



Late Essays : 2006-2017

J.M. Coetzee

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Stranger Shores, a collection of J.M. Coetzee's essays from 1986 to 1999 was followed by *Inner Workings*, which contained those from 2000 to 2005. *Late Essays* gathers together Coetzee's literary essays since 2006.

The subjects covered range from Daniel Defoe in the early eighteenth century to Coetzee's contemporary Philip Roth. Coetzee has had a long-standing interest in German literature and here he engages with the work of Goethe, Hölderlin, Kleist and Walser. There are four fascinating essays on fellow Nobel laureate Samuel Beckett and he looks at the work of three Australian writers: Patrick White, Les Murray and Gerald Murnane. There are essays too on Tolstoy's great novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, on Flaubert's masterpiece *Madame Bovary*, and on the Argentine modernist Antonio Di Benedetto.

J.M. Coetzee, a great novelist himself, is a wise and insightful guide to these works of international literature that span three centuries.

Late Essays : 2006-2017 Details

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Mark says

J.M. Coetzee often begins the late essays of *Late Essays* in an apparently simple fashion, perhaps with some basic items of the author's biography or with the bare plot details of a story (whichever he starts with, he often includes the other at some point in his text, loosely aiming the two vectors towards some sort of mid-way meeting point). But these starts are mere feints. Coetzee is not much interested in the immutable, and quickly veers away from it after the briefest grounding in the facts of the circumstances. Sometimes he turns his summaries of lives or of works into near-jokes that make the larger whole seem trite and stark by how quickly the action is described as progressing, as if mocking efforts to reduce plots and lives to convenient paragraphs. He expands outward from these unassuming beginnings and rapidly expands the scope of his inquiry. He does the usual critical work with a creative writer's insight and a critic's faculty for dissection, calling out writer's tricks and intentions, highlighting the ways readers are easily duped into perceiving fiction as "realistic" or "truthful," and noting failures where blame is to be shared (the author's creation of work too subtle for the readers; the readers' failure to interpret the work at the intended level). He challenges persistent, cemented, misguided reputations, explores why authors on critically shaky ground find themselves there, and probes contemporaneous mixed-to-negative responses to eventual classics.

Coetzee's own opinions would mostly be categorized alongside mixed reviews, if his pieces felt like mere reviews, which they don't—even the reviews. He's the rare critic supremely comfortable working the fertile ground between rave and pan, between the hyperbolic extremes of the superlative and the pejorative. He is clear-eyed about failings, but does not dwell on them, and generously tries to include praise for the aspects of a work he specifically appreciates, even if they are only subsidiary pleasures; he operates with a nature of maximum expansiveness and inclusion, noting minor niggles and minor delights, and doesn't feel that tempering or mitigating factors should necessarily diminish celebration of a work. By making them sound interesting and nuanced, he instills, at least in me, almost *more* desire to read many works than a strictly positive review might have. (The only essay that really reads as the equivalent of a negative review is "Irène Némirovsky, Jewish Writer," where Coetzee searches endlessly for something of worth, or even of note, and in his inability to find anything ends up submitting the only dry inclusion in *Late Essays*.) But his main interest is not in pronouncing judgements so much as promoting and provoking in his reader a spirit of continuing inquiry to match his own. (The endings to essays nearly always betray Coetzee's fundamental reluctance to make anything too final (not a negative thing). He most often trails off somewhat arbitrarily, or will offer something like an ending that is more in the mode of a final rumination than a benediction. Even his clearer attempts at endings underscore the remaining uncertainty, and often he likes to keep the closing off-balance slightly by giving the final focus not to the author under discussion but to someone offering a competing perspective, be it himself or a contemporary.) Coetzee is not one who views art as something to be solved, or objectively measured, or reduced to order. (He is only interested in the latter in as much as he's interested in the ways *others* construct propositions that reduce art to order and what it says about them, and sometimes the art itself as well. Which is to say very much so.)

