



The Terrors of *Dusklands* and *Northanger Abbey*

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Introduction

When I heard about the 50th anniversary conferences planned for 2024 to commemorate the publication of J.M. Coetzee's first novel *Dusklands* I was keen to be part of the celebrations, but reading the novel after a longish period was a sobering experience, to say the least. Like Ceridwen Dovey, when re-reading the novel 'I was assailed by the brutality of the imagery, the terrible scenes of rape and murder, of disembowelment.'¹ The physical and psychological violence the novel describes, its continual and ever more insistent assaults on the reader, had a numbing effect. I became increasingly convinced that I have little to offer in the way of conventional scholarship that would venture beyond the brief discussions in my 2010 book on Coetzee's work.²

At about the same time, I had been invited to contribute to a project about Jane Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey* – her first to be ready for publication, though not published until after her death. The apparently bizarre idea occurred to me that comparing the 'first' novels of these two consummate writers might be the best chance I have of offering something original. I thought I could try to work out whether they are actually as incommensurably different as they seem, and to consider more broadly why it is an extraordinary idea to compare these two novels in particular, and the works of Austen and Coetzee more generally.

Two first novels?

Dusklands was J.M. Coetzee's first novel: I think that is clear: the first of the published books to be written, as David Attwell demonstrates in *JMC and the Life of Writing*, and first to be published. Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, on the other hand, has a more dubious claim to firstness. It was not her first novel to be published: that was *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Northanger Abbey* was published posthumously in 1818. And an early version of *Pride and Prejudice* was apparently offered to a publisher, who turned it down unseen, in 1797, six years before *Northanger Abbey* was sold to a publisher who failed to publish it. However, these other two novels published in her lifetime were significantly revised before publication, while *Northanger Abbey* apparently remains largely the work which was ready for publication in 1803. Can we call it her 'first novel'? Peter Knox-Shaw remarks that it was 'evidently intended over a long period to be her first book' and it 'preserves the character of a manifesto'.³ Kathryn Sutherland, on the other hand, cautions that 'Any concept of 'early' must in Austen's case be treated with extreme caution and allowed an elastic longevity. ... first drafts were subsequently buried or destroyed in rewriting, and cannot easily be separated in time from work done on stories in the three MS volumes'⁴ – which contain her sometimes outrageous and transgressive juvenilia. *Northanger Abbey* does seem to share with these teenage works some features which, while they did not exactly disappear, were somewhat smoothed over in later fictions. The exuberance of this novel might, in a way, parallel the extreme graphic violence of *Dusklands*.

¹ Ceridwen Dovey, *Writers on Writers: J.M. Coetzee* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2018), p. 27.

² Gillian Dooley, *J.M. Coetzee and the Power of Narrative* (New York: Cambria Press, 2010).

³ Quoted in Frances White, 'Response and responsibility: Jane Austen and Iris Murdoch', *Iris Murdoch Review* (14) 2023, p. 55.

⁴ Kathryn Sutherland, *Jane Austen's Textual Lives* (Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 204.



Satirical excess

One of these features that these two first novels, *Northanger Abbey* and *Dusklands*, might have in common is a certain satirical extravagance. There is a directness in Austen's portrayal of comically appalling characters like John Thorpe that she toned down in later fictions. John Thorpe boasts of his 'foresight and skill' in hunting which, 'though it had never endangered his own life for a moment, had been constantly leading others into difficulties, which he calmly concluded had broken the necks of many' (NA 66).⁵ Jacobus Coetzee boasts of his 'career as a tamer of the wild': 'I move through the wilderness with my gun at the shoulder of my eye and slay elephants, hippopotami, rhinoceros, buffalo, lions, leopards, dogs, giraffes, antelope and buck of all descriptions' and so on (DL 78-9).⁶ There is presumably some exaggeration in both cases: both are fantasists, and while John Thorpe doesn't actually commit murders like Jacobus Coetzee, he does turn out to be an effective agent of chaos: nobody dies but people's lives and futures are affected by his careless swaggering and boasting.

