

Towards an Archaeology of *Dusklands*

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If there's an archaeology of the book, then the beginnings are deep under the surface, under the soil. (Coetzee, in Scott 95)

This essay seeks to explore the question of origins: the beginnings of the literary career of arguably South Africa's most significant author, and the development of a form of authorship that was, at its inception, situated both locally and globally. An archaeology of the publication history of the debut novel *Dusklands* (1974) can shed light on the emergence of a particularly complex form of transnational authorship that J. M. Coetzee came to assume, a form locating itself within the South African literary landscape while simultaneously connecting itself to broader international literary currents. The material under consideration allows us insight into the beginnings of Coetzee's extraordinary literary career and lets us trace the relationship between the author and his work: Coetzee is meticulously involved in the production process of the book, but doggedly disengaged from its reception, its textual explication, both in public and in private. Furthermore, an examination of the biographical self-representation on the book's jacket covers also allows us to trace Coetzee's staging of the authorial self, and his ambivalent relationship with the larger South African society in which he had come to live again after a long sojourn in England and the United States.

Although some of the material presented here will appear biographical in the sense that it deals with the life of John Maxwell Coetzee, the essay is less concerned with the life of an author than with the semi-autonomous lives of his books. A book historical approach to *Dusklands* will thus be less concerned with textual interpretation, than with how the artefact came to be published in the form that it was, and how this material form inevitably shaped its meaning. The meaning of books is, as Andrew van der Vlies has put it, "influenced by factors often beyond the control of authors themselves, and how they are constructed, and change, and how these processes are intimately connected with publishing pressures, the ruling discourses of reviewing, censorship, abridgment, educational institutionalisation, and the valorising economies of literary prize culture" (*South African Textual Cultures* 4).

In considering the circumstances in which Coetzee's books were written and published, it is necessary to look at extra-diegetic, ancillary material beyond the ambit of conventional literary analysis: newspaper reviews and interviews, book contracts, jacket design, press releases, sales figures and, most importantly, private correspondence between the author and his publishers and agents.¹ Such records enable us to understand the production context of the books and to trace how the relationship between Coetzee and his publishers shaped his sense of himself as an

emerging author. Much of the material has not been subjected to sustained attention before, because the focus of literary critics has not been on book historical approaches, but rather on textual analysis and theoretical explication, developing readings of Coetzee that draw in particular on continental post-structuralist philosophy.

The bias towards various post-structuralist and postmodern theoretical approaches in the large volume of Coetzee scholarship is understandable given the fact that his novels are often paradoxical, allegorical, open ended, and resistant to interpretation. These theoretical approaches have also served well to position Coetzee not so much within the narrow national category of South African literature, but more within a global, or certainly Western, intellectual milieu that has emphasised a strong reciprocity between text and theory. Michael Chapman has recently, in a survey of Coetzee criticism, asked what the "case of Coetzee can tell us about the state of South African literary criticism" (108), pointing out that "the literary-critical vocabulary of the last decade is indebted to continental philosophies and to a postcoloniality that emanates from northern institutions: the empire continues to write back to the margins" (108). Chapman's critique of intellectual derivativeness in South African criticism is the basis for a call for a distinctive accent of locally inflected response that is not obeisant to metropolitan theory.

It may therefore be possible to discern a recent shift in South African literary studies from modes of reading grounded in high theory, towards more locally situated critical practice, a broader shift of which book history may be one particular manifestation. Ironically, the fact that Coetzee's novels are frequently self-reflexively concerned about books, writing and publishing, would suggest that they have always invited a book historical approach, a focus on the materiality of the book as an artefact. While *Foe* (1986), Coetzee's most overtly book historical novel, concerns itself with the book trade and the politics of publishing, questions around reading, writing and the production of books feature overtly in a number of his novels right up to *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) and *Summertime* (2009).

Book historical approaches constitute a fairly new field in South African literary studies, particularly in Coetzee scholarship. The work to have appeared thus far includes the research of Peter McDonald on censorship, culminating in the book *The Literature Police* (2009); Kai Easton's doctoral exploration of the Coetzee papers at Harvard; Andrew van der Vlies's recent book, *South African Textual Cultures* (2007); Jarad Zimble's article on the Ravan edition of *Foe* (2004), and my work on the publication history of the three versions of *In the Heart of the Country* (2008). Easton's doctoral thesis as well as a later essay provide the most detailed insight to date on the genealogy of *Dusklands*:

Coetzee had clearly made a New Year's resolution to begin a novel: the first entry for the first draft of *Dusklands* is dated January 1, 1970. He is nearly 30 years old,

an assistant professor of English at the State University of New York at Buffalo. [. . .] He writes by hand, usually using a black or blue ballpoint pen and lined paper. Like a journal, the draft is made up of almost daily entries - all dated - usually a page or two a day, sometimes only a paragraph, sometimes more. His revisions too, are clearly set out. ("Coetzee, the Cape and the Question of History" 11)

Easton has looked at the manuscript and proof versions of the novel, deposited by Coetzee at Harvard's Houghton Library upon his retirement from UCT and emigration to Australia. The fact that these manuscripts, part of a larger collection of papers comprising 27 box files are, like many other important documents of South African literary history, now at an American university and not in a local archive, is a matter that will no doubt continue to be critically debated by those concerned with the conservation of South Africa's cultural heritage.