He recognizes the fruitlessness of such reduction and Cartesian methodizing; he notes that "[t]rying to make sense of *Molloy* may not be the best or most fruitful way to approach the book," and while this holds especially true in the case of Beckett's novel, it's suggested that Coetzee holds the belief to be widely applicable. He doesn't try to extract or pin down single, condensed meanings either, nor to eliminate ambiguities such as those of authenticity, realism, the semi-truth that popular misconceptions take on, the necessary distortion the act of translation involves even as it illumines; indeed, he seems attracted to the fascination of flaws and complications. He prefers to merely note unanswerable questions rather than posit answers to them. There is a consistent humility to his rare suggestions of authors' purposes; he is far more likely to be found destabilizing, deconstructing, and otherwise questioning assumptions. He also likes to

stake new ground altogether, often centering his thoughts and opinions on “minor” (a term he rightly uses in scare quotes) works, but “major” or “minor,” he recognizes the resistance and persistence of texts above all interpretations; he quotes authors at length, giving a further inclusive, and conversational, feel to his criticism, appropriate for a writer who is interrogating authors and their claims and their intent along with the texts they’ve produced, and Les Murray is quoted as saying something that Coetzee might otherwise have had to write: “Each interpretation we put upon the poem will wear out in time, and come to seem inadequate, but the standing event of the poem will remain, exhausting our attempts to contain or defuse it.”

Coetzee is careful not to give too much weight to even authors’ intents in or interpretations of their own work, steering well clear of committing the intentional fallacy. But that’s not to say he ignores their words or opinions; rather, he directly challenges them and their accounts of themselves. Though he stops just short of explicitly making the connection, his discussion of *The Scarlet Letter* is deeply entwined with the separation between an artist’s intentions and an artist’s art; “the meaning of the letter is mobile, does not always have to be what it was intended to be by those who brought it into existence,” and just as the A can stand for artist or agency, and the agency of the artist, it, like art, can stand for things beyond even the artist’s or the wearer’s agency as well, much less those who dictated its wearing. (Some of Coetzee’s slyest humor comes in the form of highlighting such distinctions in sidelong fashion; for example: “For the reader of Murnane’s fiction, grasping just how the other world relates to this one is the main obstacle to understanding what Murnane is up to, or believes himself to be up to.”) Contradictions such as those between one’s intentions and one’s work capture Coetzee’s fascination. Many of his essays explore such tensions that are apparent within the works, rightly focusing on those tensions as primary sources of the work’s power; his exploration of the paradoxes proposed by Tolstoy’s writing in *Anna Karenina* and in his *Confession* is maybe the most striking example. Contradictions are yet another aspect of writing incapable of being resolved, hence their appeal to Coetzee; he delights in pinpointing where writing shines light on philosophically unsound missteps while being propelled by similarly unsound principles, or the way writers’ output can be starkly different from their claimed influences.

Part of the reason Coetzee’s thinking is so reliably independent of that of the authors whose work he critiques is because he’s rather more interested in *how* writing is constructed than *why*, and he understands that there’s much more to that how than can strictly be determined by the author, and is indeed beyond their control, and even, frequently, beyond their awareness. Translators and literary executors affect the circumstances of work being given broader exposure (in some form), or any at all; historical, social, and cultural contexts not only influence the artist and art, but also the ways in which they are perceived initially and at each point in time thereafter. Coetzee notes not only the unintended effect of one’s surroundings on one’s work but also how they consciously adopt elements which they see as useful though not practical (e.g. Hawthorne’s use of Puritanism); he calls out the denial of influences that seem apparent, even obvious. He dwells on clearly unintentional aspects, like Némirovsky’s *Suite Française*, the first two volumes of which were integrating up-to-the-minute elements of reality but which was never completed because she was sent to her death at Auschwitz before the era could play out long enough for her to synthesize it into her suite. This sort of eminently thin line between fiction and nonfiction—honed to razor-thinness by factors such as the ways in which writers dramatize the reality of their own lives and even their own writing process, the ways in which a work’s reflection of the circumstances in which it was created makes it a documentary of sorts of its own writing and its own author, and the ways a novelist can be consumed by her characters just as her characters are consumed by her own personality—is one of the complicating factors that makes various kinds of categorization impossible, and thus compelling to Coetzee.

