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**The Novel Today**

**J M Coetzee**

The following is the text of a talk given at the 1987 Weekly Mail Book Week in Cape Town.

Speaking as a novelist, I would like to make some observations on the relation of novels and novel-writing to the time and the place in which we live. What is it that I and other writers are doing, I want to ask, when, as people making our own history or people living out the history of our time or people enmired in history or people undergoing the nightmare of history, depending on how one sees it, we write these long prose works that we call novels? Are we trying to escape historical reality, or, on the contrary, are we engaging with historical reality in a particular way, a way that may require some explanation and some defence?

I need hardly say that this is a question that has been addressed by novelists and theorists of the novel since at least the time of Cervantes. This new thing, this new genre, this 'novel', they have asked - is it a kind of history, a fictitious history, which, while in one sense nothing but a lie sucked out of the writer's thumb, is also, in an Aristotelian sense, 'truer' than what we usually call history because it deals with the underlying patterns of force at work in our private and public life, in contrast to straight or orthodox history, which unavoidably has to deal with mountains of events without detectable pattern, with brute contingency?

Neither is there time, nor is this the place, for me to make a plea for the higher truth of fiction, even if I were inclined to do so. Instead I would like to narrow my focus considerably and talk about the novel and history in South Africa today, and in particular about what I see as a tendency, a powerful tendency, perhaps even dominant tendency, to subsume the novel under history, to read novels as what I will loosely call imaginative investigations of real historical forces and real historical circumstances; and conversely, to treat novels that do not perform this investigation of what are deemed to be real historical forces and circumstances as lacking in seriousness.

In the position I am calling into question, then, the novelistic text becomes a kind of historical text, an historical text with a truth-value that requires a fairly sophisticated mode of interpretation, but one that compensates for its dubious truth-status by performing certain functions that orthodox history has difficulty with. For example, orthodox history does not have the means to give the kind of dense realisation of the texture of life that the novel, or certain kinds of novel, do so well. And history does not have the formal means to explore, except clumsily and 'from the outside', the individual experience of historical time, particularly the time of historical crisis.

We are not - I should make it clear - talking about what used to be called 'the historical novel', the novel that self-consciously and on the basis of explicitly historical research sets out to re-create on its own terms a given time in the past. We are talking about novels that engage with or respond to, or are said to engage with or respond to, the so-called historical present. We are talking about novels that engage with the historical present, but we are not talking about all such novels. And here we reach a crucial point. There are some novels that fit better in the history classroom than others, some novels that supplement the history text better than others. Why is the point crucial? Because at certain times and in certain places - and this is one of those times and places - the novel that supplements the history text has attributed to it a greater truth than one that does not.

Now, the argument I want to conduct is only peripherally an argument about truth, about greater or lesser truth. It is an argument about complementarity, which I will put in

the way: in times of intense ideological pressure like the present, when the space in which the novel and history normally coexist like two cows on the same pasture, each doing its own business, is squeezed almost to nothing, the novel, it seems to me, has only two options: supplementarity or rivalry. It cannot be both autonomous and supplementary. If the novel aims to provide the reader with vicarious first-hand experience of living in a certain historical time, embodying contending forces in contending characters, filling our experience with a certain density of observation, if it regards this as its goal, the rest - for what I will call its principal structuration - depending on the model of history - then its relation to history is self-evidently a secondary relation.

What, by contrast, would be meant by a novel that occupies an autonomous place, like what I call a rival to history?

I mean - to put it in its strongest form - a novel that operates in terms of its own processes and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the processes of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history (as a child's homework is checked by a schoolmistress). In particular I mean a novel that evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process (and here is the point at which true rivalry, even rivalry, perhaps enters the picture) perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history - in other words, demythologising history. Can I be more specific? Yes: for example, a novel that is prepared to work itself out outside the terms of class conflict, race conflict, gender conflict or any other of the oppositions out of which history and the historical disciplines erect themselves. (I need hardly add that to claim the freedom to deconstruct - or better, re-think - such oppositions as propertyed/propertyless, coloniser/colonised, masculine/feminine, and so forth, does not mean that one falls back automatically on moral oppositions, open or disguised, like good/bad, life/died/death-directed, human/mechanical, and so forth.)

Why should a novelist - myself - be speaking here - the Baxter Theatre - in terms of rivalry with the discourse of history? Because, as I suggested earlier, in South Africa the colonisation of the novel by the discourse of history is proceeding with alarming rapidity. I speak therefore - to use a figure - as a member of a tribe threatened with colonisation, a tribe some of whose members have been only too happy - as is their right - to embrace the new reality, to relinquish their bows and arrows and their huts in the wilds and move into the spacious roof of the great historical myths. I speak, moreover, on an occasion welcomed by an active and unashamed proponent of this colonising process, for a record which, I have every reason to expect, will be recuperated by next week into the discourse of history. I do not even speak my own language. This is not an occasion, let me say to you, at which storytellers have been invited to tell stories or poets to read poems. My language is to address what are called problems and issues. I speak, therefore, a fragile language with very little body, one that is liable, at any moment, to find itself flattened and translated back and down into the discourse of politics, a sub-discourse of the discourse of history. Let me therefore hasten to get through with what I have to say before the flattening takes place.

