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Out of South Africa

By RACHEL DONADIO DEC. 16, 2007

Correction Appended

This month, Viking will publish "Diary of a Bad Year," the latest novel by J. M. Coetzee. With his spare prose and unsparing sense of the human condition, Coetzee is one of the most important novelists at work today. His biographical note mentions his 2003 Nobel Prize and 18 previously published books. It also presents, understatedly, a significant fact: "A native of South Africa, Coetzee now lives in Adelaide, Australia."

A host of questions lurk behind that simple sentence. Why would a novelist who has written so powerfully about the land of his birth pack up and leave? Were his 2002 move and his taking of Australian citizenship last year a betrayal of his homeland, or a rejoinder to a country whose new government had denounced one of his most important novels as racist? Was it just another example of the "white flight" that has sent hundreds of thousands of generally affluent South Africans to other Anglophone countries since the end of apartheid? Or was it a tacit acknowledgment that Coetzee had exhausted his South African material, that the next chapter in the country's history was the rise of the black middle class, and what did an old resistance writer, with his aloof, middle-aged white narrators, know about that?

Although he said he had been drawn by Australia's "spirit" and "beauty," Coetzee's further reasons for emigrating and assuming Australian citizenship

remain elusive; he rarely speaks to the press and declined to be interviewed for this article. But the fraught events leading to his departure have been much discussed in South Africa. In a country where every inch of physical and moral ground is contested, Coetzee has been criticized for refusing to play the role of writer-as-statesman, one more easily played by his fellow Nobel laureate, Nadine Gordimer. (Unlike others who have delivered rousing Nobel lectures, Coetzee, true to form, gave an elliptical disquisition on decoy ducks in Daniel Defoe.) But he has been criticized even more harshly for his work. Nothing struck a rawer nerve than Coetzee's powerful 1999 novel, "Disgrace." Rather than offering comfort or encouragement to a defensive new nation, the book brilliantly explored the unresolved tensions of the post-apartheid order.

"Disgrace" is about a divorced university professor in Cape Town, David Lurie, who is caught up in a sexual harassment scandal with a student and goes to stay with his daughter, Lucy, on the farm in the Eastern Cape where she has chosen to live. One day three black strangers, two men and a boy, arrive at the house, asking for help. When Lucy lets the men in, they rape her and assault Lurie. Lucy becomes pregnant — and chooses to have the baby. She refuses to file charges and continues to work on the farm with the family that seems to be harboring one of the rapists. "Yes, I agree, it is humiliating," Lucy tells her father. "Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start again at ground level. With nothing. ... No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity. ... Like a dog." An unsettling interweaving of realism and allegory, with biblical allusions and Dostoyevskian moral complexity, "Disgrace" has been called a masterpiece — "a novel with which it is almost impossible to find fault," wrote the critic James Wood, who praised "its loose wail of pain, its vigorous honesty." Coetzee became the first novelist ever to win the Booker Prize twice.

The reception at home was less rapturous. In public hearings on racism in the media held by the government's Human Rights Commission, the African National Congress accused Coetzee of representing "as brutally as he can the white people's perception of the post-apartheid black man," and of implying that in the new regime whites would "lose their cards, their weapons, their property, their rights,

their dignity," while "the white women will have to sleep with the barbaric black men." Beyond that, some interpreted a subplot in "Disgrace" about an animal shelter where Lurie ministers to wounded dogs as a sign that the novelist cared more about animal rights than human rights.

The response of many literary colleagues was hardly more sympathetic. "In the novel 'Disgrace' there is not one black person who is a real human being," Nadine Gordimer said in an interview in Johannesburg in 2006. "I find it difficult to believe, indeed more than difficult, having lived here all my life and being part of everything that has happened here, that the black family protects the rapist because he's one of them," she said. She had harsh words for Coetzee's vision. "If that's the only truth he could find in the post-apartheid South Africa, I regretted this very much for him."

Gordimer's point was echoed by Chris van Wyk, whose books include "Shirley, Goodness and Mercy," a memoir about his childhood in a colored township. "I believe 'Disgrace' was a racist book," van Wyk said. "The white characters are fleshed out, the black evildoers are not."

Tensions rose even higher after Coetzee won the Nobel in 2003. No sooner had the A.N.C. congratulated this "son of the soil" than an opposition party said the A.N.C. owed Coetzee an apology for its earlier denunciation of "Disgrace." The A.N.C. stood by its criticism. (It remains to be seen whether the issues will be revived next year, when a film version of "Disgrace," starring John Malkovich, directed by Steve Jacobs and filmed on location in South Africa, is scheduled for release.)

Yet "Disgrace" certainly has its defenders. "I suppose it was groundbreaking in the sense that there was something sacrosanct about the 'new' South Africa, and he actually broke a taboo by speaking about it in those terms," the South African novelist Damon Galgut said. Though he expressed reservations about the novel, he added that "some people here revere the book because they think it articulates exactly where we are now."

Homi Bhabha, a Harvard English professor and the de facto dean of postcolonial theory (and a friend of Coetzee's), says the novelist's power lies precisely in his ability to unsettle. "Disgrace," he said in a recent interview, is a work of "open seams" rather than "suturing." In a moment of "real social, historical, psychic crisis," he said, Coetzee makes readers feel their anxiety rather than resolving it "in the way in which we as progressive liberals would want him to do." For Bhabha, "Disgrace" is so powerful because it "allows people to project onto it some of their own most heartfelt but violent feelings."

So, it would seem, does its enigmatic author. Writing in 2003, the trenchant South African cultural critic Shaun de Waal half-jokingly called Coetzee "the Greta Garbo of South African literature," a "blank screen" onto which the reader could "project his or her fantasies without restraint." Indeed, to a great extent, the furor over "Disgrace" stemmed from an ambiguity about author and narrator: are David Lurie's attitudes Coetzee's too? It's a confusion the novelist seems to encourage. The protagonist of "Diary of a Bad Year" is a South African novelist, J. C., whose books include "Waiting for the Barbarians" and who has recently relocated to Australia.

So how are we to interpret Coetzee's self-expatriation to Australia, where he is currently a research fellow at the University of Adelaide? Since his move, his novels have been set in Australia ("Slow Man" and "Diary of a Bad Year"), or have had an Australian protagonist ("Elizabeth Costello"). At the same time, his work has grown increasingly philosophical, preoccupied with the nature of literary and political authority and the stark contrast between the brute reality of the natural world — as manifested by animals as themselves and as allegorical figures — and the separate world of our ideas and interpretations. In his 1991 essay "What Is a Classic?" Coetzee writes about T. S. Eliot's decision to leave America, become a British citizen and convert to Anglicanism. That process, Coetzee writes, is "one of the most spectacular that occur to me of a writer attempting to make a new identity, claiming that identity not on the basis of immigration, settlement, residence, domestication, acculturation ... but by defining nationality to suit himself and then using all of his accumulated cultural power to impose that

definition on educated opinion."

Perhaps Coetzee, for all his reticence, has similarly grand ambitions.

Correction: January 6, 2008

An essay on Dec. 16 about J. M. Coetzee misspelled the given name of the cultural critic who once referred to him as "the Greta Garbo of South African literature." He is Shaun de Waal, not Sean. The essay also referred incorrectly to the student with whom the protagonist of Coetzee's novel "Disgrace" was involved in a sexual harassment scandal. The novel doesn't specify her race; she is never described as "colored." The religion to which T. S. Eliot, whom Coetzee discussed in a 1991 essay, became a convert was also misstated. It was Anglicanism, not Catholicism.

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