

Group, Nation, State: J.M. Coetzee and Problems of Nationality in Postcolonial Countries

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Summary

J.M. Coetzee's adoption of Australia as his permanent home is puzzling in view of his preoccupation in his work with South Africa. His autobiographical works *Boyhood* (1997) and *Summertime* (2009), however, as well as *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), which, I shall argue, has autobiographical elements, show that the protagonist, whose name is John Coetzee, had experiences in South Africa which have prevented any simple attachment to the country, where group loyalties and antagonisms often replace love of country. The protagonists of *Boyhood* and *Summertime* are of Afrikaans descent though their first language is English, which has further problematised "nationality" (a word which I consider carefully) for them. Señor C in *Diary of a Bad Year* has come to see the state – all states – as potentially tyrannical. A further and important matter which is discussed is the relationship of the author with his protagonists in these works.

Opsomming

Dit bly 'n raaisel waarom J.M. Coetzee Australië as sy permanente tuiste aanvaar het in die lig van sy preokkupasie in sy werk met Suid-Afrika. Sy outobiografiese werke *Boyhood* (1997) en *Summertime* (2009), asook *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), waaroor ek kan aanvoer dat dit outobiografiese elemente bevat, toon dat die protagonis, met die naam John Coetzee, ervarings in Suid-Afrika gehad het wat enige eenvoudige verbintenis met die land sou voorkom het, waar groeplojaliteit en antagonisme dikwels die liefde vir die land verplaas. Die protagoniste van *Boyhood* en *Summertime* is van Afrikaanse afkoms, alhoewel hulle eerste taal Engels is, wat "nasionaaliteit" ('n woord wat ek noukeurig oorweeg) vir hulle verder problematiseer. Señor C in *Diary of a Bad Year* sien die staat – alle state – as potensieel tirannies. 'n Verdere belangrike saak wat bespreek word, is die verhouding van die outeur met sy protagoniste in hierdie werke.

Since J.M. Coetzee's departure from South Africa to take up residence and citizenship¹ in Australia, the component of his identity, which we call nationality, has been a puzzle to many of his readers. Five of his novels, his three autobiographical works and much of his major criticism show strong engagement with South Africa. Though it is possible to see *Disgrace* (1999) as valedictory, several of his later works – parts of *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) and *Summertime* (2009) – struggle for understanding of South African problems.

I will try to account for Coetzee's willingness to leave South Africa despite this continuing preoccupation by focusing on two of his overtly autobiographical works, *Boyhood* (1997) and *Summertime* (2009), and on *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), which placed side by side with *Summertime* (2009), can be seen to have an autobiographical component. I will not discuss *Youth* (2002), in which he seems to be most concerned with the problems of becoming an artist, though South Africa and his feeling for it receive occasional notice.²

I will argue that Coetzee's experience of South Africa has exposed him to group loyalties which he has perceived as detestable. Group membership in Coetzee's childhood – and there was pressure on everyone to belong to a group – implied antagonisms of belonging and not belonging. The state was rarely visible to the child, except as the source of arbitrary regulations. By the time he published *Age of Iron* in 1990, he had come to perceive the South African state as murderous; by *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) he believed that all states were potentially tyrannical.

Before the publication of *Summertime* (2009), it might have been argued that the form of *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), in which voices other than those of the protagonist are important, and the discrepancies between the life of "Señor C" (the Coetzee look-alike within the novel) and the author's own life disqualified it as autobiography. Since *Summertime*, discrepancies of this kind have to be seen as irrelevant to the discussion of genre within Coetzee's work, and we are forced to give emphasis to his statement that "in a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it (Coetzee 1992: 17). His recognition that the necessary selectivity of autobiography is governed by the author-subject's "evolving purpose" (p. 18), rather than his memories,

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1. Coetzee moved permanently to Australia in 2002, citing as his motive the South African government's attitude to crime (Hans Pienaar, *Independent*, 3 October 2003) and became an Australian citizen in 2006 (*Mail & Guardian*, 6 March 2006).
 2. See for example Gilbert Yeoh: "Stupidity, Impasse and Negative Form in J.M. Coetzee's *Youth*", in which he argues persuasively that James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* has been the strongest influence on *Youth*.

makes it clear that he regards autobiography as a literary genre with variable conventions of fictionalisation in terms of its author's preferences.

