

BOOK REVIEW

“Dusklands”

by J. M. Coetzee: Ravan Press Johannesburg 1974.

Reviewed by PAULINE FLETCHER

Don't be misled by the bland exterior of this slim volume, with its dust jacket reproduction of a painting by Thomas Baines. Title and painting might seem to suggest that here we have yet another inoffensive piece destined for the Africana shelves: something interesting to send to Aunt Mary overseas. Aunt Mary would be horrified by its contents, and many South Africans, whatever their political affiliations, are going to be equally horrified. **Dusklands** is an extremely powerful and disturbing book; but what makes it particularly interesting is that its power to disturb springs not merely from 'strong' writing and the exploitation of highly emotive issues, but from the penetrating intelligence of its author.

The work falls into two quite independent parts, one of which is set in modern America and the other in eighteenth century South Africa. And yet one feels that the real subject is modern South Africa. This is, of course, never stated, but if the reader feels that the confrontation between a 'superior' and an 'inferior' culture, with the issues of power, dominance, brutality and violence that such a confrontation raises, has any relevance to our own situation, then he will have no difficulty in making the connections himself. Meanwhile it is an enormous advantage not to have our own cliché and guilt-ridden problems dealt with directly.

The central section of **The Vietnam Project** consists of a completely cold-blooded recommendation for a 'final solution' to the Vietnam problem: the demoralization of the people is to be achieved by ruthless psychological warfare, by the use of indiscriminate terror-killings (in bureaucratic language, a 'de-politicizing process') and finally, by total air-war in which the earth itself would be destroyed by soil-poison.

What renders all this even more horrifying is that the plan is worked out by a character who describes himself as being 'in an honourable line of bookish men who have sat in libraries and had visions of great clarity'. His task, which he sees in idealistic terms is the 'patient struggle of the intellect against blood and anarchy'. He tells us:

I am a story not of emotion and violence - the illusory war-story of television - but of life itself, life in obedience to which even the simplest organism represses its entropic yearning for the mud and follows the road of evolutionary duty toward the glory of consciousness.

But the triumph of the intellect, the cool, efficient detachment that allows him to make 'fine distinctions' is accompanied by sordid failure at the human and physical levels. Marital failure and sexual inadequacy, described with great vividness and a certain wry humour, are both cause and effect of his work on Vietnam. The sexual thrill that his wife fails to give him comes instead from the contemplation of his Vietnam atrocity pictures, but he is no simple sadist. He has always refused any real contact with the war:

Watching this film I applaud myself for having kept away from the physical Vietnam: the insolence of the people, the filth and flies and no doubt stench, the eyes of prisoners, whom I would no doubt have had to face, watching the camera with naive curiosity, too unconscious to see it as ruler of their destiny - these things belong to an irredeemable Vietnam in the world which only embarrasses and alienates me. But when in this film the camera passes through the gate of the walled prison courtyard and I see the rows of concrete pits with their mesh grates, it bursts upon me anew that the world still takes the trouble to expose itself to me in images, and I shake with fresh excitement.

In the presence of actual human flesh and stench the thrill would fail, and be replaced by disgust, like the disgust that is his only reaction to sexual contact:

my seed drips like urine into the futile sewers of Marilyn's reproductive ducts.

From such repulsive encounters with reality he retreats into that stronghold of the intellect, the library, and spends his time passing his fingertips 'over the cool odorless surface' of a photograph of a prisoner in a tiger cage, while he dreams up schemes of mass annihilation. The library itself is like a cage or fortress in which he seems to be secure, 'walled round with earth, steel, concrete, and mile after mile of compressed paper'. but the enemy is really within. He is betrayed by his own 'revolting body', which constantly limits his aspirations by its sordid cramps and pains, imprisoning him in 'ropes of muscle', It is the one physical reality from which he cannot escape.

Later, he wonders whether he would not have been saved by contact with the realities of war:

Is it the blocked imperative of action that has caused the war, and my discourse of the war, to back up and poison me? Would I have freed myself if I had been a soldier boy and trod upon the Vietnam of my scholar fantasy?

Disturbing questions, these, for the anti-war campaigner. One cannot dismiss the protagonist as the brutal jack-booted villain of the anti-fascist posters. He is so intelligent, self-aware, deprecatingly self-ironic that he is within a hair's breadth of being one-of-us instead of one-of-them. Indeed, the liberal intelligentsia are invited to look within and see whether the enemy does not lurk there, nurtured by the destructive habits of dispassionate, intellectual analysis.

Although the narrator-hero of the second story, **The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee**, is a very different product of a very different age, he has the same cool, analytic approach to violence. He hands out shrewd advice on the only sure way to kill or tame a Bushman and tells us that if you want profit out of Bushmen women 'you must make them breed you herders off the Hottentots'. At the same time both Bushmen and Hottentots are seen entirely without sentimentality, not glamourised into noble savages. In fact when the narrator does think of them as savages it is because it flatters his own ego to imagine them as worthy opponents. His fantasies about dangerous encounters with them end with the triumph of his 'magic' over theirs and his reign as 'tribal demigod', after which he returns to civilization enriched with numerous cattle.

The reality is very different and Jacobus Coetzee is an honest enough narrator to convey that difference to us in extremely vivid terms. His first meeting with the wild Hottentots starts on a heroic note: two potentially hostile bands of men facing each other in the desert. But soon the scene dissolves into comic confusion, with the Hottentots fighting for pieces of tobacco and Coetzee reduced to the role of schoolmaster restoring order amongst naughty children. As he retreats to safety the Hottentots once again become a horde of 'oncoming savages' but when they have closed in on him he sees them 'chattering softly among themselves, looking at me with curiosity, squinting into the sun like little slave-boys'.

