

*Diary of a Bad Year* by J.M. Coetzee (Harvill Secker) R248  
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The protagonist of J.M. Coetzee's latest novel is an ex-South African novelist with the initials JC, living in Australia. He had a father whose initials were ZC. This seems fairly conclusive; but then, JC is older than JMC, and has won only "a modest reputation" as novelist.

Safer, then, not to make any assumptions about the relation between novelist and character, and to treat this simply as a novel about a novelist in his early seventies called JC. As is well known by now, the book is structured as three bands of text running in parallel. The first band comprises JC's "opinions", formal reflections on a variety of topics intended for publication in a German book; the second band renders his informal responses to the appearance in his life of a young woman called Anya, a fellow-resident in his apartment block; and the third band contains her even less inhibited reflections on what she recognises as his fascination with her. This third band incorporates also the dismissive views of her economist partner, Alan, to whom the human being is only an economic unit.

The connection between the various bands is elusive: at thematic level, any cross-connections we might want to force are tenuous at best, contrived at worst.

It seems more plausible that two orders of awareness, the intellectual and the physical, are at first quite sharply distinguished, in the comical contrast between the extreme earnestness of the opinions in the first band and the banality, in the second band, of the old man's randiness, with Anya's commentary, the voice of conscious physical excellence ("my divine behind"), adding a further deflationary reduction to the mix.

But as the novel progresses, the bands become gradually less distinct, the opinions acquiring more of the warmth of the physical – indeed, Part 2 of the novel contains a "Second Diary", what Anya calls JC's "soft opinions". And as JC's opinions soften, Anya's narrative becomes more intellectually alert and emotionally responsive.

This merging of two orders is prefigured very early on in JC's description of Anya's "derrière so near to perfect as to be angelic." This apparently inept simile (angels not normally being celebrated for their derrières) in fact serves to introduce the tension between the exalted/spiritual/ethereal and the mundane/secular/physical orders.

As the novel progresses the apparently oxymoronic angelic/divine bum becomes a manifestation of a reconciliation between the two orders – a reconciliation that in Christian cosmology is perfected in the angelic, but that is here also more humbly embodied in the birds that JC watches in the park, and that Anya urges him to write about.

Towards the end of the novel JC comments wryly "all old folks become Cartesians", that is, they start believing in the duality of body and mind, because they hope their minds will outlast their bodily decrepitude. But the novel's move is towards an anti-Cartesian fusion of the intellectual and the physical, the earth-bound and the heavenly. It is a fusion for instance, that JC locates in nineteenth-century song: "the contrast between the mere physical body and the voice that transcends the body, emerging from it, rising above it, and leaving it behind. From the body, thus, song was born as soul."

It is a fusion, too, that he ascribes to animals, a dog not aware of a sore foot as “my foot” or a bird not aware of a broken wing as “my wing”: “To the dog, when it tries to walk, there is simply *I am pain*, to the bird, when it launches itself into flight, simply *I cannot*.” But for the human, “the existence of such locutions [as “my leg”, “my eye”] shows that language cannot get purchase, cannot get going, until it has split up the unity of experience.”

The human intellect, in trying to rationalise the non-human universe, perpetuates this split: “What Cartesian nonsense to think of birdsong as pre-programmed cries uttered by birds to advertise their presence to the opposite sex, and so forth! Each bird-cry is a full-hearted release of the self into the air, accompanied by such joy as we can barely comprehend.”

To restore the “unity of experience” is the aim of the three gradually converging bands. In his last meeting with Anya, JC, earlier “careful not to stretch a hand in case, like a shy bird, she should take flight again”, embraces her in awkward but blissful union, “this shrunken old man and this earthly incarnation of heavenly beauty.”

By novel’s end, Anya’s letter has usurped JC’s band, and “her” band embodies a vision of accompanying him on his last journey. She can now invoke with a new appropriateness Horatio’s farewell to Hamlet: “and flights of angels [sing thee to thy rest], and all the rest.”

In parallel with Anya’s vision of the succour she can offer the dying man, JC reflects not on his bodily decrepitude but on the strength he can still derive from “the master Tolstoy on the one hand and the master Dostoevsky on the other”: “They annihilate one’s impurer pretensions; they clear one’s eyesight; they fortify one’s arm.”

The consolations of physical beauty as the “earthly incarnation of heavenly beauty” and the sustenance derived from the example of the “standards toward which any serious novelist must toil” together bring to a moving close a narrative that has gone some way towards restoring the “unity of experience”.

Whereas *Diary of a Bad Year* is never less than fascinating, I happened to read it alongside Philip Roth’s latest novel, *Exit Ghost*, which shares many of Coetzee’s preoccupations and situations (elderly novelist, young woman, the place of literature in the political arena), but which is much more vividly realised at the level of the central relationships. Coetzee’s Anya, damagingly for a novel that is so much concerned with the body, has very little physical presence, apart from her much-praised bum. Alan has jowls, but is for the rest the sum of his opinions, and his plot to defraud JC generates little tension. Disappointing as *Slow Man* was in some respects, its Marijana and her robust family had the contours of a reality that is but sparsely rendered in *Diary of a Bad Year*. At one point JC reflects morosely: “I was never much good at evocation of the real, and have even less stomach for the task now.” Whether or not thus intended by JMC, this is, to an unfortunate extent, exemplified by this novel. There are novelists who extend our notion of what a novel can do, and Coetzee is one of these; but I’m not sure that *Diary of a Bad Year* is such a novel. May posterity prove me wrong.