the same level: one does not command the other. Perhaps that is why I have turned to the mode of dialogue: as a way of getting around the impasse of my own monologue. (p. 18-19)

Yet if Coetzee found the “mode of dialogue” performed as interview conducive (and he is certainly generous in his responses to Attwell), it is not a mode he has much continued with. Indeed we might see *Summertime* as rehearsing a refusal of the two-way, interpersonal intimacy apparently demanded by the situation in which the “real writer” is expected to front up; in this case he subverts the autobiographical convention of talking about himself, making “himself” instead a peripheral character in the stories of others. This refusal of intimacy is also, plainly, mirrored in *Summertime*, in John’s relationships with the others book’s other characters.

If writing is a process of self creation, how does this differ from the everyday creation of selves performed by embodied individuals? The answer, surely, is to be found in the fact that writing can reach an audience far broader than the community that comes into direct contact with the performing, embodied self. Reading, moreover, invites a more contemplative and engaged response. On one side of the ledger it offers greater control, the writer having the time to select with care the words which will form the basis of his self construction. On the other side, once he submits those words to his readership, a readership that will outlast him as long as his words endure, he surrenders that control more completely. Each reading finds a reader creating the writer anew, each new work adding to the reader’s creation. The risk, one might suggest, is that the reader will get the writer wrong, will misread him and not create the right writer. However an opposing view is that it is precisely this possibility that amounts to “life” for the writer, since life is not, in this view, a graspable, totalisable thing but something ineffable, the meaning of which cannot be fixed without unacceptable reduction.

In *Elizabeth Costello*, faced by a panel of judges who seek to reduce her in just this way by demanding that she give an account of her “beliefs”, Costello dramatizes the difficulties inherent in taking such an approach in a world which seems substantially invested in a notion of individuality that demands an either/or approach to selfhood:

“You ask if I have changed my plea. But who am I, who is this *I*, this *you*? We change from day to day, and we also stay the same. No *I*, no *you* is more fundamental than any other. You might as well ask which is the true Elizabeth Costello: the one who made the first statement or the one who made the second. My answer is, both are true. Both. And neither. *I am an other*. Pardon for resorting to words that are not my own, but I cannot improve on them. You have the wrong person before you. If you think you have the right person you have the wrong person. The wrong Elizabeth Costello.” (p. 221)

To attempt to speak oneself in terms and ideas that do not cohere with one’s auditors’ logic is to risk incomprehension (and in Costello’s case, derision). The penultimate sentence here is interesting, an apparent non-sequitur that could be accounted for as a manner of speech (what she really means is: You may think you have the right person but actually you have the wrong person). However, following the logic outlined above we might equally read it in a way that extends, but does not contradict the logic of the sentence: to think that you could “have the right person” *in your view* (i.e. have satisfactorily and finally identified a stable belief system with a single differentiated body) is to judge my self in a manner inimical to my understanding of being, to *have the wrong person in my view*. The borrowing from Rimbaud – “*I am an other*” – offers a revision of the notion of *autrebiography* previously outlined that treats the otherness of the autobiographical subject simply as a function of temporal (and perhaps mental and emotional) distance from the narrating self. Rather than marking a temporal distance, here the otherness of the self is integral to selfhood constructed in this way through language. The use of “words that are not [her] own” is not restricted to this acknowledged moment of quotation. Words pre-exist the writer; moreover patterns of speech also tempt the writer to quotation, to replication. The autobiographical ideal – the affirmation of the writer as originary genius – is subverted in favour of writing as a perpetual becoming. The writer may not be able to dance “to save his life” but writing nevertheless a mode of relation, and of being, that is not without its intimacies. However this is an

interpersonal intimacy that requires surrender of control in a way that leaves one open to misunderstanding.

Towards the end of Mr Vincent's interview with Senhora Nascimento, he finally draws some interest from her towards Coetzee's fiction by pointing out that Susan Barton was a Brazilian in the first draft of the novel. "And what kind of woman is this Brasileira of his?" she asks. In response, Vincent summarises both the character and the novel in a way that is breathtakingly misguided:

*What shall I say? She has many good qualities. She is attractive, she is resourceful, she has a will of steel. She hunts all over the world to find her young daughter, who has disappeared. That is the substance of the novel: her quest to recover her daughter, which overrides all other concerns. To me she seems an admirable heroine. If I were the original of a character like that, I would feel proud. (p. 200-1)*

If we are familiar with this narrative, it is because we recognize it as the story that Foe is determined to foist upon her, not because it captures the "substance of the truth" that she endeavours to have him tell and not because it bears any relation to "the original" either. Writing, writerly control, is no proof against misreading, whether performed in ignorance or for particular ends (but nor is silence, as Friday also demonstrates in that novel). By creating himself through writing Coetzee risks becoming a part of, being overtaken by, someone else's fiction, someone else's self creation, but that is the risk with all intimate relationships.

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