While it is easy to criticise Coetzee's decision to exile his literary estate (and himself) from an uncertain South African scenario after 1994, it is astonishing to find that the archival question had already exercised his mind more than thirty years earlier, even *before* his first novel had been published. From the outset, Coetzee took his authorship seriously and was at pains to exercise ownership and control over his manuscripts. His concern with literary preservation is expressed in repeated calls to Ravan Press for the typescript of *Dusklands* (and all later novel manuscripts) to be returned to him.² Given the actual disarray into which Ravan Press's records fell in the late 1980s, as well as its subsequent demise as an independent publisher - a process, as we shall see, that was accompanied by a partial dispersal of records - Coetzee's determination to retain possession of his manuscripts seems prescient.³ Incidentally, his scepticism in respect of publishers' record-keeping abilities was not only limited to Ravan, a small, independent and always precarious enterprise, but also extended to major established firms such as Secker and Warburg, his London publishers.⁴ Coetzee's professional vocation as a literary scholar and his long-standing immersion in archival research would have attuned him to the value attached to literary manuscripts, records and correspondence, and the significance of their preservation. Indeed *Dusklands*, as he told David Attwell in *Doubling the Point*, was partially conceived in the late 1960s during months of archival study in the substantial Africana holdings of the University of Texas (52), but one can trace the genesis of the novel to an even earlier period, namely Coetzee's London years. As he tells Joanna Scott, he had made his "preparation [. . .] by reading in the British Museum [. . .] accounts of early travel and exploration in Africa" (Scott 85). *Dusklands* can therefore in a sense be understood to have been born of the archive, specifically of a colonial South African archival record dispersed across several continents.

Coetzee's decision to deposit his papers at Harvard should not therefore be associated with scepticism evoked by South Africa's transition to democracy. Rather than chauvinistically claiming Coetzee as an exclusively South African writer whose

archive should belong in this country, we might more usefully see his work as expressing itself transnationally, as inhabiting a multiplicity of globally dispersed spaces of which the South African landscape of the Cape is only one, though significant, locale of creative practice and fictional engagement. The transnational quality of Coetzee's work is especially visible in the geographic reversal of subject matter and writing location in *Dusklands*, where the second part of the novel, "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee," was written in the USA, and first part, "The Vietnam Report," was conceived in South Africa. As Easton puts it,

the text evolved over a series of transatlantic travels; the final destination reveals a circular route, with Coetzee and his manuscript returning to the Cape, his home territory, in 1971. [. . .] The writing and publishing of this first novel by J. M. Coetzee are thus in themselves spatially significant: *Dusklands* was begun in Buffalo, New York and completed in South Africa. ("Textuality and the Land" 50)

The transnational genesis of *Dusklands* is foundational to a spatially unrestricted understanding of Coetzee's authorship that also needs to take into account his repeatedly expressed reluctance to be included in a narrow, nationally defined category of South African writing, or a geographically constrained provincialism. Indeed, Coetzee's return to Cape Town (and his subsequent 30-year-long career as an author writing and publishing in South Africa) was an accident of history: his application for a US Green Card was unsuccessful in 1970 and he was forced to return to South Africa against his wishes.⁵ Asked to think about the different path his career could have taken, Coetzee speculated as follows: "If I had stayed in the United States I would have been a different person. I would have a different history. I would not be here answering your questions" (Scott 86).

Having considered the overall trajectory of *Dusklands*, both its transnational genesis and the final journey of the original manuscript back to America, we might now turn to the actual publication history of the book. The following account will be substantially based on an examination of Coetzee's correspondence with his South African (and British)⁶ publishers. This material is not easily obtainable for study, for reasons of restricted access and geographical dispersal in at least three different locations. The first significant materials are the Ravan Press papers at the National English Literary Museum (NELM) in Grahamstown. These contain several letters between Coetzee and Peter Randall, the founding editor of Ravan Press, dating between 1974 and 1977. They concern only *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country*. At the time of my research visit in 2006, the material was chronologically unordered, but it soon became apparent that significant parts of the correspondence were missing, not only relating to the periods before 1974 and after 1977, but also within the three years covered. The NELM letters may not be photocopied, and due to the privileged nature of the material, permission to cite must first be sought from the authors. In my attempts to track down the missing correspondence, I had the help not only of Peter Randall, who now lives in England, but also of Ivan Vladislavic, who had

worked briefly for Ravan Press in 1989 and was entrusted with bringing order to the chaotic state of its correspondence and filing. A second, minor set of letters was obtained from the Spro-Cas collection at the Cullen Library at the University of Witwatersrand, but the major corpus of correspondence is currently kept at Macmillan Press in Johannesburg. Macmillan took over Hodder & Stoughton, who had themselves taken over Ravan Press in 1997. The Coetzee Archive at Macmillan is in the form of four large lever arch files labelled "Dusklands," "In the Heart of the Country," "Waiting for the Barbarians" and "Foe." There is, inexplicably, no file on *Life & Times of Michael K*, though some correspondence concerning this novel can be found in the other files. The files contain not only relevant correspondence with Coetzee and the original book contracts, but also royalty statements and documentation relating to printing, sales, permissions and licencing. As already mentioned above, there are no manuscripts or proofs⁷ since Coetzee always insisted that these be returned to him as soon as they were no longer needed.

