

Bodley Head/FT Essay Prize

Long-form writing is alive and kicking



Simon Schama

All of you out there sounding off about the tweetification of English can relax. The 2012 Bodley Head/FT non-fiction Essay Prize, for writers aged 35 or under, yielded a harvest of essays so rich in imaginatively chosen subject matter and in spirited style that there can be no doubt that long-form non-fiction is very much alive and kicking. Somewhere between the expansiveness of the blogosphere with its indulgence of loose, spontaneous free association, and the straitjacket of the strict-deadline column, the essay as an art of written thought survives and flourishes. Hazlitt and Orwell can stop revolving in their tombs.

Some 400 submissions were received, in a wide range of voices from whimsically informal (a musing on scarecrows) to the sternly tutorial (what's the point of foreign correspondents?). But all were stamped with the distinctive tone of their authors. The strongest followed the models of the classic essayists by beginning with a glimpse of the concrete (in both senses in the case of Enver Hoxha's recycled Albanian bunkers) and moving outwards to bigger, deeper meditations on the human condition.

In the spirit of the greats, nothing, especially food writing, was off the table. One of the most beguiling essays was the third-placed piece, by Frances Leech, which followed a day in the life of an apprentice baker in a tiny Japanese-owned Parisian patisserie who was acquiring, simultaneously, a working knowledge of idiomatic Japanese and the techniques for perfect millefeuille.

The judges agreed, after much sifting, that there were two essays that were nothing short of brilliant examples of the art, albeit executed in such different literary tones, colours and moods that comparison became not just difficult but painfully invidious.

The ranking was made still more difficult by the fact that both essays engaged with matters of real seriousness – the selective nature of military memory and the arbitrary obsessions of the contemporary literary canon, but did so with delicately thoughtful elegance, and through two completely compelling pieces of non-fiction narrative.

Raghu Karnad's "Everybody's Friend" (overleaf) is a poignant pilgrimage to the military grave of a great-uncle, fallen defending the obsolescent Raj against the oncoming army of imperial Japan. The most brutal fighting unfolded on the unforgiving northeast Indian border with Burma, and Karnad takes himself and the reader deep into Nagaland to find the war graves of Imphal. There he broods without heavy reproach but with stoical sorrow on the marginalisation of memory offered to Indian troops who, in the authorised epic of Indian independence, fought on the "wrong" side for their imperial masters while the much thinner ranks of the Indian National Army, Subhash Chandra Bose's fighters, have been accorded the rites and respects of freedom fighters.

Hedley Twidle's pucky account (this page) of stalking the South African writer JM Coetzee on page and in the halls of academe to which, in the end, the judges awarded the laurels is a tour de force of literary doppelgänger comedy: by turns ruefully self-mocking, seriously prosecutorial, and somehow darkly faithful to both its self-consciously evasive subject and his increasingly desperate pursuer. Comparisons with Nicholson Baker's wonderfully futile courtship of Updike – *U and I* (1991) – or even Hazlitt's savage put-down of his quarry, the aged, sententious Coleridge, are not, I promise, far-fetched. Watch out for Twidle (a name you are unlikely to forget) for, mark my words, you'll be reading a lot of his.

What, in the end, was so heartening, for this judge anyway, was to discover in an age where the disposable and the instantaneous seem to rule, essays of sustained power that call for our complete and undivided attention and reward it with as much pleasure as illumination. Though our media are baggy with pedestrian generalisations and prose that plods along in leaden boots, we have plenty of young writers whose work can dance. That's not such a bad present to take with us into the uncertain winter of another new year.

The winning essay and two runners-up will be published as free digital shorts by the Bodley Head in January 2013

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Getting past Coetzee

Hedley Twidle's winning submission in the Bodley Head/FT Essay Prize chronicles his life as a South African academic working in the shadow of the Booker-winning author

There is an odd made-for-television documentary from 1997 which shows footage of JM Coetzee conducting a guided tour of Cape Town's southern suburbs. From the slopes of Table Mountain he points out the hospital where he was born; the suburb of Plumstead where he lived as a young boy; the university campus where he spent much of his academic career. A colleague recalls how Coetzee would not take calls from the Booker prize committee because he was investigating undergraduate exams: a measure of his professionalism. We visit his Standard Three classroom at Rosebank Primary and the grassy common where he participated in school sports days. He recalls taking gold in the running backwards race of 1948, as if enjoying a wry joke at the expense of anyone who thought that such an exercise might grant some privileged insight into his work.

