Diary of a badly written and

JM Coetzee: A Life in Writing suffers from many problems, including a star-struck author

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John Kannemeyer, a Stellenbosch academic, submitted the draft for this biography just before his death on Christmas Day last year. The authorities assure us that the text is in effect complete. Despite the uneven quality I am inclined to believe that it would not have benefited from second thoughts.

In his role as biographer, Kannemeyer is a doctrinaire starting from the startling principle that his "book is not a psychological study of the man JM Coetzee", but rather a body of "facts that were not previously in the public domain". Kannemeyer's subject has never liked finding himself under psychological investigation and must have approved the method as well as his style of choosing the reliable practice of acquiring facts rather than following fugitive and ever-changing feelings.

Yet lives, and literary texts more than lives, are constituted by feelings as much as facts. It is the unfortunate teacher Thomas Gradgrind at the outset of Hard Times who instructs us that "facts alone are wanted in life ... This is the principle on which I bring up my own children and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to facts, sir!"

Moreover, the range of Kannemeyer's facts is narrow. The fact that Coetzee's career coincides with the high point of dispossession and subordination of tens of millions of human beings is visible only on the perimeter of this biography. It adds a moral drama to Coetzee's life, but little of human and individual significance. He draws on almost no informant of colour, presents no significant relationship or exchange that Coetzee might have had with a black or brown man or woman in any capacity, and asks no questions about the possible origins of figures like Michael K or Petrus in Disgrace.

The most useful set of Kannemeyer's whitewashed facts concern the Coetzee family and its branches and alliances by marriage in the Cape. Descended from a Dutchman, Dirk Couche, who first settled near Stellenbosch, they were generally pro-British and as close to English-speaking society as to Afrikaans. The women learned to play the piano while the men studied cricket and worked as bookkeepers, postmasters and bank managers. In this bilingual world, failed artists and writers were not unknown.

In "the case of John Coetzee, the artistic talent was given free rein, in keeping with the not uncommon phenomenon that exceptional talent in the arts is preceded in a family line by mediocre practitioners". The most proximate failure was that of Coetzee's father, Jack, a lawyer "with his dapper little moustache and his cocky look," who embarked on a disastrous career of heavy drinking and defrauding his clients.

In 1957 Coetzee, who saw himself as a poet, found a better home in the University of Cape Town. Yet the English department was already a byword for academic dysfunction. In 1984, after serving there for more than a decade, Coetzee was clear that he "never enjoyed working in the English department" and in 1999 he finally moved out of "a depressed and depressing work environment, namely the department of English language and literature". In the same year, through the figure of David Lurie in Disgrace, Coetzee drew on his memories to present an environment of unbridled mediocrity, serving time, racial exclusion and sexual harassment.

In 2011, in the same department, where I happen to work, 88% of black undergraduates left English before reaching their final year, a casualty rate that indicates that the advanced forms of postcolonial and poststructuralist argument that Coetzee found so congenial have as distant a connection to equality as Gradgrind to real horses.

Even as an adolescent Coetzee wanted to find a way out of provincial society. By learning to play Bach, as he tells us, "I was symbolically electing high European culture, and command of the codes of that culture, as a route that would take me out of my class position in white South African society and ultimately out of what I must have felt ... as an historical dead end". We should be patient with this characteristic pose. Why would a man have to infer the nature of his own conscious feelings? Why does politics, in a country under effective martial law, touch Coetzee only at such a distance?

In Kannemeyer's account, apart- heid is brought home to Coetzee at the university when the students are forbidden to join a march on De Waal Drive. And before that? Did he never see a sign on a beach? Did he never pass a segregated bus stop or see the handcuffed men in the back of a Black Maria? In the United States Coetzee is moved principally by what he sees of Vietnam on television: "I think particularly of the effect that televised air strikes had on the small screen. The violence erupted at you."

There is something wrong here, or at least some strange distribution of priorities, which Kannemeyer evades by defining Coetzee in Keatsonian terms as a man of no fixed identity, too sensitive to harbour a conviction. During his undergraduate years, for example, Kannemeyer's Coetzee avoids both the "right-wing politics of the National Party" and "the left-wing politics of some of his fellow students with their violent political rhetoric".

Only the least interesting of our reactions, such as Kannemeyer, FW de Klerk and Hermann Giliomee, are still trying to construct a moral balance between the National Party and the left-wing organisations that opposed it. For the rest of us, we are entitled to ask whether the anecdotes concerning Coetzee, which show a man who has placed a seamless and implacable style between himself and the world, do not dramatise the limits of a certain conception of the writer.

In London, after Cape Town, Coetzee worked as a programmer for computer company IBM. He soon moved to the University of Texas at Austin where he studied linguistics and interested himself in Samuel Beckett. In 2001 he recalled that "both the state of Texas and the University of Texas were welcoming and generous to me from the moment I arrived there in 1965 ... It is a source of much satisfaction to me to have kept up the contact with the university to the present day." The gentlemanly tone of that statement is one of the unexpected constants in Coetzee's language and, I suspect, in his nature.

Kannemeyer wastes many pages quoting unnecessary academic verbiage, but it is true that the university, its values and its disappointments are central to Coetzee. In this biography he protests on only two occasions and only for reasons of profession and guild. At the first, in 1970 in the United States, he was charged and arrested and therefore