I cannot omit at this point, though I have gone into it in detail elsewhere (Lenta 2003), discussion of the genre – or genres – to which *Boyhood*, *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Summertime* belong. Coetzee has discussed his distance from the child and adolescent he once was, a distance which, in an autobiographical interview published in 1992, five years before the publication of *Boyhood*, he claims causes him to speak of his child self in the third person. Not until he speaks of going to Texas and beginning the studies which are to influence the rest of his life can he say “*he* now begins to feel closer to *I*: *autre*biography shades back into autobiography” (1992: 393-394). This may have seemed, in 1992, to imply that distance in time would be the governing influence on the form of the fictionalised memoirs (if that is what they are), but complications of genre have continued in his work, and *Summertime*, the most recent work containing an autobiographical element, manifests them in an acute form.

Reviewers of *Summertime* have almost unanimously focused on the generic problems of the work: Michael Sayeau, in the *New Statesman*, has called it “a non-stop assault on the conventions of the genre” (2009) and most other reviewers agree with him, or at least feel that the generic problems need to be discussed before an appropriate reading of the work can be arrived at. Justin Cartwright in the *Telegraph* calls it “a very tricky memoir” (2009).

Besides the autobiographical works, Coetzee has produced in *Doubling the Point* (1992) a series of interviews in which he discusses his life and the identity at which he has arrived. These interviews are the work of his adult self, and though the identity at which he has arrived is not unchangeable at the point at which he speaks – it never is – the interviews represent his reflections in middle life on himself as child and young adult. In their recent compilation *J.M. Coetzee in Context and Theory*, Elleke Boehmer, Robert Eaglestone and Katy Iddiols remark that “J.M. Coetzee as the ‘real’ author writes highly complex and ambiguous fictions and latterly speaks only through fiction” (2009: 2). This is of course true, and there can be no simple argument that the adult author is confirming or modifying in any of the autobiographical works what he revealed in *Doubling the Point*. It would nevertheless be perverse to argue that his impulse in the interviews in *Doubling the Point* is to puzzle or confuse his reader concerning the processes of his life.³ In the final interview of the latter work especially (1992: 391-395) he is explaining his own development as a writer and as a

3. To argue that these interviews are ambiguous in the way, for example, that the verdicts pronounced on Señor C in *Diary of a Bad Year* are, seems to me to fail to understand the difference which Coetzee himself is signalling by framing the former accounts of himself as interviews and presenting the latter as a novel.

personality, and what he says corresponds to the account offered in a different mode in *Boyhood*.

Coetzee's adult declaration in *Doubling the Point* of the category of persons to which he belongs – it would be mistaken to call it a group – is the result of experiences which resemble those which he records in *Boyhood* and *Summertime*, and of his reflections on that experience in adult life, rather than any aggregation of or selection from the attitudes which he has encountered.

I am one of the many people in this country who have become detached from their ethnic roots, whether those roots were in Dutch South Africa or Indonesia or Britain or Greece or wherever, and have joined a pool of no recognizable ethnos whose language of exchange is English. These people are not, strictly speaking, "English South Africans", since a large proportion of them – myself included – are not of British ancestry.

(Coetzee 1992: 342)

This statement seems to be a claim that the writer has no group *loyalties* – I shall argue later that he is willing to acknowledge that he has an inherited component in himself, which is Afrikaans.

Boyhood is to show us a society in which groups are all-important, though the child protagonist stands outside of all of them. At least as he understands them, they replace any loyalty to nation or state. I cannot avoid the word "nation", though it is in its derivation inappropriate, since "natio" means a tribe, a people united by "race and descent" as J.S. Mill (1975: 380) says they may be. Such groups, gathered into single states, tend to be rare in the modern world. Even today, however, commentators on states and groups within states often use the word "nation" meaning something approximating to "ethnic group" – or more often, "imagined ethnic group".