The *Dusklands* file contains the letter, written on 22 October 1973, that can in a sense be regarded as having started it all. The courteous, formal, slightly distant tone of the covering letter, as well as its brevity, effaces any sense of affect a first author might be expected to have when submitting his first book, and the laconic closing sentence ("I also enclose return postage") signals his willingness to accept a negative outcome. In offering the manuscript of *Dusklands* to Ravan, Coetzee stuck his head out, so to speak, but not very far. It would also be the last time Coetzee would have to write a letter of such a nature.

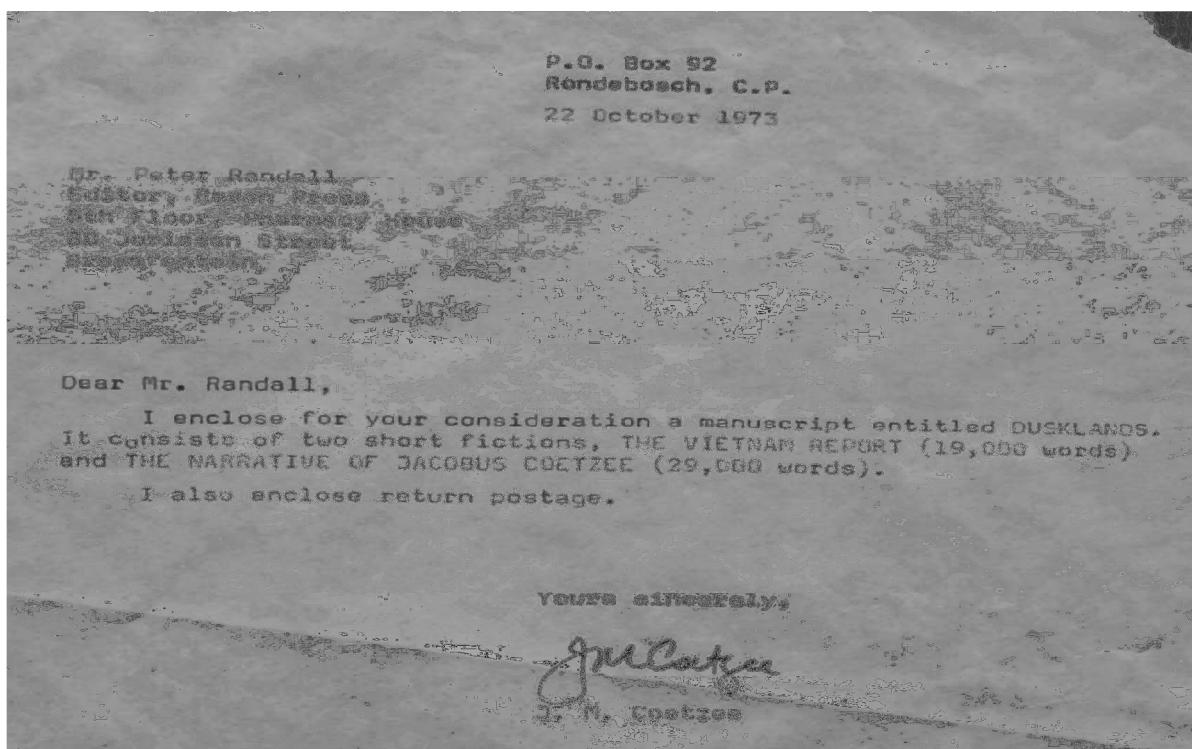


Figure 1: Facsimile of J.M. Coetzee's original *Dusklands* submission letter (Macmillan Archive)

One of the questions worth raising regarding this letter is why in the first place Coetzee chose Ravan Press as his South African publisher. This is a question that has not been asked of Coetzee's work before, perhaps as the answer would appear self-evident. Ravan Press was after all South Africa's most prominent and resolutely oppositional publishing house, one of the few avant-garde presses that consistently defied the apartheid state, risking censorship and financial ruin by publishing black and radical writers. Founded as the publishing wing of the Christian Institute's SPRO-CAS project in 1972, it was by 1974 an independent publisher under the leadership of Peter Randall, Danie van Zyl and Beyers Naude (their surnames also provided the name "Ravan," which Coetzee here misspells as "Raven"). One of its later flagship projects was the well-known literary magazine *Staffrider*. Ravan developed a list that was dominated by leftist and class-oriented analysis, revisionist history and social studies, as well as literacy books and fiction. As Jarad Zimler put it with respect to *Foe*, "the Ravan imprint served to position Coetzee's novel within a radical cultural milieu" (48).

But this "radical cultural milieu" and Ravan's stature as an oppositional publisher had not yet emerged by the time Coetzee penned his submission letter in Oct. 1973. In fact, Ravan had hardly begun to exist, and had only published one work of literature, namely James Matthews's poetry volume *Cry Rage*. Andrew van der Vlies has argued that Ravan provided "a significant institutional context for Coetzee's writing, given its association, through *Staffrider*, with 'black consciousness' ideology, a self-consciously Marxist dedication to engaged writing, and a scepticism about aesthetic validations and categories of literariness" (*Textual Cultures* 137). While this assessment is undoubtedly accurate for the overall reception of Coetzee's South African published books (and may explain his commitment to Ravan long after he had secured more advantageous international publication), it does not account for Coetzee's initial submission. *Staffrider*, after all, was only established by Mike Kirkwood five years later, early in 1978.