Amongst these gentle, dishonest and feckless people it is extremely difficult for Coetzee to maintain his dignity and

accompanying sense of his own identity. He is not helped by a particularly humiliating illness which reduces him to complete, almost infantile, dependence on them and allows them the opportunity of robbing him of all his possessions. Illness, humiliation and delirium bring with them new powers of introspection and he comes to realise how much his own reality is inherent in the things he normally owns and controls, especially his gun. He needs his gun not merely for self-protection (in fact his life is never really threatened) but because the gun, by giving him the power to kill other life, guarantees his own separate identity. It 'stands for the hope that there exists that which is other than oneself'.

As he recovers strength, humility departs, but the final degradation is still to come. In a climax of painful comedy he has an unseemly brawl with a gang of children who have stolen his trousers:

Naked and filthy I knelt in the middle of the ring with my face in my hands, stifling my sobs in the memory of who I was. Two children raced past me. The rope which they held between them caught me under the elbows, under the armpits, and hurled me on my back. I huddled in a ball protecting my face. Long stillness, whispers, laughter. Bodies fell upon me, I was suffocated and pinned to the ground. Ants, ants raped from their nest, enraged and bewildered, their little pincers scything and their bodies bulging with acid, descended between my spread buttocks, on to my tender anus, on to my weeping rose, my nobly laden testicles. I screamed with pain and shame. 'Let me go home!' I screamed. 'Let me go home, I want to go home, I want to go home!'

Reduced to the status of the little boy who no longer wants to play rough games, he is turned out by the tribe and, abandoned by his servants, makes his way back to civilization.

Having been rejected by the Hottentots as father or tribal god, he returns with reinforcements and many guns as a wrathful god to exact his revenge. In his own eyes he comes as an evangelist, bringing to ignorant savages the 'great system of dividends and penalties', and the assurance that God has not forgotten them. Once more he has cast himself in a heroic role; he is the bringer of retribution and justice. But once more his own conception of himself is undermined by the lack of heroism in his opponents. The 'execution' of the defectors turns into a bloody shambles, humiliating for all concerned and with shameful overtones of macabre comedy.

My brief résumé does not do justice to the quality of the writing, which is very powerful and which hovers often in that weirdly disturbing duskland between tragedy and farce.

Nor can any review do justice to the quality of the ideas behind the writing; Mr Coetzee is plainly a writer with far ranging philosophic interests. Some critics may, indeed, feel that he uses too much licence in some of the more

metaphysical speculations that he attributes to his narrator, the trekboer and hunter, Jacobus Coetzee. Certainly he goes beyond what would traditionally be regarded as the limitations of the character he has created, but then Mr Coetzee is not a traditional novelist. He is a highly conscious artist, interested in the relation between the author and the creatures of his own creation. Many novelists have tried to eliminate the presence of the omniscient author in their works. Mr Coetzee openly acknowledges and deliberately exploits that presence. In *The Vietnam Project* he presents himself as one of the characters, the shadowy director of operations. In *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee* he is not ostensibly present, but I cannot help feeling that there is a degree of identification between Coetzee the explorer and Coetzee the writer. This could be a way of saying that the writer has failed to create an autonomous character, but I think the 'failure' is deliberate and that it forms part of the overall concern in the novel

with the nature of reality and consciousness. Jacobus Coetzee himself suggests something of this in his final words:

you will find that whether I am alive or dead, whether I ever lived or never was born, has never been of real concern to me. I have other things to think about.

Although Mr Coetzee has shown that he has the power to describe events with minute realism, the narrow limits of 'realistic' characterization are not his concern. He endows Jacobus Coetzee with a richer and more modern consciousness than historical realism would allow. But by doing so he gives more universality to his story, makes him our contemporary and makes it more difficult for us to escape the similarities between his situation and ours.□

SOUTH AFRICA IN CANADIAN EYES

by ARTHUR KEPPEL—JONES

In trying to describe Canadian attitudes to South Africa I am compelled to make observations at three levels. There are the attitudes of the government, of what may be called "interest groups", and of the general public.

The government's attitudes — those of previous governments as well as of the present one — are explicit and easy to describe. They do not occupy a large part of the Ministers' attention. The 1970 white paper on foreign policy devoted a little more than two pages, out of a total of 185, to this subject. The statement amounted to this: on one hand the government deplored the South African system of racial supremacy and oppression; on the other, Canadian business has many dealings with the country, and it was not Canada's policy to stop trading with countries of whose regimes she disapproved. The list of such countries was too long.

This fence-setting did not appeal to the other Commonwealth governments which met in Ottawa in August, 1973. They proclaimed the legitimacy of the liberation movements in white-ruled Africa, and Canada joined them in re-

cognizing that legitimacy. The recognition was followed, early in 1974, by an undertaking to give financial support to the liberation movements. The support was to be for humanitarian activities only — educational, medical and the like—and to be channeled through international agencies such as Oxfam and the World Council of Churches. Thus Canada would have no direct dealings with the "freedom fighters".

To some people the policy appears unheroic and even shameful, but it is easily explained. Canada has acquired, both in the Commonwealth and in the United Nations, the reputation of a white nation that can be trusted by the black nations. The role cast for her is that of "a bridge across the chasm of colour" (Julius Nyerere's words). To play this part she has to be trusted by white nations also. Hence the fence-sitting. There is also something more positive: aid to underdeveloped countries. In the ratio of this aid to gross national product Canada stands seventh among the donor countries — a typical Canadian position, neither high nor low.