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## ***Chapter 10***

# **AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANA SHEETS: J. M. COETZEE AND WILL SELF— 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY FICTION AND INTO THE NEW MILLENNIUM, ITS APEX AND ITS DESCENT**

**Keywords:** Coetzee, *Disgrace*, doubling, *Life & Times of Michael K*, *Liver: A Fictional Organ with a Surface Anatomy of Four Lobes*, Self, *The Book of Dave*, *Umbrella*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*

**MFS:** First of all, J. M. Coetzee seems to have one of the most peripatetic lives I have ever encountered—born in South Africa, worked in computers in England, got his Ph.D. at the University of Texas before heading back to South Africa. Now he's living in Adelaide, Australia. Does this say anything to you about him as a writer?

**DS:** Peripatetic is apt. J. M. Coetzee (1940-) was born in Cape Town, South Africa. His parents were Afrikaners, that is, South Africans who were principally of Dutch descent. Nevertheless, Coetzee grew up speaking English at home and in school. However, he spoke Afrikaans to relatives and later studied the language in high school, which facilitated his understanding of Dutch and, to a lesser degree, German. For those of our readers who have no knowledge of apartheid in South Africa, it's important to understand the historical context that framed much of Coetzee's fiction. Racial segregation in South Africa extended back to Dutch colonial rule and continued after the British took control of the Cape of Good Hope in 1795. Apartheid—the separation between the races—became formally and legally sanctioned from 1948 to 1994 when the National Party, dominated by Afrikaners, set up institutional and legal statutes that ensured the domination of white minority rule and, conversely, severely limited the economic, social, cultural, and educational opportunities of black Africans and other minorities. The practice of apartheid resulted in protests, popular unrest, and uprisings beginning in the 1950s. Approximately 3.5 million non-white South Africans lost their homes and were relocated into segregated and impoverished neighborhoods. While apartheid

officially ended in 1991, only in 1994 were democratic (multiracial) elections held. The result was the victory of the African National Congress led by Nelson Mandela.

Some South African writers opposed apartheid throughout much of their literary careers including, among others, Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014), who received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1991, André Bink (1935-2015), and J. M. Coetzee (1940-). Apartheid and its aftereffects served as a catalyst for Coetzee to write some of the most memorable fiction in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the oppressive policies pursued in South Africa also help to explain the social context prompting his peripatetic life. With degrees in both English and mathematics, Coetzee moved to Britain in 1962 where he worked for four years as a computer programmer. He then traveled to America where he completed his Ph.D. at the University of Texas. His thesis examined the stylistic features of Samuel Beckett's fiction by means of computerized analysis. He probably would have remained in the United States; however, his first academic appointment was at the State University of New York at Buffalo where he joined fellow faculty members and students in protesting the Vietnam War. In the course of occupying a building, he and others were arrested. Although the charges were later dropped, the notoriety appeared to have prevented him from obtaining permanent residency.

As a result Coetzee returned to South Africa. The repressive measures stemming from apartheid, as well as the violence and upheaval in the years immediately after its dismantling and the establishment of majority rule shaped his most important fiction. Coetzee received the Booker Prize—Britain's most prestigious literary award—for the *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) and *Disgrace* (1999). Thus, he became the first writer to receive a “double Booker”, and many critics regard him as the best living English-language writer living today.

Life in post-apartheid South Africa has its economic and social challenges with “deepening inequality, rising unemployment, the HIV pandemic and burgeoning violent crime” (Padayachee & Desai, circa 2008). Indeed, the violence has been so pervasive it prompted at one least one writer to conclude that South Africa is “a country at war with itself” (cited by Padayachee & Desai, circa 2008). Consequently, when Coetzee published *Disgrace* in 1999, which featured a gang-rape of a white woman by black Africans, the book was criticized vigorously by the African National Congress as exploiting “white people’s perception of the post-apartheid black man” and the racist fears by whites toward majority rule, which heightened their fears that they would “lose their cards, their weapons, their property, their rights, their dignity” and fueled possibly the greatest fear of all, namely, that “the white women will have to sleep with the barbaric black men” (Donadio, 2007). Not surprisingly, Coetzee left South Africa for Australia in 2002, becoming a citizen in 2006. In 2003, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

I discovered Coetzee when I first began to read literary fiction seriously. It was after he won the Booker for *The Life and Times of Michael K*. I was living in England where I was completing archival research for my Ph.D. thesis on the Primrose League in which I analyzed the reasons underlying the appeal of the greatest mass conservative political movement in Britain in modern times (Sheets, 1986).