Ten years ago, I was commissioned by a famous poet-editor to write a profile of Coetzee for a London review. At the time, the offer was a big break, and could have led to great things. I was fresh out of university and the editor was a high-up at Faber and Faber, a talent scout for *The New Yorker*. But it never got written.

Instead of providing a controlled and judicious survey of the oeuvre, I found myself obsessed by minor details on the outskirts of his work. The grim memoir *Youth* (2002) had just appeared and I wrote at length about the stockings full of clotting cheese that young "John" hangs up in his kitchen – proof of his extreme thriftiness, in life as in prose. The fish fingers that he fries in olive oil in a London garret, trying to emulate the Mediterranean diet of Ford Madox Ford: these finer points of domestic economy seemed laden with meaning.

And what did the two brooding initials say about his relation to high modernism, I wondered? To the T and S of Eliot, the F and R of Leavis, the D and H of Lawrence? What did the "M" stand for anyway? Was it Maxwell? Like Dylan refusing to sign autographs in the Pennebaker documentary, Coetzee had point-blank refused to answer this question when interviewed. I combed obscure academic journals for more of these duels, rejoicing in how he would not play the celebrity author game. The journalist Rian Malan described how Coetzee wrote each question down on a notepad and methodically analysed the assumptions on which it was based, "a process that offered some sharp insights into my intellectual shortcomings but revealed nothing about Coetzee himself... 'What kind of music do you like?' I asked, desperately. The pen scratched, the great writer cogitated. 'Music I have never heard before.'"

The Nobel Prize came and went; the time was ripe for a penetrating summation of (what I should have deemed) "the major phase" – from *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) through to *Disgrace* (1999) – followed by some measured demurrals regarding the obtrusive postmodernism of "late Coetzee", from *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) onwards. But, in fact, all the assignment resulted in was a series of politely worded rejection emails spanning several years. The editor didn't understand why I had spent quite so long speculating on the anal carbuncle that plagues the murderous frontiersman Jacobus Coetzee in *Dusklands*

There remains the matter of getting past Coetzee. 'Dusklands' (1974)

I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire.

'Waiting for the Barbarians' (1980)



Interviewer: Would you like to comment further on the importance which you attach to the notion of resistance? Coetzee: I hope that a certain spirit of resistance is ingrained in my books; ultimately I hope they have the strength to resist whatever readings I impose on them on occasions like the present.

Tony Morphet, 'Two Interviews with JM Coetzee, 1983 and 1987' from *TriQuarterly* (1987)



...their talk, their excessive talk, about how they love South Africa has consistently been directed toward the land, that is, toward what is least likely to respond to love: mountains and deserts, birds and animals and flowers.

Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech (1987)

'Hero and Bad Mother in Epic, a poem'

the matriarch of melancholy sleeps in the tidal casino the poisoned philatelist gropes through its symmetries his search is perplexed where is the seaborne matriarch? without the seaborne matriarch where is the lucky fiction?

in the final symmetry of the casino of solitude the poisoned vegetable mounts the sleeping matriarch

JM Coetzee, *Staffrider* (March 1978)

Sometimes, as he walked, he did not know whether he was awake or asleep. He could understand that people should have retreated here and fenced themselves in with miles and miles of silence; he could understand that they should have wanted to bequeath the privilege of so much silence to their children and grandchildren in perpetuity (though by what right he was not sure); he wondered whether there were not forgotten corners and angles and corridors between the fences, land that belonged to no one yet.

'Life & Times of Michael K' (1983)

As a writer I am not worthy to loose the latchet on Kafka's shoe.

'Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews' (1992)

(1974). The pages and pages devoted to analysing Coetzee's early, algorithm-generated poetry were intriguing (he wrote), but perhaps only to the specialist. It was somewhere at the edge of Lake Malawi, during an episode of heat-stroke on a long-distance cycling trip (made in honour of the Master of Cape Town) that I finally gave up trying to explain what JM Coetzee meant to me.

