for Balz

— thank you.
LADINA BEZZOLA LAMBERT, ANDREA OCHSNER (eds.)

MOMENT TO MONUMENT

The Making and Unmaking of Cultural Significance

(in collaboration with REGULA HOHL TRILLINI,
JENNIFER JERMANN and MARKUS MARTI)
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How the West was won:
J.M. Coetzee and postcolonial canons

Lily Saint

It is difficult to be a so-called successful writer and to occupy a marginal position at the same time, even in our day and age.
J. M. Coetzee

The canon debate has started to look a bit canonized itself. Traditionally, it pits knee-jerk multiculturalism against a philosophy of transcendent aesthetics – the former arguing for the inclusion of works by underrepresented groups, the latter arguing that only works transcending political, temporal and spatial specifics deserve canonization. Neither of these rigidified positions allows for a careful look at how the production and circulation of literary works also determines their inclusion in or exclusion from such canons.

Fortunately, this oversight is being redressed by some recent work that seeks to detach the literary from its ethereal position, recasting it squarely in terms of down-to-earth modes of material production.1 Ian Baucom, building on Giovanni Arrighi’s work, goes the farthest, perhaps, when he suggests that contemporary global literary studies function on a centripetal model akin to that of the chartered companies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As the publishing industry broadens outwards from the capitals of London, Paris, and New York to include works from “the rest” of the globe, the wealth generated by these new and often “exoticized” works gets reincorporated in the central metropolises rather than shared.

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1 See Guillory, Ali, Baucom, Damrosch and Casanova.
with their places of origin. As Baucom neatly puts it: “expansion contracts” (160).

This paper examines how the material production of literary canons contributes to the production of J.M. Coetzee as a canonical writer, investigating in parts I & II how Western academia and the publishing industry influence this success. Part III considers how some of Coetzee’s thematic and formal preoccupations provide clues to explaining how it is that a well-known author from the so-called postcolonial ‘margins’ has come to occupy such a central position. The ‘living monument’ of the canon, to which Coetzee’s works belong, cannot be understood outside of the historical, economic, aesthetic and ideological trends which produce it. Indeed, Coetzee’s success seems to depend, despite himself, on the articulation of a set of ideologies particularly resonant within the still-white, still-Western hegemony. Part of what is fascinating about Coetzee’s success viewed from this thematic perspective, is how the *bricolage* of ideas that he propounds, including both Enlightenment notions of selfhood and 20th-century aesthetics of postmodern instability, comes to be a kind of gauge for contemporary Western thought.

Despite marked attempts within academia to disrupt and overturn the hegemony of the so-called Western tradition, academic institutions, events, publications and people also stand in complicit relation to the Western canon by upholding and replicating its rigid borders and the very idea of borders. Pascale Casanova points to the pivotal role “consecrating authorities” (academics and critics) and “foreign exchange brokers” (translators) play in canon formation. Conferences, peer-reviewed journals, and academic presses function to simultaneously consecrate a pre-established canon and to create new ones by establishing and maintaining theoretical, thematic, and authorial hierarchies, and even producing canons about canons. A conference or a book that focuses precisely on mechanisms of monumentalizing and canonization might well be expected to call into question its own contribution to the very subject under consideration. Processes of selection and rejection are just one way in which academic practices reproduce canons. Popular keynote speakers at conferences are

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2 The phrase “living monument” is used in multiple contexts – intending both William Godwin’s reference to books as “living monuments” (in Marshall, 178), and Mary Shelley’s description of Frankenstein’s monster as “the living monument of presumption and rash ignorance…” (64).
asked to contribute – to consecrate their authority on the larger proceedings – and considerations of audience must also be attended to. What topics, for instance, will draw a crowd? Whose name will help generate publicity? The complex responsibilities of the organizing committee for an academic conference or anthology force a confrontation with the strange conflation of celebrity and word. What fame is in a name?