Within a colonised or previously colonised country like South Africa, there are likely to be several "nations" of the kind Mill envisages, and nationality and patriotism cannot be a simple matter of birth, residence, kinship or culture. Descendants of colonisers may retain a residual loyalty to the land in which their parents, or their ancestors, originated. Many, while regarding themselves as owing loyalty to the country where they reside, consider themselves so different from indigenous peoples, or even from later immigrants, that their principal loyalty is to their group, rather than to the total population resident in the country. Indigenous peoples too may feel a difference from later settlers, which prevents them from feeling simple loyalty. This is evidently the case in Worcester, the provincial town in the Cape Colony portrayed in *Boyhood*, where the child "John Coetzee" lived from 1948 until 1952.

Mill writes on the simplification of loyalties which can be achieved when "nation" in the sense of a people united by "race and descent", coincides

with “state”, and by implication, suggests the problems of a state in which this does not occur:

It is, in general, a necessary condition of free institutions that the boundaries of government should coincide in the main with those of nationality – where the sentiment of nationality exists in any force, there is a *prima facie* case for uniting all the members of the nationality under the same government, and a government to themselves apart. This is merely saying that the question of government ought to be decided by the governed.

(Mill 1975: 381)

So much the reverse of this description is the society of Worcester as Coetzee depicts it (and which to an extent epitomises the state of South Africa) that to know its divisions and the boundaries between groups as the child learns them is to understand in the simplifications possible for a child the problems of a state in which such groups are forced together.

In the same essay, “On Representative Government”, Mill considers the appropriateness of democratic government to people at different levels of social development, concluding that people who have previously had no laws, but have lived by “will” must have “not a government of force but one of guidance” (1975: 175) and that representative government is not at this stage suitable for them. His crucial observation is that such “leading strings are only admissible as a means of gradually training the people to walk alone” (p. 176). The history of colonialism and of the decolonisation of previous colonies has led us to feel that an important part of the discussion is missing at this point: in order to maintain the privileges and power of mastery, the governing group is likely to insist on the intellectual inferiority of the governed, and may seek to perpetuate it by denying education and economic opportunities to them. The creation of the kind of public opinion which would justify the retention of rights from other groups was the process which the child John Coetzee observed in Worcester, though he did not understand it.

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The places and time periods in which the two overtly autobiographical works which are my subject are set are real and specified: Worcester in the late 1940s and early 50s, Cape Town and the Karoo in the 1970s. The depiction of group and state in both of them is recognisable, though the understanding is related to a particular child and adult. We are being offered commentary on places within South Africa which are knowable, and though we do not have to agree with the narrator (whoever she or he may be at the time) we can use our own sense of such places and times to challenge, authenticate or supplement.

Boyhood is a narrative in which, although we are given extensive access to the consciousness of the child protagonist who forms its principal subject, he never addresses his readers. Carrol Clarkson has pointed out that

although “a common critical consensus about the use of the third person is that it distances the character from the narrating consciousness”, what Plato emphasises is that “the use of the third person in narrative prose *affirms* the identity of an authorial voice” (2009: 77), and this must of course be true: “the voice which commands the narrative, categorises a subject as ‘he’, in third person – someone who is not addressed (which would be second person) but who is reflected on. Is the authorial voice that of the author? In the sense that all voices within a text are author-created, he certainly is”. Clarkson quotes Coetzee in *Doubling the Point* as saying that “[w]riting reveals to you what you wanted to say in the first place. In fact, it sometimes constructs what you want or wanted to say” (p. 44). She goes on to quote from a later interview, ten years after *Doubling the Point*, in which Coetzee claims that his thinking on autobiography has been changed by reading and teaching Wordsworth’s *Prelude* and Roland Barthes’s *Roland Barthes*: I cannot *intend* quite the same as I originally intended” (2009: 45).

This is not an obscure statement: the author of *Diary of a Bad Year*, for example, has had important experiences, including those associated with changing his place of residence to Australia, which the author of *Boyhood* has not. Yet this author is evidently the descendant of the earlier author. He plays his usual game of inserting into the text of *Diary of a Bad Year*, alongside details which differ from the facts of his own life, indications that this is the J.M. Coetzee who wrote the novels. The most obvious of these is his reference to “my novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*” (Coetzee 2007: 171). *Diary of a Bad Year*, however, presents for the most part, not the events of the protagonist’s or the author’s life, but the opinions at which he has arrived.