He mistrusts most groupings (such as “allegory” and “realism”) by writers or critics, finding them too limited, often in a way antithetical to the multifaceted nature of the art being pigeonholed, but finds the attempts fascinating, and considers them at length from an almost philological standpoint, considering drafts, palimpsests, translations, emendations, and extrinsic extratextual evidence as he theorizes about the writing at hand. In keeping with his approach throughout *Late Essays*, Coetzee is, refreshingly, more interested in theorizing than actual theories; as such, one doesn’t find him forcing analysis to fit his assumptions, but

rather carefully reverse-engineering finished prose and poetry to determine that aforementioned how—how their effect was achieved. He focuses tightly on how language is used by authors, narrators, and characters, and for what purposes; he draws out implied semantic connections and ponders their implications, and he notes intra-text discourses where the author provides competing viewpoints from his own point of view and that of the text, or of one or more of his creations, points of view that also reflect worldviews. He analyzes the merits of various approaches taken by translators in trying to convey or neutralize extra-authorial shadings of works, expounds on the value of prose-embedded poetry (or poetic segments), evaluates the effectiveness of characters' epiphanies left off-page so as to potentially prompt similar ones in the reader, allowing a book to take flight.

As might be expected of someone so concerned with precisely crafted and fitting stylistic choices, Coetzee's own prose style in his essays. He develops nice, repetitive, perfectly parallel patterns to construct his comparisons (the word "arguments" doesn't quite seem right for what he's doing here), and deploys parentheses—sometimes playfully, or at least lightly—to set up alternate considerations, parallels, and dichotomies, to list possibilities, to contrast signifier and signified, to note provisional assumptions, or to provide examples. He structures his essays cleanly and guilelessly; his lack of a strong underlying need to leave his readers thinking in any particular way allows him to avoid the sort of trickery that he repeatedly calls out in his subjects. Even the sentences that particularly stand out don't do so for their flash or pith, but for the precise and effortless way that they capture a given sentiment; his occasional flights of relative fancy, like a near-approximation of Samuel Beckett's style while discussing his work, doesn't seem to add nearly as much value as his standard stylings. There are some other minor flaws to Coetzee's writing in *Late Essays* which it would be in my nature to catalog anyway, but which I'll especially do here in the spirit of Coetzee's own similar tendency. Lines will sometimes betray a lack of research (see phrases such as "to my knowledge," or a discussion of a translation from German to English through an intermediary French version which he didn't investigate and which left open questions in his piece of a rather less positive sort than the kind he aims for). He is occasionally willing to make assumptions of his own about authors from textual evidence that likely wouldn't pass muster under his own rubric. He at times gratuitously gives authors the benefit of the doubt, allowing some motives to go uninterrogated, dispensed with by a thrown-away "doubtless had his reasons." But these are perhaps inevitable shortcomings for a book by a man interested in mapping, if not exploring, as many lines of inquiry as possible; the interest in opening inquiries without an equal-but-opposite impulse towards closing the investigations, even in the cases where it could more easily be done, results in this sort of weaknesses. They're a negligible price to pay for the many virtues of an entire book of essays built around such curious principles.

Richard J says

Good analysis, but...

I found this book to be a bit rambling and unclear on the criteria for the selection of writers for review. Some chapters were clear, others repetitious.

Bruddy says

J.M. Coetzee, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature, has also published literary essays for a large part of his career. This collection is his most recent. It offers Coetzee's interpretations of the works of such writers as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Leo Tolstoy, Gustave Flaubert and Philip Roth. Additionally, there are a number of essays on German and Australian authors, several with whom I was unfamiliar.

Coetzee writes in more depth about some writers than others, at times offering simply a short introduction to a single work. Other times, he provides an overview of a writer's career and an extended examination of multiple works. Literary criticism very often loses sight of the work it purportedly intends to examine and becomes overburdened with theory, becoming almost inaccessible to a non-specialist. This book, written in a clear, easy to follow manner, offers meaningful insights into great works of literature.

Max Nemtsov says

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Kent Winward says

Coetzee: The Nobel Prize Winning professor you wanted opining on literature that you didn't know you needed.

George says

Short interesting collection of 23 essays on a number of authors including Samuel Beckett, Ford Maddox Ford, Philip Roth, Goethe, Hawthorne, Patrick White..... Each essay is about 10 pages and includes a short history of the author and a review of a book or two of the author. Coetzee provides thought provoking insights into these authors works.

Lukasz Pruski says

"This modest but beautifully composed little ten-page episode does indeed provide a good education, and not just for older persons: how to dig a grave, how to write, how to face death, all in one."