What about a South African name? How does the mark of linguistic belonging contribute to or belie the success of an author? How much cultural capital can a mere name carry?

The ‘Coetzee’ of the title contains a weighty and steadily increasing amount of value – ‘value’ in the Marxian sense, indicating the human labor that has gone and continues to go into the production of ‘Coetzee’ in the literary marketplace. How much does his value extend beyond his work, even conferring worth here? A digression into South African history exemplifies the particular problem of naming in the postcolony.

In 1837, Dingane, half-brother of Shaka, the famous Zulu king, came to an agreement with the Boer leader, Piet Retief, exchanging large portions of Natal for a herd of stolen cattle. A few months later, abruptly changing tactics, the Zulus attacked and killed Retief and hundreds of other Voortrekkers. In return, on December 16, 1838, Andries Pretorius and his men killed approximately 3000 Zulus, and thenceforth Afrikaners commemorated this day as ‘Dingane’s Day’, the implication presumably being, that this was the day of Dingane’s defeat.

The first government of the South African Union renamed ‘Dingane’s Day’ the ‘Day of the Vow’ in 1910, in reference to the religious pledge the Voortrekkers were meant to have made, promising to build a church, to keep the day as holy, in return for a triumph against Dingane. The National Party continued to link religion and nation with this day, renaming it the ‘Day of the Covenant’ in 1982. Some have questioned if the vow – usually accepted as a 1962 translation of a 1919 reconstruction of a never-recorded pledge – ever even occurred. But its symbolic power remains. Despite rebelliously using the date to launch the first attacks of the African National Congress’s military wing – Umkhonto we Sizwe – in 1961, the ANC renamed the holiday ‘Reconciliation Day’ in 1994 when it assumed power, as a symbolic gesture of cooperation with the recently defeated government.

Bearing the mark of ideological and affiliative changes, this day exemplifies how South African names reveal sets of complicities – whether brutally enforced, willingly or begrudgingly accepted or adamantly denied. Coetzee’s own name, as he remarks in his autobiography Boyhood, constantly threatens, despite his most fervent desires, to locate his complicities
within the camp of the Afrikaners. Perhaps the circumstantial accident that marked this author with the same last name as brutal and prominent defenders of apartheid is ignored in studies of Coetzee’s work because of the monopoly white South African academics have within studies of South African literature. Do these critics fail to remark upon the mark of the name because they fear to speak what their own names reveal?

II

One reason Coetzee presents an interesting case study for examining contemporary trends in canon formation is that his own novels frequently either directly invoke canonized works like Daniel Defoe’s popular canonical text *Robinson Crusoe*, or refer in their structure and subject material to clearly canonical authors such as Kafka and Dostoevsky. Evaluating Coetzee’s place in the canon, Rita Barnard claims that Coetzee’s works stage a “subversion of British canonical texts” (4), however, Derek Attridge is perhaps more accurate when he argues that Coetzee’s novels offer themselves not as challenges to the canon, but as canon in the manner of already canonized, one might say. They appear to locate themselves within an established literary culture, rather than presenting themselves as an assault on that culture. Moreover, that literary culture is predominantly European, and clearly ‘high’. (68)

Coetzee accomplishes this ‘always-already’ canonization of his novels, in part because his writing accords with certain ideological ideals driving European and North American markets.

John Guillory in *Cultural Capital* stresses the importance of educational institutions in the formation of canons: “Literary works must be seen … as the vector of ideological notions which do not inhere in the works themselves but in their institutional presentation,” yet his dismissal of how the works’

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3 | “There are rumours that the Government is going to order all schoolchildren with Afrikaans surnames to be transferred to Afrikaans classes. His parents talk about it in low voices; they are clearly worried. As for him, he is filled with panic at the thought of having to move to an Afrikaans class. He tells his parents he will not obey.” (*Boyhood* 69)

4 | Two examples immediately come to mind: Dirk Coetzee, for instance, was the founder and commander of the infamous Vlakplaas torture and death unit; in Ian Gabriel’s film *Forgiveness* (2004) the character Tertius Coetzee is an ex-member of the South African police, seeking forgiveness for the brutal murder of a ‘coloured’ man.
own ideological content functions to determine their place at the center (or the margins) of their institutional representations is questionable (ix).