I have discussed elsewhere (Lenta 2003) the concept of the “immanent voice” which I borrow from J.A. de Reuck (1988): it is crucial to the reader’s response to all Coetzee’s autobiographical works, and especially so in the case of *Boyhood*, where inadequacy and misunderstanding in the protagonist’s responses have to be supplemented by the reader’s understanding. Clarkson discusses a phenomenon akin to this in *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (2009); she quotes David Attridge’s statement that “the use of the third person ‘implicitly disassociates the narrative voice from the narrated consciousness’” (Attridge in Clarkson 2009: 23). More than disassociation is required: de Reuck identifies a set of signals which indicates that the author requires the reader to go beyond the child’s perceptions. Frequently the signal is his puzzlement: why must he not visit the houses of the farmworkers? He reflects that “[w]ith Coloured people in general and with the people of the Karoo in particular, he simply does not know when they cease to be children and become men and women” (Coetzee 1997: 86). For readers, however, to know the boundaries between groups is to understand the problems of a state in which groups divided by social custom and the law are forced together. These groups are being led by the state to

believe that their differences are so great that it is just that they have different status and rights within the polity.

The “John Coetzee” of *Summertime*, who in the present of the book is dead, is for the most part reported on by others, who are, however, also creations of the author. There are two short sections of his notes, but the bulk of the work consists of five interviews with a biographer, in which four women and a man speak about their acquaintance with him in the period 1972-1980. The differences between the ways in which they perceive him (and in at least one case the account offered may be a conscious falsification) are related to their own characters and situations. Julia sees him as part of her disengagement from a bad marriage; his cousin Margot, though she empathises with his love for the Karoo, sees him as possessed of the typical Coetzee incompetence. Is Adriana telling the truth about his passion for her, which she says irritated and disgusted her, and about her own resolute devotion to her dying husband and her children? Perhaps she misunderstood his overtures; perhaps she is lying; perhaps not. All but Sophie, a fellow academic, focus strongly on the fact that he is physically and socially inept.

Despite the fact that in *Summertime* the author has again chosen, no doubt purposefully, to name the protagonist John Coetzee, there are obvious differences between the protagonist’s life and that of the author: Patrick Denman Flannery has summarised them:

J.M. Coetzee married in 1963 and, by the early 1970s, was the father of two children, but *Summertime*’s Coetzee is unmarried (“not made for conjugal life. Not made for the company of women”) and childless. J.M. Coetzee’s mother, Vera, died in 1985, but the fictionalized writer’s mother has been dead for some time before John comes to live with his father in 1972. And of course, the historical Coetzee is not dead.

(Denman Flannery 2009: 19)

The “John Coetzee” of *Summertime* seems to be portrayed as unmarried because of the form the author has chosen for the work: two of the women interviewees, Julia and Sophie, have the knowledge of him which comes from being sexually involved with him; his cousin Margot is resuming an intimacy with him which began in childhood, and Adriana’s description of him as *célibataire* (2009: 160) depends on his being alone, as do the suspicions which she claims to have had about his interest in her younger daughter.

The decisions of John’s parents in *Boyhood* have complicated his understanding of the groups whose members he encounters. Mr and Mrs Coetzee, first-language speakers of Afrikaans, have decided that their sons shall be first-language speakers of English, though their surname will always identify them as of Afrikaans descent. The result as the adult Coetzee understands it is that “[h]is parents have no foothold in either Afrikaans or English social circles” (Coetzee 1992: 394). He does not deplore, even as an

adult, their refusal of group loyalties; his verdict on them is approving: "His parents aren't traitors, they aren't even particularly deracinated; they are merely, to their eternal credit, indifferent to the *volk* and its fate" (p. 393). As a child, he does not regret their decision that he shall speak English, as many of the Afrikaner children whom he sees are "poor whites" from impoverished rural backgrounds.

Either by inheritance or by nurture, he seems to possess a good deal of his parents' unwillingness to conform to the ethos of a group. He remembers an earlier stage, before he came to live in Worcester, when he preferred the Russians to the Americans – both groups being unknown to him: "He chose the Russians in 1947 when everyone else was choosing the Americans; having chosen them, he threw himself into reading about them" (p. 27).