Both novels are, also, responding to existing texts in ways which take them beyond the mere spoof. While *Northanger Abbey* is prompted by the gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe fashionable in the 1790s, Coetzee based the second part of *Dusklands* on the *Relaas* of Jacobus Coetzee, his account of his expedition to the Northern Cape in 1760, a generation earlier than Radcliffe. In Coetzee's early manuscript notes, he suggests 'the possibility of rewriting another novel ... or of making that rewriting into the subject of your own writing'. Later, in his own words, Coetzee admitted, 'I read mostly the stuff that, crudely speaking, I can cannibalise.'⁷ One could perhaps see the same dynamic in Austen's reading, not only Goldsmith's *History of England* and Cowper's poetry, but every novel she could lay her hands on – and the gothic ones clearly intrigued her. According to Kim Wheatley, 'Most of the time, Jane Austen is not a gothic novelist. But her work never leaves behind its attraction to the extravagance of gothic scenarios, character types, and language. ... She exploits the gothic not only to critique but also to humanize the characters in whom she is most invested.'⁸ And it is interesting that, according to David Attwell, 'The rebellion against the forefathers is not obvious in the earliest drafts of *Dusklands*. Only gradually does it become apparent that Coetzee is acting as a mole, undermining the tradition while pretending to be its newest representative.'⁹ The gothic horror in Austen is certainly more innocuous than that in Coetzee, but its shadows still surround the narrative.

Incomparable and incompatible?

However, making a comparison between *Northanger Abbey* and *Dusklands* appears somehow preposterous. Even comparing Coetzee and Austen gives one pause. But why? It may have to do with the contrast between Coetzee's awareness of complicity in the history he is dramatizing and Austen's apparently comfortable acceptance of the world of late Georgian England and her place in it. But this calls to mind something Sri Lankan literary scholar Yasmine Gooneratne observed in her 1970 book about Austen: 'Despite the outward poise of her manner, the reader feels sometimes that

⁵ All references to Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* are to the Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen, 3rd edition, 1933, prefixed 'NA'.

⁶ All references to J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* are to the Penguin edition, 1982, prefixed 'DL'.

⁷ Dovey, p. 43

⁸ Kim Wheatley, 'Jane Austen: Gothic Novelist?' *Persuasions* (41) 2019, p. 71.

⁹ David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2014) p. 56.



Jane Austen is clinging to her ideals rather than calmly stating them, and that the final triumphs of her heroines are so many challenges to a hostile society.’¹⁰ Several critics have drawn attention to the real danger that the inexperienced Catherine Morland is subject to, at the age of seventeen, sent by the imperious General Tilney from Northanger Abbey to her home in Fullerton, more than 100 kilometres away, with no one to accompany her, facing a miserable future.

Some might say that these two books are incommensurable because their tone is so different. *Dusklands* is fiercely, explicitly violent. *Northanger Abbey* might seem, on the contrary, to be mere comedy. Mere comedy? Think of Henry Tilney’s words to Catherine about how in contemporary England ‘every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies’ (NA 198) – a vision of hell if ever there was one.

Perhaps it is the ambitions of the two books that are so disparate. David Attwell writes that, in Coetzee’s first novel, ‘what he sought had huge conceptual reach, a linking of self and history on a grand, world-historical scale’, and that ‘his note-taking’, now available to study in the archives, ‘includes a chronology of all of colonial history.’¹¹ How can we think of placing Austen’s work alongside this huge ambition? As she herself wrote to her teenage nephew, defending herself (playfully) against an imagined accusation of stealing some chapters from his novel in progress: ‘What should I do with your strong, manly, spirited Sketches, full of variety and Glow? – How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much Labour?’¹² Written at a time when women were routinely disempowered, impoverished, and forced into loveless marriages, Austen’s novels all have these uncomfortable facts lurking in the background. Ian Watt writes, ‘nearly all the great issues of human life make their appearance on Jane Austen’s narrow stage. True, it is only the stage of petty domestic circumstance; but that, after all, is the only stage where most of us are likely to meet them.’¹³ Other writers would make the most of the melodramatic possibilities of the Georgian novel, but Austen chose to keep them, for the most part, in the background, noticing them only to mock them. Her novels were, formally, comedies – and like Shakespeare’s comedies, encompass a wide emotional and affective range – and the default tone of the narrative voice is ironic. On the other hand, Coetzee’s novels, as James Wood writes, tend to ‘avoid the warm flavours of the comic-ironic for the bitter concentrates of the allegorical-ironic.’¹⁴

Coetzee on Austen

In Ceridwen Dovey’s book on Coetzee in Black Inc.’s ‘Writers on Writers’ series, she quotes the correspondence between her mother, Teresa Dovey, and Coetzee in 1984. Teresa was asking him about postmodernism and postcolonialism in his work: in his response, he wrote from Buffalo,

that high English realism (Austen, G. Eliot, James) is associated, here and elsewhere, not unnaturally, with the social intricacies of middle-class English society (which formed its main subject matter), and that if you are trying to get away from the one, you may want to try to get away from the other.¹⁵

¹⁰ Yasmine Gooneratne, *Jane Austen* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 43.

