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# Inner Workings: Literary Essays 2000-2005 [Review]

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an apt one to conclude this book. The bulk of the chapter, however, theorizes “identity in general,” as well as discussing ethnic and post-structural theorists and writers. Rather than calling the chapter “Conclusion,” therefore, he might have put most of it into a penultimate chapter reminding us of the importance of identity to ethnicity, history to identity, and titled accordingly. A short concluding chapter might have been the better place for his critical/ethical agenda. Welcome would have been a clearer (and more clearly expressed) tying together of identity theories with what had been so well explored in the first section—the place of history, geography, cultural specificity in identity formations—personal and communal. We need to understand better why the third term in his subtitle, “African American,” simply dropped out of the discussion in the rest of the book. One final, unrelated quibble: better proof-reading was in order.

That said, Franco has made a valuable contribution. He is a good close reader and relates those readings to a strong ethical purpose. At the same time, while he gives voice to the deepest concerns of the ethnic communities he discusses, he does not beat the drum or sloganize for any one, but recontextualizes their concerns within a larger canvas, making connections that those concerned with only one ethnicity and its politics often fail to see. He even touches on the larger questions of what we do when we read and discuss literature: What are the responsibilities, and the limits, of reading? What does reading do? What can a book do? Questions that so often get ignored or forgotten he reminds us to consider—a vital reminder.

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Judith Oster

J.M. Coetzee. *Inner Workings: Literary Essays 2000-2005*. New York: Viking, 2007. 318pp. \$25.95/\$16.00.

Like *Stranger Shores* (2000), *Inner Workings* collects J. M. Coetzee’s recent literary essays, many of which first appeared in *The New York Review of Books* or as introductions. Bound together, they accrue a taste and texture that readers might not have suspected if they encountered these essays in their original publications. Coetzee engages a compelling cluster of twentieth-century writers, including, among others, Italo Svevo, Walter Benjamin, Paul Celan, W. G. Sebald, Samuel Beckett, Saul Bellow, Nadine Gordimer, Gabriel García Márquez, V. S. Naipaul, and, likely of special interest to this journal’s readers, Philip Roth. Walt Whitman is the lonely denizen of the nineteenth century.

The dustcover of the hardbound edition promises “a window [...] that will be fresh and illuminating for readers already familiar with [the texts

Coetzee treats] and also [to] provide an ideal introduction and analysis for those approaching them for the first time.” Of the latter claim, there is little to doubt. Coetzee generally begins his essays by discussing an author’s life and cultural context. While this lends a slightly distracting predictability to the rhythm and structure of the collection, it also aggregates an effect that reminds me of David Markson’s recent fiction, juxtaposing biographical facts of writers in a dizzying and somehow moving meditation on the incalculable and troubling personalities, politics, and historical circumstances from which twentieth-century fiction emerged.

We may wonder whether Coetzee will consistently refresh and illuminate his subjects for those already familiar with them, because the short forms of the book review and the introduction impose space, time, and other limitations. The relative uniformity of the essays here may begin to make readers feel claustrophobic. But this also results from Coetzee’s seeming reluctance to challenge the limitations of the genre or to harness the potential intrepidity of the essay form. Coetzee writes with meticulousness and exactitude, but also with impersonality and adherence to a workmanlike formula. Still, we may feel privileged to read over Coetzee’s shoulder, for his meticulousness and exactitude often flash brilliantly against the flint of his formidable literary imagination. All of his performances have the feeling of a term Coetzee uses to praise the genius of W. G. Sebald: “mysterious ease” (148).

Sometimes Coetzee infuriates with mysterious ease as well. When Auden writes of Yeats in “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” he says, “You were silly like us,” but when Coetzee writes of Walter Benjamin, he seems merely to say, you were silly. Because he, like Theodor Adorno, does not respond to Benjamin’s method of dialectical images in *The Arcades Project*—largely, it appears, because he rejects Benjamin’s thesis that the nineteenth century, and we ourselves suffer under a long and catastrophic dream of capitalist phantasmagoria—the only three verdicts he proposes for it are “ruin,” “failure,” or “impossible project” (63). While in other reviews Coetzee castigates translators for even the smallest of alterations, here he complains about Benjamin’s long paragraphs—“surely the translator should feel free to break these up” (63)—and seems intent to further fillet Benjamin’s text when he envisions a “student edition...in which the quotations would be cut to a minimum and most of the surviving text will be by Benjamin himself. And that would not wholly be a bad thing” (61). Coetzee knows that to cut Benjamin’s text is to undermine its potential to survive as dialectical images, to violate Benjamin’s crucial structural principle of arresting history and shocking us awake, but he seems intent on digesting Benjamin’s most consuming intellectual project to little more than “a treasure hoard of curious information,” “thought-provoking quotations,” and “a multitude of succinct observations, polished to a high aphoristic sheen” (60).

Coetzee has high praise for Philip Roth. His review of *The Plot Against America* (Houghton Mifflin 2004) shows us one literary craftsman eyeing the edifice of another and coming away with a largely admiring view. He is par-

ticularly sensitive to Roth's narrative choices and to the unique challenges that Roth set ahead of himself in writing his novel: "Subjecting himself to a child's world-view means that Roth has to eschew a range of stylistic resources, in particular the harsher reaches of irony and wails and tirades of desperate eloquence that distinguish [...] *The Dying Animal* and the great *Sabbath's Theater* [...]" (240). Coetzee considers *The Plot Against America* as a dystopian novel, set unexpectedly in the past rather than the future. Thus, Roth must "provide two lines of suturing: the imaginary Lindbergh years have to be sutured at one end to the real history from which they diverge in mid-1940, and at the other end to the real history that they rejoin in late 1942" (241).

Sutures leave scars, however. Coetzee criticizes Roth's novel as implausible: "As Lindbergh himself disappears into thin air...so his presidency disappears, leaving its trace only on the mind of the boy who will grow into Philip Roth the writer. Save for the book we hold in our hands, there is no Lindbergh legacy. The two ghostly, parallel years in the American story [...] might as well not have occurred" (243). So while "at his best [Roth] is now a novelist of authentically tragic scope [...] *The Plot Against America* is not a major work. What it offers in place of tragedy is pathos of a heartwrenching kind saved from sentimentality by a sharp humour" (240). Indeed, here Coetzee needs Benjamin, for he seems to have missed the heart of Roth's arresting and shocking historical vision. Young Philip tells us, "And as Lindbergh's election couldn't have made clearer to me, the unfolding of the unforeseen was everything. Turned wrong way round, the relentless unforeseen was what we schoolchildren studied as 'History'...where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable. The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning disaster into an epic" (Roth, *Plot Against America* 113-4). A chronicle of the inevitable could just as likely describe "tragedy" as "History." Roth does not try to write either in *The Plot Against America*, but rather to write unforeseen "terror" and "disaster," those forms of pathos that may tell us more about real historical experience than plausible "tragedy" or "History" can.

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