Casanova gives more credence to the importance of ideological content when she shows how the disparate thematic foci of works in the English-speaking ‘global south’ were grouped together under the homogenizing umbrella of ‘Commonwealth literature’ as “a curious yet clever way of incorporating as part of official British literary history works that to one degree or another were written against it” (121). Guillory thus mistakenly assumes that the thematic and ideological content of such works has nothing to do with the way they are incorporated and re-represented in institutions of canonical circulation. By combining these two theorists’ ideas of how educational practices wittingly or unwittingly collude with the self-promoting agendas of the Western publishing industry, we begin to understand how it is that many South African works which present greater challenges to Western aesthetic and thematic tyrannies often fail to see the light of day.

III

One should neither underestimate the diligence and talent of creative writers nor the importance of quality in the production of a successful author. However, apart from problematizing the very notion of ‘quality’, one should also investigate how ideological allegiances are rewarded, and how this privileging can be recognized not only through the obvious effects of gender, race, class, and language, but also through the more subtle prisms of thematics and form.

Derek Barker’s 2006 study uses statistical analysis to show how South African literary reviews play a vital role in the canonization process. By counting the number of occurrences of reviews focusing on a particular South African author in eleven major South African literary journals over the last four decades, Coetzee emerges as by far the most consistently discussed South African author, both during apartheid, and after its demise. Articles about Coetzee outnumber those on other authors at the startling rate of 2:1, meaning that there were always twice as many articles written about his work than about any other author in any decade under consideration (Appendix 76).

What can be made of such clear evidence of Coetzee’s preeminence in the critical market? Is Coetzee twice as good a writer as all these others taken together, because the critical literature spends twice as much time discussing him? It can hardly be ethical to draw such a conclusion. Yet this trend is not limited to South African literary criticism. Though Barker only discusses literary journals in publication within South Africa, there is
ample evidence to suggest the preoccupation with Coetzee is international. Indeed, the fact that academic presses outside of South Africa published three books in the last three years with a sole focus on Coetzee is worth noting if only because no other single-author studies have appeared on any other South African writer. Further evidence of Coetzee’s international popularity, in addition to the obvious prestige of his Nobel Prize, can be seen in the 2005 election of Disgrace as the best book written in English in the last 25 years in the British newspaper The Observer.

Why does Coetzee receive all this attention? This discrepancy can be explained in ways that look beyond the un-nuanced argument that Coetzee’s work is simply of a higher aesthetic caliber; quantity and quality should obviously not be conflated. There is instead a complicated network of processes working to produce the successful South African author for the international arena, and Coetzee’s brilliant career is rather the result of all these global forces than of any eighteenth-century notion of creative ‘genius’.

Coetzee has had obvious advantages helping him to enter the annals of world literary history, but neither these, nor his self-fashioning as a descendent of European thought are solely responsible for his unparalleled position in world letters. It is his thematics and the generic mutability of his works, that has resonated so successfully both with an international audience of readers, and with the “consecrating authorities” in the “world literary space” (Casanova). In what follows I argue that this approval further stems from his focus on 1) the individual, 2) the universal, 3) non-violence, and 4) the postmodernist aesthetic.

In the introduction to a recent collection of essays about Coetzee’s work, Jane Poyner observes that most of his novels depict the “conscience-stricken white writer” (2). This emphasis on guilty white liberals who deftly articulate the anxieties and torments of their privileged position is understandably of great interest to many a well-read Western liberal, anxious on the one hand to locate a convincing idiom of ethical responsibility, and grateful too, to read about the crises of morality and self-hood many advantaged liberals are afraid to admit to.