Coetzee's submission of *Dusklands* is then much better explained by the fact that it had "been rejected by every 'normal' publisher," including Adrian Donker, who had read it in bed, and had not found it to his liking, as Peter Randall remembered. According to Randall, "Coetzee in desperation sent his manuscript to Spro-Cas and it was accepted as one of the first books of Ravan" (Wittenberg). In an interview with UCT's *Monday Paper* in 1974, Coetzee himself mentioned four rejections. Van der Vlies quotes Mike Kirkwood as saying that the "manuscript of *Dusklands* was rejected by a number of foreign publishers" (*Textual Cultures* 136). Similarly, Kai Easton cites Andries Oliphant as claiming that the manuscript had initially been rejected by US and British publishers ("Textuality and the Land" 50). *Dusklands*'s initial rejection both places Coetzee in the long and illustrious list of writers who struggled to have their first book published, and shows why Ravan was such a necessary and exciting venture in South Africa in the 1970s.

While Peter Randall immediately recognised *Dusklands* as a "work of genius" (Wittenberg), his initial dealings with Coetzee show that Ravan was anything but an established, viable publishing firm. In his acceptance letter to Coetzee, Randall candidly admitted that publishing fiction was "new territory" to him. He even went so far as to suggest that Coetzee turn to another publisher rather than Ravan as they "may well have more expertise in marketing than we do in the field." He asked cautiously whether Coetzee wished "to receive royalties from the book" in view of the fact that Ravan's "experimental program" was non-profitmaking (2 Nov. 1973, Macmillan Press archive). Despite Randall's enthusiasm about the manuscript, the letter on the whole is a remarkably candid assessment of Ravan's unsuitability, on the face of it, as a publisher. Rather than being discouraged, Coetzee wrote back to Randall, accepting the constraints that Ravan was operating under, allowing Randall to draw up a contract. But the contract that Randall proposed to Coetzee also revealed Ravan's commercial inexperience: for a first-time author, Coetzee was offered extravagant royalties of 15%, not on net returns or profit, but calculated on the retail selling price, a highly generous proposition. By comparison, *Life & Times of Michael K* brought Coetzee more realistic royalties of 7.5%. Additionally, Randall committed Ravan to an ambitious print run of 4500 copies and early publication in April, an unusually generous undertaking to an as yet unproven author. Coetzee signed the contract on 13 Dec. 1973.

By January, Randall reported that Ravan was "proceeding with the book as best we can in between court cases, visits from the police and other unsavoury matters," and asked Coetzee for a photograph and to "supply a few more personal details for possible use - we are often criticised for not telling readers about our authors." Randall made some suggestions about the kind of information that he was looking for: "While I do not want to over-do this, some more information about your school education, for example, or your family background, may be useful" (11 Jan. 1974, NELM).

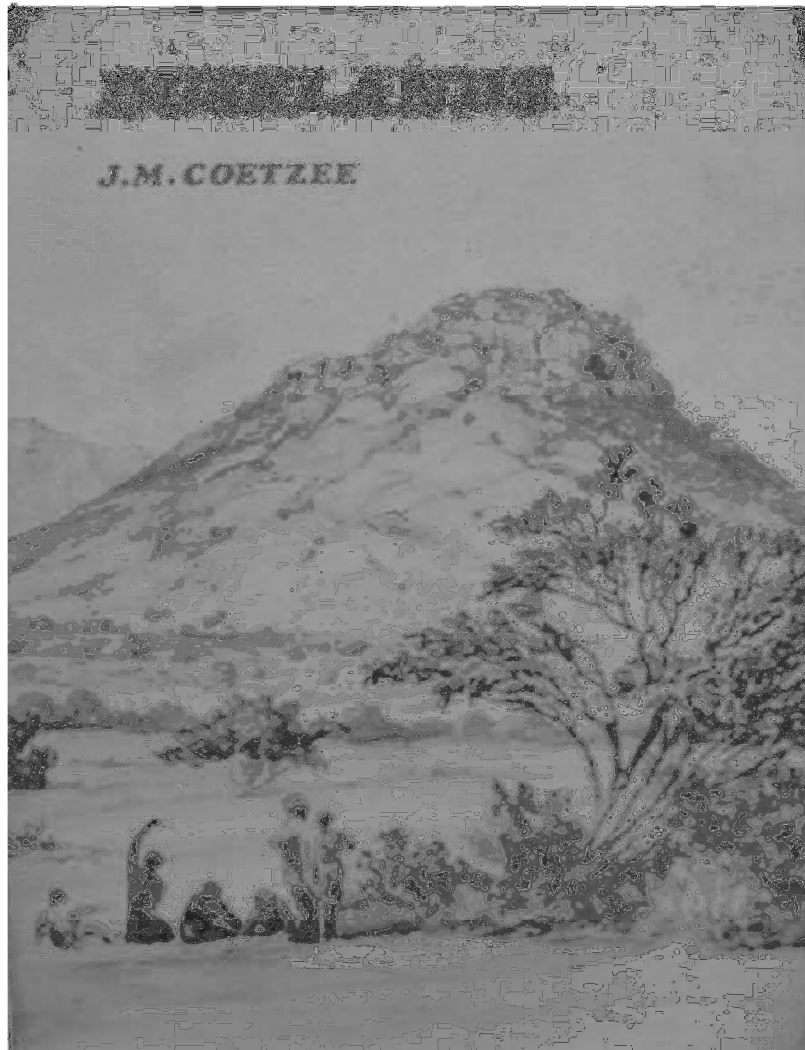
Coetzee responded to questions of a personal nature in a carefully reasoned manner that characteristically posed more questions than it answered. Above all, Coetzee wanted to avoid being categorized within a set, parochially defined identity, showing a keen awareness of the politics of social class and background that characterize colonial societies. Already here, at the beginnings of his literary career, a distinctive reticence about public disclosure of the personal is apparent:

I am in two minds about supplying the particular personal information you suggest, not because I am at all against idle curiosity, and not either because I think the facts of a writer's background are irrelevant to his work (they are and they aren't), but because the information you suggest suggests that I settle for a particular identity I should feel most uneasy in. A few words about my schooling, for example, would make me a player in the English-South African game of social

typing and can even be read as a compliment to those monsters of sadism who ruled over my life for eleven years. As for my family background, I am one of the 10,000 Coetzee's, and what is there to say about them except that Jacobus Coetzee begat them all? (17 Jan. 1974, NELM)

He ended the letter somewhat whimsically: "among the things I am interested in in a non-professional way are: crowd sports; other people's ailments; apes and humanoid machines; images, particularly photographs, and their power over the human heart; and the politics of assent."

The latter part of the letter would become almost verbatim the text of the strange and off-beat biographical note on the jacket cover of the first edition that has bemused and perhaps puzzled readers ever since. When the novel appeared with this quirky note Coetzee would not have been amused, but he was polite enough not to reprimand Randall with whom he had developed a good friendship. Later though, in a letter to Mike Kirkwood, who took over Ravan when Randall was banned in 1977, Coetzee complained that "the biographical note to *DUSKLANDS* was lifted without permission from a letter" (4 Jan. 1978, Macmillan Press). It is clear, then, that Coetzee's eccentric self-stylization on the jacket cover of *Dusklands* was not an aberration on the part of a writer who went to unusual lengths to keep his personal life and opinions separated from his books, but a publishing error, perhaps attributable to Randall's well-meaning inexperience as a fiction editor. In all subsequent editions of *Dusklands*, as well as in the following novels, biographical information was kept to a prosaic minimum that concerned itself rather with the books than with the person who wrote them.⁸ Coetzee's suppression of the personal even extended to the assumption of his chosen authorial name "J. M. Coetzee." He wrote to Randall that he wished "to be styled as J. M. Coetzee," thereby eliding his more personal first names. Coetzee also reminded Randall that he thought that "the 'Dr Coetzee' angle should be avoided" (20 March 1974, NELM).



**Figure 2: The Ravan first edition cover of *Dusklands*(1974).
The jacket cover credits the source of the image as follows:
"Water colour painting attributed to Thomas Baines.
Johannesburg Africana Museum.
Catalogue of Pictures R444."**

Apart from the biographical note, *Dusklands* is also interesting in that its cover design is much more conventionally pictorial than the subsequent modernist, abstract text-art designs that accompanied his later novels. While Coetzee respected the publisher's prerogative to determine an appropriate book design - "It is not, of course, my business to make suggestions about the physical form of the book" (19 Dec. 1973, Macmillan Press) - he initially suggested images out of an obscure work of colonial ethnography:

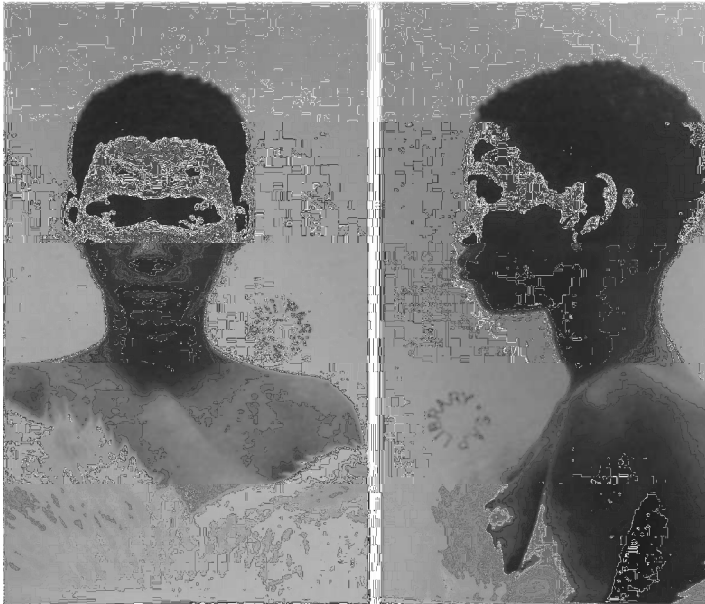


Figure 3: Images to be used for Coetzee's intended cover for *Dusklands*. From Schultz, Leonhard. 1907. *Aus Namaland und Kalahari*. Jena: Gustav Fischer.