This was a novelist who – and I had known this from the opening lines of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, my first exposure – was simply operating at (the only way I can describe it) a higher pressure than any other from my native land, that country "as irresistible as it is unlovable" – South Africa. But this pressure – the pressure of a toxic history that went far back before 1948, and would last for long after 1994 – was registered in a prose of negative space. While other anti-apartheid writers turned up the heat, Coetzee lowered the temperature until (to borrow from Seamus Heaney on the Polish poets) it began to burn, like the strand of a metal fence gripped in winter.

This was a critic who had said everything about everything, with greater economy and less sentimentality than anyone else (I couldn't even look at a mountain or a desert or a bird or an animal or a flower without his words getting in the way). Who had been (as Eliot said the artist should be) heterodox when everyone else was orthodox, and orthodox when everyone else was heterodox. Who had, in fact, described the horizon of my thought for my twenties; whose cycling clips I was not even worthy of attaching; whom I desperately wanted to get past, even though the very idea of getting past Coetzee had already been anticipated in his debut effort (damn him!).

THE WINNER



Hedley Twidle, 32, was born in Johannesburg. He studied in KwaZulu-Natal, then at Oxford and York, and lived for several years in Edinburgh before taking up a post as lecturer in English at the University of Cape Town. Between 2007 and 2012, Twidle worked on the *Cambridge History of South African Literature*, published this year. At the moment he is teaching and thinking about life-writing, essays and literary non-fiction in Africa. More of his writing can be found at www.seapointcontact.wordpress.com.

Ten years later, I find myself a lecturer at the English Department of the University of Cape Town, in the very corridors where Coetzee taught and wrote for so many years. His pigeon-hole lingers on, even though he has long since left for Australia, living out his eminent life under the bluegums near Adelaide. There are Coetzee seminars and study groups, Coetzee research clusters and Coetzee collectives. There are posters of him tacked on to doors: Malan's "crocodile-eyed genius" stares out from New York Review of Books caricatures and the occasional photographic portrait: the small mouth, the handsome, slightly lopsided face.

Droves of students arrive from Winesconsin and Ohio to spend a term abroad, filling the Coetzee sign-up lists, while classes on new directions in post-apartheid poetry or fictions of the Zimbabwean diaspora languish unattended. A steady stream of PhDs and post-docs arrive from York, Auckland, Vienna, Granada and Oslo, ready to present their work in progress.

During a conference last year, I was asked by a visiting academic from Bangalore to take a picture of him standing at the lectern where JM used to teach, as if it were a tourist snap in front of the Little Mermaid. The same lecture theatre – wooden, antique, hidden in the middle of the ivy-clad Arts block – had been used in the filming

This was a novelist who was simply operating at a higher pressure than any other from my native land

of *Disgrace* (2008). Our head of department (my boss) landed a role as an extra, listening to David Lurie (John Malkovich) as he pronounces on Wordsworth's *Prelude* (while really ogling his student Melanie). But she (my boss) was caught carrying a copy of the novel in shot – the Vintage edition with the mangy dog on the cover. The director (Australian) deemed her a postmodern agitator and banned her from the set. (Malkovich, though, was most impressed and invited her to brunch with him.)

Since Coetzee lodged his manuscripts in Harvard and now Texas, we have learnt that he wrote his major novels almost entirely in University of Cape Town examination books. They have dull orange covers with instructions printed on them: "Peak caps to be reversed"; "Answer only ONE question per booklet". Recently I invigilated an exam on his work, striding up the aisles, doling out extra books to diligent students who raised their hands. But, of course, it is the less diligent answers that stay with you. Taking home a stack of scripts to mark, I read a long account of how the protagonist of *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) – the silent and hare-lipped gardener of Coetzee's greatest, most flawed work – had refused to join the "gorilla" fighters during the civil war, had defended his pumpkin seedlings from the "gorillas". Magnificent, in its way – a clear First.

Another candidate (who had obviously only ever listened to lectures) wrote a whole essay about "James Coetzee". James Coetzee – what total and pristine ignorance! How impressive, somehow, that this student had contrived never even to see the Nobel laureate's name in print. I gave the