The child "John Coetzee" perceives the different groups – Afrikaners, English speakers, Catholics, Jews, coloured people, urban and rural (there are significant differences between the latter two groups) as permanently divided. Though he does not consider political rights, he is aware of social and economic differences. The poverty of the ragged coloured children who hang about outside the Globe Café where John is treating his friends to fudge sundaes hurts his heart (1997: 72-73). Eddie, the coloured child aged seven, who comes to work for the Coetzees, is clearly not receiving formal education, and the mother who allows him to accept employment probably has few alternatives. When Eddie runs away, he is savagely beaten by the Coetzees' lodger for doing so. John knows that this beating is sadistic, though he does not know that it is a survival of the will to assert the servile status of coloured people. His knowledge alienates him from the sadist, an Englishman, whom he has wished to see as superior (pp. 74-75).

The child perceives group divisions as they are visible in the Cape Province in the period 1948-1952. The power of the state is still remote from him, though he hears rumours that children with Afrikaans surnames will be compelled by law to attend Afrikaans-medium classes in school – to learn to identify themselves, in effect, as Afrikaners. He will not realise until he is much older that the word "race", used to define the difference between whites and coloureds, Jews and gentiles, Afrikaners and English speakers, is an imposed fiction. The Cape coloured group, for example, whose ancestors were brought from other parts of Africa, from every country bordering on the Indian Ocean (see Shell 1994: 41), and beyond as far east as China, and whose members have intermarried with the Khoisan and formed liaisons with Europeans, is depicted in *Boyhood* as united by poverty, which follows from its political status of almost complete disenfranchisement. The Afrikaans group descends from almost every European nation, as well as having an admixture of indigenous African genes. The assumption that group loyalties were and are wrongly presented as ethnically based and therefore fundamental and inescapable for all but the deviant,

becomes part of his adult refusal of nationality, understood as being part of a group which in turn may be part of a state.

In *Boyhood* the author Coetzee presents the child protagonist as refusing at school to be part of the majority “Christian” (Protestant) group, and claiming to be a Roman Catholic, because of “Rome, because of Horatius and his two comrades” (1997: 20) and later in order to opt out of assembly, which involves prayer and preaching. Finding that membership of the Catholic group also involves obligations, he considers the Jews – not as members of a group which he can join, but as friends: “[T]he Jews do not judge In a minor way he feels comfortable with the Jews” (p. 21). The clichéd anti-Semitism of his uncles and mother: “[Y]ou must never trust a Jew”, which is contradicted by the generosity of his father’s Jewish employer, Wolf Heller (pp. 22-23), forces him into a position in which he cannot reconcile the differing opinions to which he is exposed and the evidence of his own experience. It is a position which is to become familiar to him.

Coetzee has written in *Doubling the Point* about his lack of feeling for the state in which he was born, and has traced the beginnings of his feeling of “alienness” to his years in Worcester “as a child from an Afrikaans background attending English-medium classes, at a time when laws were being concocted to prevent people of Afrikaans descent from bringing up their children to speak English” (1992: 393). He writes of his sense of “being outside a culture that at [that] moment in history [was] confidently setting about enforcing itself as the key culture of the land” (1992: 394).

The relationship which the adult perceives between his parents’ decision that he and his brother shall be English-speaking and their indifference to the *volk*, and his own feeling of alienation, is important, but he offers another, and perhaps even more cogent reason: “As a child in Worcester he has seen enough of the Afrikaner right, enough of its rant, its self-righteousness, its cruelty, to last him a lifetime. In fact, even before Worcester he has perhaps seen more of cruelty and violence than should have been allowed to a child” (1992: 394).

“The terminal loyalty of a citizen to a state implies coterminality between nation and state,” writes T.K. Oommen (1997), and he goes on to discuss the nature of nationality. He quotes Petersen as saying that “a nation, in fact a sub-nation, is defined as ‘a people, a folk, held together by some or all of such more or less immutable characteristics as common descent, territory, history, language, religion, way of life or other attributes that members of a group have from birth onwards’” (Peterson quoted in Oommen 1997: 28-29). This longish list reveals the constructed nature of “nations” in Europe, as does the history of the “reunification” in the nineteenth century of Italy and Germany. Nations, in many if not most cases, are composed of people who *are led to believe* that they share “immutable characteristics”. The groups which coexist uneasily in Worcester and on the Karoo farm are being led to believe that this sharing of characteristics is confined to sub-groups in the state.

