

J. M. COETZEE IN CONVERSATION WITH JANE POYNER

JP: In *The Essential Gesture*, Nadine Gordimer warns of the dangers of conformity to an “orthodoxy of opposition” to the apartheid government. How difficult do you think it now is, as an intellectual-academic, to criticize the ANC government? Does fiction have an important part to play in maintaining a critical opposition?

JMC: (1) I interpret the first part of the question to mean: How difficult do I think it is for someone who is either an intellectual or an academic to criticize the ANC government? Answer: Not difficult at all. (2) It is hard for fiction to be good fiction while it is in the service of something else.

JP: Could you comment on South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission: to what extent has it fulfilled its objectives, and is the conception of confession misplaced in the public sphere? In other words, does such a mode of confession suggest a performance without any judicial authority?

JMC: In a state with no official religion, the TRC was somewhat anomalous: a court of a certain kind based to a large degree on Christian teaching and on a strand of Christian teaching accepted in their hearts by only a tiny proportion of the citizenry. Only the future will tell what the TRC managed to achieve.

JP: How important do you think it is for artists and writers to memorialize catastrophe and atrocity, such as the Holocaust or apartheid?

JMC: For artists and writers individually? Surely artists and writers will decide for themselves what is important to them.

JP: Your fiction attracts a lot of attention from postcolonial critics. As a discourse (or set of discourses), does postcolonialism interest you? And if so, what problems does it raise or are implicit in it?

JMC: I don't read much academic criticism.

JP: In *Doubling the Point* you state that "sympathetic to the human concerns of the left, [you are] alienated, when the crunch comes, by its language—by all political language, in fact" (394). To what degree is this a sentiment that you continue to experience?

JMC: There is no longer a left worth speaking of, and a language of the left. The language of politics, with its new economic bent, is even more repellent than it was fifteen years ago.

JP: Edward Said describes the intellectual as "an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug."¹ Said assumes a public role for the intellectual; how far would you agree with his comments?

JMC: What Said writes here constitutes a definition, not a comment. The resurrection of the term *public intellectual*, which for years was not part of public discourse, is an interesting phenomenon. What is the explanation? Perhaps it has something to do with people in the humanities, more or less ignored nowadays, trying to carve out a niche for themselves in the body politic.

JP: Said has also suggested that the intellectual should always occupy a position of marginality (“the whole point is to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant” [Reith, 9]) in order to remain objective in their critique of political/public discourse. As a novelist, an academic, and an intellectual, do you find yourself occupying, or wishing to occupy, such a position?

JMC: 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.

JP: Are there points at which you see the role of the novelist conflicting with that of the public intellectual? I am thinking, for instance, of writers like Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and, of course, yourself. How does one negotiate one’s roles as intellectual, academic, and novelist? Is the novelist’s conception of truth necessarily different from that of the intellectual?

JMC: I try to avoid the term *role*, which implies that one is giving oneself to a part that is already written. Of course there is a larger scheme in which we may all be said to be playing roles. But that scheme is invisible to us.

JP: In recent times in the United States and Britain there has been a great deal of discussion about professionalism within the institution of the university, where academics are put under greater pressure to publish and to be accountable to more rigorous assessment of their research and teaching. What is your view of the state of the academic world today? Do you see these shifts as a threat to the intellectual’s freedom of speech?

JMC: (1) I would question your assertion regarding accountability and rigor. What happened to universities, in my view, had little to do

with creating higher standards and everything to do with imposing a business model on them. (2) Universities seem to be fairly miserable places nowadays. (3) The question is too general. Which intellectuals? When and where did (or do) such intellectuals have freedom of speech? What freedom of speech did (or do) they have?

JP: Has your move to Australia opened up new possibilities for your writing?

JMC: Yes.

JP: What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of current South African writing?

JMC: I don't know the range of current South African writing well enough to comment.

Notes

1. Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (London: Vintage, 1994), 9.