¹¹ Attwell, p. 52.

¹² Jane Austen, Letter to James Edward Austen, 16-17 December 1816, *Letters* 3rd edn., ed. Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 323.

¹³ Quoted in Frances White, ‘Response and Responsibility’, p. 58.

¹⁴ James Wood, ‘Coetzee’s *Disgrace*: A Few Skeptical Thoughts’ in *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), p. 246.

¹⁵ Dovey, p. 58.



I think I can fairly confidently assume that Coetzee didn't see Austen as a writer he could 'cannibalise'. Austen does, however, make a surprise appearance in Coetzee's Essay Collection *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* in a discussion of the Marquis de Sade:

There is a deep sense in which Jane Austen finds sex as demonic as Sade does. She finds it demonic and therefore locks it out. What she emphatically does not share with Sade is any faith in the capacity of the rituals of writing, in acting out the emotions of demonic desire, to break down the bounds of the self.¹⁶

This is the only time Austen is mentioned in *Giving Offense* and it appears in the course of an argument about that nature of pornography and the varieties of feminist responses to it. Why Austen? The immediate context of this passage is a discussion of Susan Sontag's work. Coetzee writes that 'Sontag is right to point to the importance of the pornographer-writers Sade, Lautréamont, and Bataille, and the hostility or derision with which they confront the rational ideal of integrating sex into a pleasant, happy, ordered, and productive life – of taming sex and setting it to work for personal enjoyment'¹⁷ – an ideal that he implies Austen is opposed to.

When preparing my essay on Coetzee and the women of the canon for a 2016 conference on Coetzee's women, I looked for further discussion of Austen. She is mentioned, very briefly, in the discussion of mid-20th century South African novelist Sarah Gertrude Millin in *White Writing*:

Among Millin's problems as a novelist were two faced by every colonial novelist of her generation: the problem of deciding which elements of the European novel were relevant to the colonial situation; and the problem of locating in the colony a social field rich enough to support the transplanted European novel. ... The Romantic novel, with its emphasis on solitary destinies, provides an attractive model: Emily Brontë rather than Jane Austen.¹⁸

In contrast to the former discussion of Austen, this is little more than a standard recourse to fictional stereotypes, Austen representing the social, domesticated novel and Brontë the wild and untamed romantic spirit. Austen is once again put in her place, faithfully documenting the lives of people who, it is implied, are uninteresting to the core, for the very reason of their residence within that 'neighbourhood of voluntary spies.'

Austen and sex

But I wonder if the Sade reference is not after all in much the same vein. Despite the implied profundity of the 'deep sense' in which she finds sex 'demonic', Jane Austen is brought into the discussion only to exemplify a particular repressive attitude to sex, a stereotype that she has been endowed with by generations of critics and readers. Where in this picture can we locate the woman who took her young nieces – aged 12 and 13 – to the theatre and wrote approvingly that they 'revelled in' Don Juan – and, for herself, she wrote 'I must say that I have seen nobody on the stage who has been a more interesting character than that compound of Cruelty and Lust?'¹⁹ She cared more about the standard of the acting and the quality of the entertainment than the morality of the play.

When writing her own work, she left the sexuality implicit but that does not mean it is absent. Catherine Morland and Henry Tilney are sexual beings, clearly. Taste, context, publishability, and the standards of her time were all against her being any more explicit, but she takes a swipe at

¹⁶ J.M. Coetzee, *Giving Offense* (University of Chicago Press, 1996) p. 31.

¹⁷ Coetzee, *Giving Offense*, p. 30.

¹⁸ J.M. Coetzee, *White Writing* (Sandton, South Africa: Radix, 1988), p. 161.

¹⁹ Jane Austen, Letter to Cassandra Austen, *Letters*, p. 219, 221.



Samuel Richardson for his daft rules about female emotional states: when Catherine meets Henry Tilney and dances with him for the first time, we are warned that
whether she thought of him so much, while she drank her warm wine and water, and prepared herself for bed, as to dream of him when there, cannot be ascertained; but I hope it was no more than in a slight slumber, or a morning doze at most; for if it be true, as a celebrated writer has maintained, that no young lady can be justified in falling in love before the gentleman's love is declared, it must be very improper that a young lady should dream of a gentleman before the gentleman is first known to have dreamed of her. (NA 51).