The image Coetzee had in mind as a basis for the cover design of *Dusklands* was a gravure plate titled "Hottentotten Madchen" from Leonard Schultz's treatise *Aus Namaland und Kalahari* (1907). Stereographical images such as "Hottentot Girl" form part of the discredited repertoire of colonial, pseudo-scientific ethnography, and Coetzee may have wanted it to function ironically, in keeping with the anti-colonial critique of the Jacobus Coetzee narrative. The book eventually appeared with a cover that reproduced a landscape watercolour attributed to Thomas Baines, a colonial image that was equally at odds with the text's radical, postcolonial narrative. Presumably the cover served to strengthen the fictive historical framing of the Jacobus Coetzee narrative (the pseudo-scientific footnotes, the faux appendix, the fake genealogy), giving the story a further sense of seeming historical veracity. Coetzee later saw commonalities between *Dusklands* and eighteenth-century fictions such as *A Journal of the Plague Year* and *Robinson Crusoe* in the sense that both he and Defoe "invested some energy in faking an authentic record" (Scott 87). The cover could thus be understood to have played a complicit role in the game that Coetzee was playing in fudging the borders between fiction and history. As Tony

Morphet later described his experience of reading the book, the narratives of *Dusklands* were "intense and compelling, yet, as I progressed, I felt the pattern of meaning eluding me. I knew it was there, somewhere, but exactly where in what form remained beyond reach" (14). If the cover of *Dusklands* could be understood to play a role in lulling the reader into a false sense of realism, Coetzee later came to regard its design as an error. Upon discussing the strikingly different modernist cover design for *In the Heart of the Country*, he made it clear that the colonial Baines image had sent a decidedly wrong message: "The cover of *Dusklands* was a mistake from every point of view, I think, including the commercial" (1 Dec. 1977, Macmillan Press).

One of the more intriguing aspects of the correspondence between Randall and Coetzee concerns Randall's disquiet about the post-realist, experimental nature of the narrative, and the way in which Coetzee dealt with this vexing matter. Already in his first letter to Coetzee, Randall asked cautiously whether "the third paragraph on p. 93" should "have been omitted" (2 Nov. 1973, NELM). Coetzee's brief answer - "No, there is no oversight on my part on p. 93" (17 Nov. 1973, NELM) - was not sufficiently helpful to put the matter to rest, and indeed Randall felt compelled to raise it again:

Incidentally, both our readers were puzzled by the point I raised earlier, regarding Klauer's death. I was unable to explain what you intended, and wonder whether you could give an explanation. (18 Feb. 1974, NELM)

Coetzee obviously felt that he owed Randall a reasonable explanation, and took some trouble in carefully framing an answer that at the same time did not put him into the untenable position of being the interpreter of his own text:

Regarding the alternative deaths of Klauer: I do not believe in the principle of authorial explication, so what I have done is ask Crewe - who gave the work a reading which was in my eyes amazingly responsive - what he made of the pages in question. He referred me to the passage on p.2 of his review where he discusses 'the disclosure of stage machinery,' and suggested (a) that Jacobus Coetzee is telling stories to cover up the 'facts' of Klauer's death, and (b) that someone (who?) is writing a document called 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' and has been caught up with the edges of revision showing. I don't know how you feel about this interpretation. I find it quite plausible. (22 Feb. 1974, NELM)

Randall had to be content with this oblique explanation, though he later said that Coetzee's "exposition baffled" him ("Notes"). Jonathan Crewe's review was written well before *Dusklands's* publication and must have been based on a typescript version of the novel provided by Coetzee. The quotations Coetzee refers to ("the disclosure of stage machinery") are however missing in the abridged version of the review that would subsequently appear in the literary magazine *Contrast*. The longer unpublished version remains one of the most perceptive readings of the novel, and it is not surprising that Coetzee would have endorsed Crewe's interpretation so enthusiastically.

The vexing matter of Klauer's double death was to have a postscript when a reviewer for *The Cape Times*, Frances Bowers, lauded the novel, but deplored instances of "careless editing" that are "not the writer's fault" (5 June 1974). Randall wrote a stern letter to Bowers asking her to explain her remarks which he felt reflected badly on his editorship. Bowers wrote a lengthy note to Ravan in which she explained her position:

What I meant by careless editing was this: On page 99 of my copy, as part of a piece of straight narrative, there is a paragraph starting 'We tied ourselves . . .' and ending 'until he (Klawer) disappeared from sight around a bend and went to his death bearing the blanket roll and all the food.' This goes straight on to describe the crossing, with Klawer (very much alive) reaching the bank with his master etc and finally being left alone (page 109). It seemed to me (and to others to whom I have shown these pages) that the author changed his mind about Klawer's fate, but omitted to delete the first version. [. . .] Having read the passage through several times, I can come to no other conclusion. Or am I being stupid? (12 June 1974, NELM)

Randall however had the last word:

I thought you possibly had the Klawer incident in mind, and I can assure you that the author's intention was quite deliberate. I took this up with him after a first reading of the manuscript and again subsequently, since I too was sure that it was a mistake, and even now I don't fully understand what he meant by it. The author's wish must, however, prevail. (17 June 1974, NELM)

Looking back some time later on these experimental aspects of *Dusklands*, Coetzee would reflect critically on their self-consciously staged nature and say that there "are moments in both novellas where I break with the conventions of verisimilitude in ways that are finally rather uninteresting" (Scott 87). Coetzee is here perhaps being unduly harsh in the assessment of his novel whose appearance was an electrifying event on the South African literary scene, if we take Tony Morphet's description of *Dusklands'* impact on the English Department as representative: "A new form of narration, a new way of imagining - a new prose had entered South African literature. Out of an academic department of twenty-three, only two of us had read the book, but our enthusiasm managed to persuade a majority to accept the text for a contemporary course" (14). Jonathan Crewe (who would have been the book's other reader) commented that "the modern novel in English arrives in South Africa for the first time," and called *Dusklands* "a very remarkable book, written with a fastidiousness and power that are rare on the South African literary scene, or any literary scene" (90).