Despite the child's wish to remain part of the English-speaking group (it becomes important that the group is not English, but English-speaking) his greatest love and loyalty is to the farm on which his father grew up, now owned by his uncle.

The farm is called Voëlfontein; he loves every stone of it, every bush, every blade of grass, loves the birds that give it its name, birds that as dusk falls gather in their thousands in the trees around the fountain, calling to each other, murmuring, ruffling their feathers, settling for the night.

(Coetzee 1997: 80)

Besides his cousin Agnes, he does not feel strongly for family members other than his Uncle Son. His love for the farm, for the terrain and its inhabitants, is secret and troubled, partly because the Coetzee family do not accept his mother as a family member, a rejection which she understandably resents, and partly because he knows that it will be regarded as excessive, even presumptuous. His relationship with Uncle Son, the owner of the farm, whom he admires, is also troubled: Son, he fears, "feels the obscure claim this strange child is making on him and rejects it" (p. 100). "He must go to the farm because there is no place on earth he loves more or can imagine loving more Yet since as far back as he can remember this love has had an edge of pain. He may visit the farm but he will never live there" (p. 79). The adult Coetzee will record that he later severed his ties with the farm (1992: 393), and *Summertime* may help to explain why.

In *Summertime*, the adult "John Coetzee" has become even stranger to his rural relatives, and his wish to establish a holiday house in Merweville, a tiny, declining Karoo town near Voëlfontein, is incomprehensible to them. The interview with his cousin Margot (an adult version of Agnes in *Boyhood*) tells of his plan to buy one of the deserted houses and bring his father to live there; he himself will spend weekends and holidays there. It is an absurd plan, as he soon understands, but it is further evidence of what he tells Margot: "This place wrenches my heart It wrenched my heart when I was a child, and I have never been right since" (2009: 97). The interview with Margot is full of this passion for the Karoo, but it is a hopeless passion.

Other than Margot, who shares his passion, none of the Coetzees feel any affinity with him, and even she contrasts her husband's easy, affectionate relationship with the family with "John's" awkwardness. He cannot live in Merweville and earn a living; but the feeling for the Karoo which has endured since he was a child – is the Karoo, in its loneliness, the equivalent of his own state, both as child and adult? – seems to be the nearest that he will come to love of a *patria*.

During the visit to the farm he claims to be an Afrikaner, a claim which the other Coetzees reject. Sophie, with whom he taught at the University of Cape Town and who became his lover, gives her opinion on this. She tells

of his anger when a French journalist speaks dismissively of Afrikaans (2009: 237), and concludes:

My opinion is that under the gaze of history he felt there was no way in which he could separate himself off from the Afrikaners while retaining his self-respect, even if that meant being associated with all that the Afrikaners were responsible for.

(Coetzee 2009: 238)

She goes on to say that nevertheless “[h]e had been rebuffed by the Afrikaners too often, rebuffed and humiliated He was not going to take the risk of being rejected again” (p. 238). This corresponds to the author’s own explanation in *Doubling the Point* of his non-belonging: “No Afrikaner would consider me an Afrikaner” (1992: 341). The term, he claims,

is not just a linguistic cultural label. It is also an ideological term ... since the 1880s it has been highjacked by a political movement, first primarily anti-British, later primarily antiblack, calling itself Afrikaner nationalism People who spoke Afrikaans as their first language but did not meet further racial, cultural and political criteria were not accepted as Afrikaners.

(Coetzee 1992: 342)

This understanding of group solidarity was published in 1992, eighteen crowded years ago, during which many Afrikaans people voiced their rejection of the ideological straightjacket imposed on them. *Summertime* is in its ironic and complicated way relevant to the present-day debate on who can claim to be Afrikaans, in a way that the 1992 statement can no longer be, in that the “John Coetzee” of the 1970s is claiming an inherited Afrikaans component in his identity, not one which twentieth-century politicians constructed.