Austen makes it quite clear, by many small signs, that this young couple are strongly sexually attracted to each other and that they both know it. I would, in fact, locate her attitude to sex among those to whom Sade and his colleagues are said to be derisive: those who aspire to '[tame] sex and [set] it to work for personal enjoyment.'²⁰

Point of view

As the passage I just quoted shows, Austen's narrative voice retains its ironic distance from her protagonist, although she was already experimenting with degrees of distance, as we can see at the beginning of Volume II Chapter 10 when Catherine is 'completely awakened', and 'grievously humbled' at her 'criminal folly' in her fanciful speculations about the gothic past of the Tilney family. Austen only allowed herself to use the first person in her fiction when including letters – and these almost always reveal the writer's duplicity or folly as surely as their actions and their words. Coetzee used first-person narrative voices in his earlier fiction, while moving to third person in later novels, and using it, like Austen, only in explicit rhetorical situations, such as JC's 'feste Anschriften' in *Diary of a Bad Year*.

Mrs Curran in *Age of Iron* writes a letter to her daughter which becomes the novel – a scenario which is clearly a fiction within the fiction, as the ending proves. *Age of Iron*, in a way, exemplifies the very difficulty I am grappling with in this paper: how to justify the study of cultures of the past when faced with a barbaric present – the same kind of problem Theodor Adorno expressed when he writes, 'cultural criticism finds itself today faced with the final state of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.' ['Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch.'²¹] While many of Coetzee's works often face this problem head on, Austen's works focus on everyday barbarity – in families and unequal societies – and the compensations of friendship and loving relationships.

No conclusion

I do not believe that I have really solved anything or even argued anything in this paper. I seem to have ended up talking about content as much as form, perhaps dodging around the elephant in the room – that Austen is still seen principally, as V.S. Naipaul, who had no qualms about speaking his mind, wrote to his sister, 'essentially a writer for women'.²² Marilyn Butler, in her introduction to the second edition of *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, turns this into a virtue: she claims that Austen would have been understood by her contemporaries to be a 'woman's writer' as well as a 'woman writer', of interest mainly to her own sex, despite the express admiration of many of her

²⁰ Coetzee, *Giving Offense*, p. 30.

²¹ Adorno, 'Culture, Critique and Society' in *Prisms* (1955). Quoted in James Schmidt, 'Poetry After Auschwitz – What Adorno Didn't Say', *Perisistent Enlightenment* [blog], accessed 11 December 2023.

²² V.S. Naipaul, To Kamla Naipaul, 21 September 1949, *Letters Between a Father and Son* with introduction and notes by Gillon Aitken (London: Little, Brown, 1999), 4.

contemporaries of both sexes, and despite her longstanding status as a member of The Canon.²³ For many Austen scholars, this remains an unsettling proposition. Austen's exceptional visibility in popular culture—through adaptations, fan fiction, costume culture, and an often fetishistic attention to Regency detail—has paradoxically diminished her authority among younger readers, for whom such associations frequently function as obstacles rather than invitations. It is not uncommon to encounter intellectually serious young men who resist engaging with her novels at all.

A comparable reductiveness possibly shapes the reception of J. M. Coetzee. His reputation for austerity and humourlessness might discourage readers who might otherwise recognise, in works such as *Slow Man* or *Youth*, a writer of irony, ethical subtlety, and formal precision. In both cases, reputation operates less as a guide than as a filter, constraining readerships in ways that obscure rather than reflect the complexity of the work.

Naipaul also said that Austen's fiction 'is for those people who wish to be educated in English manners. If that isn't part of your mission, you don't know what to do with this material.'²⁴ While such a formulation is clearly inadequate, simply rejecting it does little to address the persistence of such views.

Coetzee's own response is revealing in this regard. When declining an invitation to speak at the Austen bicentenary conference at Flinders University in 2017, he remarked that he would have nothing interesting to say about her. This cannot be attributed to indifference toward women's lives—his fiction repeatedly centres intellectually formidable female characters—but instead points to a critical hesitation. The few, suggestive references to Austen in his essays imply a latent engagement that, if pursued, might illuminate both Austen's reputation and her uneasy position within modern and postmodern literary valuation.

Teresa Dovey managed to find a copy of Coetzee's inaugural lecture at the University of Cape Town, titled 'Truth in Autobiography'. Ceridwen Dovey quotes the final line: 'If the desire of literary criticism is to tell every truth, to unveil whatever is veiled, to expose every secret to sight, why does it not tell its own secrets? Or does it claim to have none?'²⁵ I have no covert explanation to offer. Only an enduring perplexity, and an acknowledgement of the limits of critical redescription.

²³ Marilyn Butler, Introduction, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, 2nd ed., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987)

²⁴ Farrukh Dhondy, 'Farrukh Dhondy talks to V.S. Naipaul,' *Literary Review* April 2006, p. 21.

²⁵ Dovey, p. 61.

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