Dusklands finally appeared on 18 April 1974, preceded by a press release written by Peter Randall in which the novel was advertised "as one of the most important works of literature to have been written in South Africa." Randall briefly summed up the book's theme as being "about men obsessed and corrupted by their mastery of technology and their urge to dominate," but he could also not avoid drawing attention to the biographical question: "J. M. Coetzee is reticent about himself. Queries about his personal life have met with the response: 'I am one of the 10 000 Coetzees, and what is there to be said about them except that Jacobus Coetzee begat them all?'" (Ravan Archive, NELM). Coetzee's off-beat remark about his fictional ancestor is of

course, as we have seen earlier, derived from an earlier letter written to Randall. While Randall might not have consciously used Coetzee's enigmatic reticence as a marketing device to create interest in the novel, it is nevertheless clear that the public myth around Coetzee's reserved and elusive persona was being manufactured from the very outset, even preceding the debut publication. Yet a closer look at early press interviews shows that Coetzee was not always guarded and inaccessible. To Peter Temple, for example, he candidly described his writing process: "Writing comes hard. I worked on *Dusklands* for a long time - two and a half years. What I tend to do is write, plod along page after page, get to the end, start all over again, do it all over again" (3). And the journalist Hugh Robertson found that Coetzee had "an easy warmth, a lively smile, and optimistic views," and was willing to discuss a wide range of topics, including the state of South African publishing (15). But despite these early open exchanges, the dominant view of Coetzee's elusive public persona soon became firmly established, most notoriously in Rian Malan's *Sunday Times* interview where he is described as "aloof and inaccessible by reputation, a man of almost monkish self-discipline and dedication," traits which one could interpret either as "shyness, arrogance, sadism, or maybe just a desire not to squander words or ideas in idle conversation" (20). Jane Poyner, editor of a recent book of critical essays, described him as "a fiercely private individual who spurns media attention, [who] rarely gives interviews, and those he does are characterised by evasiveness and introspection" (4). This is a dominant public image that Coetzee has undoubtedly helped to construct, even though his candour and loquaciousness in a number of published interviews with interlocutors such as David Attwell, Joanna Scott and Anne Susskind would suggest otherwise.

Overall, the Coetzee correspondence with Ravan reveals a highly involved, serious author who went to extraordinary lengths to ensure the best possible presentation of his writing. Especially in respect of proofreading and text presentation, Coetzee was painstakingly scrupulous and paid meticulous attention to detail, traits that would become even more pronounced with the publication of the next novel. Compared to the publishing files kept on other Ravan authors such as Nadine Gordimer or Njabulo Ndebele for instance, the sheer volume of letters in Coetzee's case indicates that this was an author who exercised an unusually thorough oversight over his books. Randall commented that *Dusklands* had been the "cleanest ms [he] had ever received" ("Notes"), and Tom Rosenthal, Coetzee's famous Secker & Warburg publisher, later complained about the "immensely lengthy and convoluted discussions" that accompanied the production of *In the Heart of the Country* (12 July 1977, NELM). Coetzee was undoubtedly not an easy author from a publisher's point of view, and with regard to subsequent publications he would not spare his anger at what he saw as publishers' incompetence. One of his complaints to Randall about *Dusklands* concerned the three errors on the acknowledgements page, as well as shoddy binding (23 April 1974, Cullen Library).

Among the other questions dealt with in various exchanges around *Dusklands* was the choice between American and English spelling: Coetzee had originally wanted the "Vietnam Report" to retain American spelling and usage, but was persuaded otherwise by Randall. Other letters deal with enquiries about sales, possible prizes and competitions the book could be entered for, as well as Coetzee's concern at the non-availability of *Dusklands* in certain Cape Town book stores. In some of the correspondence, he appears as an anxious first author, for example his impatient telegraph to Ravan on 18 April, the publication date, asking when the book was appearing. Randall and Coetzee developed a good relationship, and by the end of 1974 they were on first name terms. Randall soon got the measure of his author, and carefully shepherded Coetzee through disappointments, for example that Heineman was not interested in publishing *Dusklands* in the African Writers Series; but also successes, for example the fact that the University of Natal was possibly ordering 845 copies, news at which Coetzee expressed reservations: "I usually have mixed feelings about books published in 1974 being prescribed in 1975" (18 Nov. 1974, NELM). Randall's relationship with Coetzee would even survive his disappointment on learning that Secker & Warburg would publish the next novel, *In the Heart of the Country*. Coetzee's relationship with Randall may well have contributed to his decision to continue his association with Ravan, even though the joint publication arrangement was increasingly fraught with tension.