The movement from understanding group loyalties as destructive towards suspicion and dislike of the state begins in *Youth* (2002), which as I have explained, I shall not discuss here. At this stage it relates to the obvious evils of apartheid South Africa. The first section of *Summertime*, “Notebooks 1972-1975”, which contains an account by the fictionalised John Coetzee of murders of South African refugees in Botswana, probably on the orders of the South African government (pp. 3-6), reveals that he is by no means indifferent to world events, though as Sophie in *Summertime* says, “He was not a militant In fact he was not political at all. He looked down on politics. He didn’t like political writers, writers who espoused a political programme” (p. 228). She goes on to explain that “[h]e looked forward to the day when politics and the state would wither away” (p. 229) but follows this by an apparent contradiction: “In Coetzee’s eyes, we human beings will never abandon politics because politics is too convenient and too attractive as a theatre in which to give play to our baser emotions” (p. 229). “As long as liberation meant national liberation, *the liberation of the black*

nation of South Africa,” she continues, “John had no interest in it” (p. 229; my italics). “He accepted that the liberation struggle was just ... [but] the new South Africa toward which it strove was not Utopian enough for him” (p. 230). She describes the pacifist, non-industrial regime which he would have welcomed: “[T]he closing down of the mines. The ploughing under of vineyards. The disbanding of the armed forces. The abolition of the automobile. Universal vegetarianism. Poetry in the streets” (p. 230).

Sophie does not share “John’s” beliefs, and there may be an element of parody in her summary of them. Nevertheless, his rejection of “liberation” as the freeing of one national group from bondage (and the likelihood of the establishment of its culture as dominant) has to be linked to the detachment from all groups which he records in *Boyhood*. It is difficult not to give special status to the interview with Sophie, who seems to have understood the author in a period when he was developing rapidly. She says, “I think he was happiest in the role of outsider. He was not a joiner” (p. 239), and this seems to be reinforced by his 1992 statement on Afrikaner identity which I quoted earlier.

The Coetzee look-alike of *Diary of a Bad Year*, Señor C, expresses similar views, and a similar pessimism about their being generally accepted, close to the end of the work:

If I were pressed to give my brand of political thought a label, I would call it pessimistic anarchistic quietism ... anarchism because experience tells me that what is wrong with politics is power itself; quietism because I have my doubts about the will to set about changing the world, a will infected with the drive to power; and pessimism because I am sceptical that, in a fundamental way, things can be changed.

(Coetzee 2007: 203)

The sense that group loyalties are destructive, that membership of one group almost necessarily implies hostility to another, appears in almost all Coetzee’s fiction set in South Africa. The “Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee” in *Dusklands* (1974: 59-134) depicts Jacobus as fixed in the determination to subjugate or kill the indigenous people whom he encounters; *In the Heart of the Country* (1978) shows the settler descendant as believing that the descendants of indigenous people must hate her. *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) focuses on the inevitability of conflict in South Africa. In *Age of Iron* (1990), the protagonist asks a young Afrikaans soldier during a township riot,

“Why don’t you just put down your guns and go home, all of you? ... Because surely nothing can be worse than what you are doing here. Worse for your souls, I mean.”

“No,” he said. I had expected incomprehension, but no, he understood exactly what I meant. “We will see it through now.”

(Coetzee 1990: 98)

He is affirming the inevitability of conflict between black and white groups, even though it is pointless.

Disgrace (1999), the last of the South African novels – so far at least – and condemned by the ANC for its pessimism concerning relations between groups,⁴ depicts the resentment of the Xhosa, dispossessed of their land in the nineteenth century, against the white group, and claims that this persists into the post-apartheid dispensation. The rapists of David Lurie's daughter, who kill her dogs, may well have been sent by Petrus, the increasingly prosperous Xhosa farmer who will take over her land.

In *Diary of a Bad Year*, Señor C, so called by the young woman with whom he becomes infatuated – her partner significantly calls him Juan – is living in his old age in Australia, having left South Africa, the land of his birth, and reflecting on the nature of the state and on that of groups. He sees people as helpless within the state: "It is hardly in our power to change the form of the state and impossible to abolish it because, vis-à-vis the state, we are, precisely, powerless Those who chose and choose to stay outside the compact become outlaw" (Coetzee 2007: 3). He goes on: "We are born subject. From the moment of our birth we are subject" (p. 4) and cites the state documentation required at every stage of our lives and deaths.