Late Essays 2006 - 2017 is the 22nd book by J.M. Coetzee that I am reviewing here and the fourth collection of essays by the Nobel Prize winner in literature, after *Stranger Shores* , *Inner Workings* , and *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* . The collection is a totally wonderful, serious, demanding read, which could well be used as a learning tool for students who intend to become literary critics. The set contains 23 essays; I am only providing unorganized thoughts on some of the essays. I wouldn't be able to synthesize these impressions into a full-fledged review of the entire collection.

In the essay on Philip Roth's *Nemesis* Coetzee demonstrates superb sense of humor when he writes about certain character being a virgin "in a Clintonian sense." But it is really a serious essay about serious issues. We read "God is just another name for Chance," and Coetzee provides a strong ending for the essay when he writes about an episode from Roth's *Everyman*, which I quote in the epigraph.

In the essay about a story written in the early 1800s by Heinrich von Kleist Coetzee addresses one of my hot-

button subjects. Suppose an author, on purpose, does not clearly state what happens to characters in the story at some point of the plot. Consider a reader's question "What has **really** happened?" Coetzee counters with his question "What does 'really' mean?" To me it touches upon the readers injecting their own fictions into the author's fiction in order to make it more realistic **to them**.

I love the essay titled "Antonio Di Benedetto, *Zama*". I have not read that novel, apparently one of the major works of Argentine literature and I have now put it on my "To read" list. In the next essay Coetzee writes about Leo Tolstoy's works and focuses on *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, one of the best novellas I have ever read, a relentlessly realistic and thus terrifying account of a man dying. He ends the essay with a powerful quote:

"In both of these stories Tolstoy pits his powerful rhetoric of salvation against the commonsense scepticism of the consumer of fiction, who like Ivan Ilyich in his heyday looks to works of literature for civilized entertainment and no more."

I have been tremendously impressed by Coetzee's essay on the Polish poet, Zbigniew Herbert. The South African/Australian writer shows deep understanding of the political situation in the Soviet-controlled countries in Eastern Europe after the Second World War, and particularly of the more benign yet no less morally corrupting Polish brand of Soviet-style ideology.

Two essays are dedicated to works by the great Australian writer, Patrick White, two of whose novels are among the best books I have read in my life, *The Eye of the Storm* and *The Aunt's Story*, which I reviewed [here](#) on Goodreads. In the first essay Coetzee focuses on White's *Vivisector* and in the other on *The Solid Mandala*, a novel that is on my "Read Immediately" shelf.

Strongly recommended jewel of literary criticism.

Four stars.

Salvatore says

There's such a joy in this writing, even if it's dispassionate and critical. I just want to read and re-read the works discussed! Even when Coetzee is harsh and unimpressed by them (we're looking at you, Irene Nemirovsky). This also may be the best collection of his short, non-academic essays. What a delight!

Gediminas Kontrimas says

K?tc? apie Rot?? Skaityciau, tik ne angliškai. Tokiam tekstui reikia gero angl? kalbos išmanymo, kokio neturiu. Kraujuojanti okupacijos met? žaizda. Visada, kai ties itin, mano galva, vertingais tekstais matau tik kelis vertinimus, o literat?rinis šlamštas sulaukia gausios minios d?mesio, pagalvoju: "kur ritasi šis pasaulis?!". Iš tikr?j? tai taip negalvoju. Tik li?dna.

Elaine says

J.M. Coetzee is a masterful writer and a masterful critic, and this collection of essays on other writers gives you a fantastic scope of insight. The only criticism I have of it really is that 1) not all writers seemed to be

worth the level of critique he gave to them and 2) it is predominantly white and male.

The last part is especially surprising because so many of the essays center around the experience of their authors' complicated relationships to the geopolitical realities of their time. The entire chapter about Holderlin was through the lens of its translation by a Scotsman. Much is made of Samuel Beckett's decision to consider France his true home. I would have loved to see this level of psychoanalysis applied to more than just one woman (Irene Nemirovsky), one South American (Antonio di Benedetto) and one African (Namaqua chief Hendrik Witbooi) - especially as those critiques show Coetzee's ability to bring the same level of nuance and perspective to their worlds.

Still, there are so many gems in this that I'd enthusiastically recommend it to anyone interested in literature. It's given much more color to the works of Hawthorne, Flaubert, Tolstoy and Beckett to know their authors' histories and the context they were writing in.