Self-hood, the great Enlightenment project of defining the individual, is a central concern of Coetzee’s fictional work; all his novels are dominated by a solitary and wounded character attempting to determine the truth

5 | See Poyner. Attridge and Wright. It is also interesting to note that Coetzee became an Australian citizen in 2006. Does this exclude him from being considered a South African writer?

6 | In an interview, Coetzee asserted “... my intellectual allegiances are clearly European not African” (in Attwell 1).
about him- or herself in relation to the world. From early novels such as *In the Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* through his most recently published *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee’s works evince a preoccupation with the alienated individual. Derek Attridge sees this focus on individuality as a hallmark of the Western canon itself:

... consistent with the traditional humanist concern of the canon is [Coetzee’s] novels’ thematic focus: for instance, they return again and again to the solitary individual in a hostile human and physical environment to raise crucial questions about the foundations of civilization and humanity ... (70).

If self-evaluation constitutes one of the Western canon’s thematic foci, then the mere existence of the apartheid system excluded many works from canonization, since only loci of material and physical privilege could permit extended exercises in existential self-absorption. Yet even if such self-directed critiques stem from a desire to redress injustices, as Njabulo Ndebele points out, moral discourses of individual action frequently become traps of the well-intentioned, paradoxically deflecting attention away from actual, material, group struggles, rather than supporting them.

In addition to his persistent concern with the self, Coetzee’s work frequently gets embroiled in debates about universality. Peter D. McDonald brilliantly explores how apartheid censor reports responding to Coetzee’s novels ironically reveal that it was the seemingly “universal” quality of the narratives that won the tolerance of the censors, who recognized in the novels’ delocalized settings a “manifest canonicity” (51). McDonald writes, “[t]he dogma of universality – canonical literature is about everywhere and all times – was simply too entrenched in the censors’ thinking” to lead them to ban Coetzee’s seemingly ahistorical and alocal texts (51). Coetzee’s censors are not in any way his best critics, but the currency of their observations cannot be denied by his readers. Coetzee’s early works in particular, benefited at home and abroad because of the delocalized, ‘universally’-applicable ways the narratives could be read.

The hermeneutical instability of his oeuvre is another reason for Coetzee’s popularity in Western academia. Interpretive aporias of his work are repeatedly championed, yet Coetzee’s “opacity of fiction” threatens to encourage a hermeneutical relativity veering on the apolitical (Poyner, 4). Lewis Nkosi remarks on the tyranny of the postmodern aesthetic in contemporary literature, suggesting, among other things, that the long lack of exposure to Western scholarship on the postmodern makes it virtually impossible for black South African writers nowadays to compete in a world in which the postmodern remains the popular mode. As Nkosi’s writing intimates, Harold Bloom is wrong to argue that “the undeniable economics
of literature, from Pindar to the present, do not determine questions of aesthetic supremacy,” for it is precisely economics, in tandem with apartheid’s racist ideology, that prevented South African writers from being able to participate in that global dialogue of ‘agons’ refiguring the modern (Bloom, 23). While Coetzee’s works can carry the mark of Beckett, Defoe, Dostoevsky and others, what allowed him access to works by those writers were precisely mechanisms that denied them to the majority of his South African compatriots.

Evidence of Coetzee’s postmodern tendency can be found most markedly in his works’ generic variety. In the Heart of the Country, for example, is written as a compilation of numbered sections void of overt chronological consistency; both Foe and Life & Times of Michael K switch back and forth between narrators; and Elizabeth Costello’s odd linking of lectures previously delivered by Coetzee further subvert generic expectations. Coetzee’s genre-bending tales write themselves neatly into narratives of post-structuralist alterity and instability thereby appealing directly to contemporary academic trends. Critics argue over whether Coetzee is a modernist (Lazarus, 131-155), postmodernist, or a late modernist (Attridge, 2), while simultaneously dismissing other South African writers’ over-reliance on realist modes of depiction.7 Coetzee further complicates – or adds value to – the matter by providing slippery and equivocal answers in interviews. As Nkosi puts it, “… although … postmodernism appears to have taken some hold in South African literature, it is a movement wholly occupied, managed, and dominated by white writers, with black writers seeming either to ignore it or not even to have heard of it” (77). Thus contemporary aesthetic and generic trends are rewarded through publication, further contributing to the exclusion of certain forms of literature from processes of canonization.

