

## Boyhood

*J.M.Coetzee*

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Every one has at least one story to tell, namely that of their own life. A real author is one who has other stories to tell as well, although some claim that those stories are after all nothing but variations on the archetypical one. Anyway you do expect from every author sooner or later to come up with an autobiography. An autobiography traces a fine line between fiction and documentation. Pure documentation, as far as it is possibly, is of course unreadable, the spirit of fiction is needed to breath life into the dry facts of life. On the other hand an autobiography which is not factual is a mere fake and hence loses all its justification. One has to assume that the thin book is in fact based on fact, that the people named and described corresponds more or less faithfully to real people with the same names and vital characteristics.

The charm of an autobiography is the invitation to identification. This is often easiest when childhood is concerned. We enter life pretty much the same, we share most of the same fears and delight, and our stations are reasonably similar, as for most famous people (who are usually the only ones who can expect their writings to be read and thus the only kind we tend to read) fame was acquired later in life and childhood shared in the general obscurity in which most of us conduct our lives.

Coetzee grew up as a poor white boy in South Africa. As most becoming writers he is a solitary boy living most of his life in a world of his own making and not surprisingly excelling in school, while being alienated from his class-mates. He has a deep, if ambivalent, attachment to his mother, and he is strangely detached from his father, whose subsequent failure will eventually make him despise him. This maternal bound makes you think of the young D.H.Lawrence. A strong part of his identity is the English language, a bequest of his parents, who, incidentally are not of English stock. His mother is really German, while his father is Afrikaans. Through his father he also has the most direct contact with the land, as one of the uncles holds on to the family farm, which he grows up to love, although he feels that he is not accepted by it, and by extension neither by the relatives of his father. (In this respect, with a trivial permutation, I recognise my own personal relation to the farm of my maternal grandfather). The life on the farm, tied to the soil, is also the life of Afrikaans, a language he learns to speak, but to whose inner sanctums, mostly of vulgar depravity, he never becomes privy. There is also in connection with the farm an intimation of sexual desire. A cousin of his, a young supple girl running around barefoot, offers the prospects of someone into whom to bare your soul under the starry sky. But it is a book on childhood, and the story is bound to peter out.

The life of a child is often very dull, involving preoccupation with mindless activities. Here I also sense a direct affinity with my own childhood and how much of it was wasted on trivia. The miracle is that in spite of everything the child learns and makes such rapid progress. The dullness of childhood propels the ambitious towards youth and adulthood, which in the book lies at the distant horizon.

His parents have literary ambitions for their son. Those might be genuine in the case of his mother, but with the unerring intuition of a child he smells that the poetic sensibilities of his father are just put-ons, simple affectations, and that he really does not go beyond the reading of newspapers. In the end the father fails professionally as he tries to establish himself as a lawyer embroiling himself in financial irregularities. Those misfortunes inspire nothing but disgust from the son. The whole thing leads to an up-rooting, the small town on the veld is replaced by Cape Town. There is a social degradation, he goes to a down-the-heels Catholic school, his proficiency in English is not recognised, but his proficiency in mathematics remains at least untarnished.

October 4, 2004 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se