In a review of *Diary of a Bad Year*, Michael Valdez Moses points out that Señor C insists that the criminal activities of the state do not end with its founding, but are everywhere present in the contemporary world: "the state establishes its absolute sovereignty through violence" (2008). Señor C's pessimism seems to come from an understanding that the frankness and fairness that attracted him to Australia are now seen as outmoded (p. 122). Though group loyalties and intergroup antagonisms are less of a threat than in South Africa, Australia has been as willing as any other state to adopt the repression of civil liberties which followed the attack on the Twin Towers:

The Australian government ... has been the most abject of the so-called Coalition of the Willing and has been prepared to suffer, with no more than a tight little smile, the humiliation of getting nothing in return In the new powers of policing that the Australian government is in the process of awarding itself, one detects a comparable contempt for the rule of law.

(Coetzee 2007: 42-43)

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4. Rosemary Jolly has given a full account of the ANC's reception of *Disgrace* in "Going to the Dogs" (2006): "The ANC, in its 1999 submission to the Human Rights Commission's investigation into racism in the media, names *Disgrace* as a novel which exploits racist stereotypes" (p. 149). She also quotes Derek Attridge as admitting that he too find[s] the bleak image of the 'new South Africa' in this work hard to take" (p. 147). She goes on to write of the ANC's submission, "This caused a furor [sic] of debate in the press" and quotes Mike Nicol's claim that the protagonist's daughter, Lucy, whose role is important, attempts acceptance and reconciliation (p. 148).

Señor C, however, recognises that he is physically safer in Australia than in South Africa. He offers an extended discussion of “raiding” (2007: 104-105), seeing violent crime, “raiding of livestock, raiding of women” (p. 104), as an ancient practice in southern Africa: “Since there was no body of law governing relations between groups, it could not be called an offence at law. At the same time it was not quite warfare.” The modern version of this is that “thousands of people from the black areas of South Africa, particularly young men ... get up each morning and, either individually or in bands, set off on raids into the white areas” (p. 105). Groups, however ancient and understandable in their continuance, are deadly. Señor C has escaped the marauding bands of Africa, but like the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, where a major theme is the need of the state to define those who live outside it as enemies, he has come to see people, even in Australia, as helpless within the state.

Señor C seems here to have come to a greater recognition: that the liberal democratic state, as a mode of government, is potentially violent and evil. This recognition is related to the understanding of intergroup violence, because it will be on the fears and antagonisms between groups – settler versus indigene, citizen versus immigrant – that the state will draw when it turns to repression.

Slavoj Žižek (2008) has insisted on the “systemic violence” innate in the liberal democratic state, and has claimed that “[t]oday’s predominant mode of politics ... focus[es] on expert management and administration The only way ... to actively mobilise people [in such a regime] is through fear, a basic constituent of today’s subjectivity” (2008: 174). This fear is likely to be fear of other groups or immigrants. Even in *Diary of a Bad Year*, however, Señor C’s and Coetzee’s opinions do not seem to be exactly similar to Žižek’s: their view seems to be that the state is – and perhaps must be – inevitably coercive, but that this implies only that the *potential* for violence is always present. Already in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate (who is certainly not J.M. Coetzee) concludes about himself and Colonel Joll: “I was the lie that the Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow” (1980: 135). In *Diary of a Bad Year* Señor C finds that in Australia fear of the immigrant in the post-9/11 period is leading to appalling cruelties in detention. The effect of this recognition is to make citizenship and the patriotism attached to it almost irrelevant to him and his author: both live where they are not in fear for their lives, but have despaired of finding the peaceful anarchy which represents their ideal.

It may be argued that the “John Coetzee” of *Boyhood* is constructed from the author’s remembered self, with all the selectivity and distortions which this implies, and which he has discussed in *Doubling the Point*, whereas the “John Coetzee” of *Summertime* represents an imagined self that never was but who might have been. To an extent this is true of Señor C too, whose

circumstances have been designed by the author in terms of his purposes. The “John Coetzee” of *Summertime*, with his passionate love of Voëlfontein, his sad effort in planning to buy a house in Merweville to own something close to Voëlfontein, and his anger at the journalist’s contempt for Afrikaans, manifests a truth about his own and his author’s identity – the “nationality” of both, in the complex sense in which I have discussed it. The author as creative artist is close to the protagonists of *Boyhood* and *Summertime*, but only in the sense that both are used by him to convey truths which are ultimately autobiographical.

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