Another popular ideological position welcomed by liberal Western readers of postcolonial literature is that of non-violence. Rob Nixon shows how South African cultural products championed by European and North American markets promote an over-optimistic liberalism, in tandem with a validation of non-violent resistance.8 Western audiences were reluctant to hear of actual violence in South Africa during apartheid, particularly of violence committed in the name of resistance. Though it is well known

7 | I am tempted to say that the scale of success (both popular and academic) of Coetzee’s most realist novel, Disgrace, suggests that academia’s recent interest in the postmodern novel is a sham functioning to maintain intellectual power for a field with rapidly dwindling social eminence.

8 | Nixon is most convincing in his discussion of how the films Cry Freedom, A World Apart and A Dry White Season revise South African history in order to cater to a Western audience.
throughout South Africa that both the ANC and the PAC had armed military wings, this aspect of the ‘story’ of South African resistance has largely been written out of Western narratives of the anti-apartheid struggle, replaced instead by idealistic ones that reductively represent resistance in terms of the religious extremes of good and evil.

Not surprisingly, Coetzee defines his position along these lines, as nonviolent. In *Doubling the Point* he tells David Attwell that “[v]iolence, as soon as I sense its presence within me, becomes introverted as violence against myself: I cannot project it outward. I am unable to, or refuse to, conceive of a liberating violence” (337). The Crucifixion he approvingly interprets as an indication of Christ’s “refusal and ... introversion of retributive violence” (337); in other words, one should respond to violence both by turning the other cheek (the refusal), and allowing oneself to be sacrificed (the introversion). This thought shows up again in his new work *Diary of a Bad Year* in which the protagonist asserts: “I believe that the greatest of all contributions to political ethics was made by Jesus when he urged the injured and offended among us to turn the other cheek, thus breaking the cycle of revenge and reprisal” (Coetzee in Wood, 7). But what is missing in both these instances is how Coetzee’s own privileged situation allows him to assume such a position towards violence. In the security of his own positionality, Coetzee never needed (or needs) to resort to violence as the ANC, PAC and other groups did – violence of the sort that Frantz Fanon so famously argues for in *The Wretched of the Earth*.

In another interview, Coetzee explains how during his years as an academic in the U.S. he felt pressure to become a teacher of African literature, to become what is referred to as an Africanist. Despite reading widely in both South African and other African literatures, he notes that “nothing truly gripped [him].” He particularly feared he would have to be “specialist in a peripheral and not very highly regarded body of literature,” an anxiety which reveals perhaps less about the actual works than about his own desire to belong to a central and ‘highly regarded’ canon (*Doubling the Point* 336, my emphasis). In his condescending condemnation of all African literature as “peripheral” and un-enthralling, Coetzee’s worldly ambition reveals itself.

The success of this ambition is well known. Writers such as Coetzee come, despite their best intentions, to stand as representatives of South African letters, thereby obscuring international awareness of other writing. One such writer, virtually unknown outside of his South African national context, is Phaswane Mpe. His 2004 novel *Welcome To Our Hillbrow*, in its yoking together of writing and death, directly suggests that this publishing climate which rewards only certain moralities and affinities is not just
the place for postmodern anxieties, but for some, a vital impediment to survival. The narrator addresses the protagonist in the second person:

When in September of 1995, your short story was accepted for publication in a reputable literary magazine, you wondered whether it was not better to write more of the same, and perhaps later rework them into a novel, which you could then translate into Sepedi. You had thought about these things, child of Tiragalong and Hillbrow; but not with the same conviction that you had thought about suicide. (30)

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