Trish says

Coetzee is among my favorite Nobel Prize winners. There is a deep vein of humor in his work—so deep we may never break into overt laughter—but a vein that is fast and cold and refreshing. These essays are criticism for the work of others, and choosing the order from among the selections is a rare delight.

In *Nemesis*, one of a series of novels written by Philip Roth, Roth confronts the idea of a plague visited upon a city, in his case “the polio summer of Newark in 1944.” The reader is unsure for most of the novel who is writing. A voice belonging to Arnie is describing the life and inner thoughts of another person, a man called Bucky Cantor. “The novel is an artfully constructed and suspenseful novel with a cunning twist towards the end.” Reading Coetzee read Roth is revelatory.

Another essay highlights my second encounter with the work of Heinrich von Kleist, whom another author I admire has called greater than Shakespeare. Heinrich von Kleist wrote in the early part of the 19th Century, and died by his own hand at age thirty-four. Von Kleist was a playwright foremost and wrote prose fiction for money, thinking it a very inferior art form. His “Michael Kohlhaas” story has lasted two centuries, lately resurrected every couple of years with new film treatments, i.e., *The Jack Bull* (1999), and *Age of Uprising* (2013). I understand that story is now considered a novella rather than a short story; I was able to discover it reprinted in *Twelve German Novellas*, translated and edited by Harry Steinbauer. Hopefully that's up next.

On the subject of Samuel Beckett, Coetzee breaks his musings into four separate essays, one concerned with the young Beckett, one on *Watt*, and one on *Molloy*. His final essay “Eight Ways of looking at Beckett” completes his examination. So thorough and intriguing are these essays, they could be used as the basis of a university course, with students reading Beckett (in the original French if possible) and Coetzee's observations. Why did Beckett begin to write in French?

“Part of the answer must be that by 1946 it had become clear to him that France was and would in future be his home. Another part of the answer was that the French language was hospitable to a savage directness of tone that he wanted to cultivate.”

What I find so intriguing about his analysis of *Molloy* is that Coetzee finds the soliloquy assigned to Molloy

“...is not the voice of an individual, a ‘character’ (in this case Molloy), but the communal voice of much of Beckett's fiction from *Molloy* onwards. It is a voice that seems to echo, or take dictation from, another remoter and more mysterious voice...”

Coetzee moves on, sharing facts about fellow citizen Patrick White who on most counts is considered

"...the greatest writer Australia has produced, though the sense in which Australia produced him needs at once to be qualified: he had his schooling in England, studied at Cambridge University, spent his twenties as a young man about town in London, and during the Second World War served with the British armed forces."

Patrick White's fiction was too difficult for me to grasp when I first encountered him, and I see in Coetzee's discussion so many reasons why White escaped me. This delicious substantive critical analysis mixed with well-chosen highlights from the author's biography is perfectly intelligible to someone not steeped in the tradition of criticism. White wrote of an adult world outside of my experience. I was more at the understanding level of his Kathy Volkov, a thirteen-year-old girl in *The Vivisector*, "for whom White draws—a little too closely at times—on Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*."

Coetzee does not discuss the work of David Malouf (born 1934) or Thomas Keneally (born 1935) in this work, but does discuss the work of their contemporary of whom I have never heard, the so-called fiction writer, Gerald Murnane (born 1939). Murnane was of Irish Catholic descent and suffered for it. His work was apparently awash in self-criticism, uncertainty, fear, *and* lacked the standard features of novels. In his later years he admitted,

"I should never have tried to write fiction or non-fiction or anything in-between. I should have left it to discerning editors to publish all my pieces as essays."

The extraordinary range of Coetzee's essays, covering writers from every continent over five centuries, is the least of its astonishments and delights. What we appreciate most is Coetzee's deep reading and enlightened presentation, his enjoyment of untangling the mysteries of great and not-so-great writing, and the fact that not for a moment is he dismissive or forgetful of the ordinary human failures we all share.

All of the essays have been previously published, many in *The New York Review of Books*. Others are mostly excerpts of Introductions written for reprints of his subject's work. In one of his essays on Patrick White, Coetzee discusses White's insistence, before he died in 1990, that his unpublished papers be destroyed. They were not. Coetzee suggests authors who know their executors will not comply with their wishes do the deed themselves before they are too infirm. He has thought about his own legacy, I suppose. I wonder what he will choose to do.