To tell the full publication story of *Dusklands* would entail a look at some of the complexities around the joint Secker & Warburg and Ravan 1982 paperback reprint, as well as the much delayed American publication. Despite the remarkably high first local print run of 4500 copies (of which only 1000 were initially bound to mitigate commercial risk) Ravan gradually ran out of stock. Initially selling for R4.80, *Dusklands* copies were becoming increasingly scarce by the early 1980s. Coetzee himself had to tell Mike Kirkwood that "dealers have recently bought up the last of the Ravan edition of *Dusklands*" and that "the book is fetching \$250 in the U.S." (18 Feb. 1985, Macmillan Press).⁹ To put this figure into perspective, *Dusklands* was still retailing at R7.95 in 1987. Faced with a depletion of stocks in South Africa, and no international publication, Coetzee had signed a contract with Secker & Warburg early in 1982, giving them the UK rights to the novel. Ravan, as we recall, had originally only been given Southern African rights. The publishers shared the costs of the reset and printing, and 2000 copies bearing the Ravan imprint were shipped to South Africa. In 1988, Ravan had another 1000 copies printed locally. Although Ravan's successor, Macmillan, still holds the South African copyright on the novel, it has chosen not to exercise its rights, instead licensing Secker & Warburg under the Penguin imprint to distribute its edition in South Africa. This licensing agreement, concluded in 1992, is presumably still in force, thereby ending the last vestiges of Coetzee's association with South African publishers. Despite a succession of successful Ravan editions, Coetzee is now no longer effectively published in this country, a state of affairs that he had already diagnosed in a 1978 interview with Stephen Watson: "Publishing-wise, you know, we're in a pure colonial situation in

that, so to speak, our literary products are flown to the metropolitan centre and re-exported to us at a vastly increased price. And this goes for me, it goes for almost any writer in this country today" (Watson 24).

To conclude: as we have seen in the way he chose to represent and style himself, Coetzee presented himself as an author who drew a line between himself and his novels, preferring to keep the personal and the literary as strictly separate domains. This stance is evident in his very early principled refusal of authorial interpretation, as well as a studious avoidance of the autobiographical gesture, in particular the politics of identity and location. An examination of the publication process around *Dusklands* does not perhaps reveal anything surprising or new about the book itself or what we know about Coetzee as an author, but deepens the sense one has of a writer scrupulously committed to his work, defending its integrity and independence, and also, after publication, seeking to promote it and give it the widest readership possible. In several letters, Coetzee asked Ravan to mail free copies to various US and British reviewers, colleagues and libraries, suggesting that he saw his readership as not narrowly South African, and that he had from the outset ambitions of a transnational literary career. In looking at the book history of *Dusklands*, we can thus not only trace the beginnings of Coetzee's Nobel Prize-winning literary career, but also see the tension between the local and the global, a tension that could ultimately not be successfully resolved.

Notes

1. The following archival sources were consulted: a) National English Literary Museum (NELM), Grahamstown: Ravan Press Collection, 98.8.1.1-127. (For consistency, only date references are given for the individual letters.); b) Macmillan Press Archive, Johannesburg; c) University of Witwatersrand, Cullen Library, Spronck Collection. Permission to cite was kindly granted by J. M. Coetzee, Peter Randall, Mike Kirkwood and Tom Rosenthal.

2. Coetzee asked for the return of his manuscript on three occasions. In a letter to Peter Randall dated 22 June 1974 he asked for the typescript and corrected proofs to be sent back to him. On 18 Nov. 1974, after having waited almost five months, he asked when the mss would be returned. And finally, on 6 Dec. 1974, he wrote to Randall again, repeating his request. We can assume that Ravan finally complied, but the long wait must have made Coetzee anxious about leaving his manuscript in the safe-keeping of publishers (Ravan Press Collection, NELM).

3. Glen Moss, the then managing editor, had "to be frank and admit" to Coetzee that "Ravan's records are in such disorder" that royalties could not be accurately ascertained (Macmillan Archive, 24 Aug. 1988). Ravan had even lost the crucial author's contract and was unsure at what percentage rate the various royalties for the books were to be calculated.

4. Coetzee complained to Mike Kirkwood about Secker's lack of communication, and the fact that he had to get his first copy of *Foe* from a fan. Coetzee speculated that this was "perhaps because they are going through yet another set of organizational upheavals" (4 Aug. 1986, Macmillan Press).

5. Coetzee refers to this matter in the Scott interview, as well as to a prior, brief arrest while demonstrating on SUNY Buffalo campus against the Vietnam War (86). It is possible that Coetzee's Green Card was denied to him on account of this history of political activism.

6. In the Macmillan Press archive, there are several letters documenting exchanges between Ravan and Secker & Warburg, as well as with Coetzee's agents. These deal mostly with rights issues and other matters concerning co-publication. There are also some copies of letters between Coetzee and Secker & Warburg, where these had been forwarded as copies to Ravan by either party.

7. The exception is one photocopy version of the page proofs of *In the Heart of the Country* at NELM.

8. In Coetzee's next Ravan book, *In the Heart of the Country*, the following biographical information is given: "J. M. Coetzee was born in Cape Town in 1940. His publications include fiction (*Dusklands*, 1974) and translation (Marcellus Emants' *Posthumous Confession*, 1976). For *In the Heart of the Country* he was awarded the 1977 Mofolo-Plomer Literary Prize and the CNA Award. He is a lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Cape Town."

9. Currently, first edition copies of *Dusklands* are on sale for between \$400 to \$600 (for example at Clarke's Books, Cape Town). A signed first edition is on the market for £1806 at <http://www.abebooks.co.uk>.

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