I am not making a plea for the art I practise. The novel, storytelling in general, will always be able to take care of itself. The problem I am addressing is not stories or even novels; but appetite, and the appropriating appetite of the discourse of history in particular. I am pointing out there is a battlefield, hard though that may be to believe. I am not tracing some of the lines of force on that battlefield.

Can storytelling can take care of itself. Is this true? Have censors been so ineffectual, after a century? Yes, they have. They are ineffectual because, in laying down rules that forbid stories may not transgress, and enforcing these rules, they fail to recognise that the power of stories lies not in their transgressing particular rules but in their faculty of creating and changing their own rules. There is a game going on between the covers of

the book, but it is not always the game you think it is. No matter what it may appear to be doing, the story may not really be playing the game you call Class Conflict or the game you call Male Domination or any of the other games in the games handbook. While it is certainly possible to read the book as playing one of those games, in reading it in that way you may have missed something. You may have missed not just something, you may have missed everything. Because (I parody the position somewhat) a story is not a message with a covering, a rhetorical or aesthetic covering. It is not a message plus a residue, the residue, the art with which the message is coated with the residue, forming the subject matter of rhetoric or aesthetics or literary appreciation. There is no addition in stories. They are not made up of one thing plus another thing, message plus vehicle, substrate plus superstructure. On the keyboard on which they are written, the plus key does not work. There is always a difference; and the difference is not a part, the part left behind after the subtraction. The minus key does not work either; the difference is everything.

Storytelling (let me repeat myself at the risk of boring you) is not a way of making messages more - as they say - 'effective'. Storytelling is another, an other mode of thinking, more venerable than history, as ancient as the cockroach. Nor is this primitiveness the only way in which stories resemble cockroaches. Like cockroaches, stories can be colonised. All you need to do is tear off the wings and sprinkle a little salt on them. They are nourishing, to a degree, though if you are truly looking for nourishment you would probably look elsewhere. Cockroaches can also be colonised. You can capture them in a cockroach trap, breed them (quite easily), herd them together in cockroach farms. You can put pins through them and mount them in cases, with labels. You can use their wings to cover lampshades with. You can do minute dissections of their respiratory systems and stain them, and photograph them, and frame them, and hang them on the wall. You can, if you wish, dry them and powder them and mix them with high explosives and make bombs of them. You can even make up stories about them, as Kafka did, although this is quite hard. One of the things you cannot - apparently - do is eradicate them. They breed as the figure has it, like flies, and under the harshest circumstances. It is not known for what reason they are on the earth, which would probably be a nicer place - certainly a easier place to understand - without them. It is said that they will still be around when we are dead and all our artefacts have disappeared.

This is called a parable, a mode favoured by marginal groups - groups that don't have a place in the mainstream, in the main plot of history - because it is hard to pin down unambiguously what the point is.

In the end there is still the difference between a cockroach and a story, and the difference remains everything.

Why am I saying these things? In particular, am I saying them in order to distance myself from revolutionary art and ally myself with those people who think there is nothing nicer than cuddling up in bed with a novel and having a good old read, people who, as they will say, see quite enough of reality on the streets, thank you? I hope not. I reiterate the elementary and rather obvious point I am making: that history is not reality; that history is a kind of discourse; that a novel is a kind of discourse too, but a different kind of discourse; that, inevitably, in our culture, history will, with varying degrees of forcefulness, try to claim primacy, claim to be a master-form of discourse, just as, inevitably, people like myself will defend themselves by saying that a history is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other - that, as Don Quixote argued so persuasively but in the end so vainly, the authority of history lies simply in the consensus it commands. The categories of history are not privileged, just as the categories of moral discourse are not privileged. They do not reside in reality; they are a certain construction put upon reality. I see absolutely no reason why, even in the South Africa of the 1980s, we should agree to agree that things are otherwise. In particular, I do not see why the

consent to be anyone's handmaiden, nor do I see why there should, here and now, or  
anywhere, at any time, for the sake of anything, be agreed to be a moratorium on the kind  
of reservations I am expressing.

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## Wayne Assam

Poem

### The Taper (26.12.84)

It is better, wrote the fiery sage,  
to marry than to burn. So much for marriage.  
So much, indeed, for warmth. I, simple soul,  
shan't quarrel with a man of holy learning,  
a man of cool, high ways and cloistered nights.  
The stars, it seems, though radiant, are cold  
and white as Arctic winters.

Yet who am I  
to speak of stars - for am I not a candle  
set in soft, deep, fragrant earth, and warm  
with lonely light beneath the stellar dust?  
Each shrinking nightfall - thus it is with burning -  
draws me closer to the beckoning earth,  
shall draw me down upon her till I am spent,  
and still, and cold, and dark with night's mute, vaporous  
darkness.

So much for me. How it may be  
with meteors and moons I cannot say.