I was immediately drawn to Coetzee’s fiction after reading his third novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*. At the time, my perception was that he was the finest contemporary literary stylist I’d ever read. His fiction is beautifully minimalist. I marvel at the vile and unforgiving social landscape conveyed in his novels. Imagine the worst that the 20<sup>th</sup> century has to offer. This becomes the reader’s immersive experience, evoking an apocalyptic consciousness that negates all humanity. Given my cultural pessimism, naturally I was smitten before I had

completed the first page. While Coetzee continues to write and publish important fiction, as well as literary criticism, I regard his most important fictional offerings as those novels he published between the years 1980-1999.

**MFS:** His books—and here are a few: *Dusklands* (1974), *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), *Foe* (1986), *Age of Iron* (1990), *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), *Disgrace* (1999), *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), *Slow Man* (2005), *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013). What do they say to you in toto as a reviewer? Are there any overriding themes?

**DS:** Given the variety of fiction represented here, I'm reluctant to reduce his varied offerings to common themes. Far better, I think, to focus on what I believe to be Coetzee's most compelling fiction set against the backdrop of apartheid and South Africa's transition to majority rule.

So, let's consider Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), winner of both the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and, more recently, the inspiration for an opera composed by Philip Glass, which premiered in Germany in 2005. We'll also look at *Disgrace*. Robert McCrum has astutely praised Coetzee for taking "the novel in English into new imaginative and moral territory". While acknowledging Coetzee's "many outstanding works of fiction", McCrum reflects a common critical assessment that "*Disgrace* is unquestionably his masterpiece" (McCrum, 2015b).

*Waiting for the Barbarians* takes as inspiration for its story the poem by the same title published by Constantine Cavafy in 1904. Let me cite just a few lines beautifully translated by Richmond Lattimore.

Why are we all assembled and waiting in the market place?  
 It is the barbarians; they will be here today.  
 Why is there nothing being done in the senate house?  
 Why are the senators in session but are not passing laws?  
 Because the barbarians are coming today.  
 Why should the senators make laws any more?  
 The barbarians will make the laws when they get here.  
 (Cavafy, 1904)

The barbarians in the poem never arrive and, in all probability, they do not exist. Thus, the poem anticipates Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* in which Vladimir and Estragon wait vainly for the arrival of Godot—god or idiot or just a figment of their imagination—who never appears. The final two lines of Cavafy's poem, as Robert Pinsky suggests, delivers a "punch line that never wears out": "What are we going to do now without the barbarians? In a way, these people were a solution" (Cavafy, 1904). Cavafy's poem hints at how regimes invoke the terror of invasion by barbarians in order to justify the brutal use of force. Indeed, in the absence of an enemy, the actions of authorities are subject to greater scrutiny. Coetzee extends this paradigm to present an allegorical story that is implicitly condemnatory of South Africa's intent to subjugate black Africans and treat them as barbarians in order to justify the state's sanction of atrocities.

Coetzee's Ph.D. thesis was on Beckett. As Brian W. Shaffer has acknowledged, Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* and Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* are similar in that "the subject of the title never arrives and may not even exist". However, in terms of the story and the style, he suggests that while there are clear parallels to Beckett's play in Coetzee's story, the greatest literary influence is Kafka's fiction: "Not only do Coetzee's abstract and austere landscapes and his parable-like prose passages at many points resemble Kafka's", suggests Shaffer, "but the Empire's torture techniques—particularly its disfigurement of barbarian 'criminals'—are reminiscent of events in Kafka's 'In the penal colony'" (Shaffer, 2006, p. 128).

But what of the novel's plot? Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* is narrated by the Magistrate, who lives in a colonial town on the perimeter of "the Empire". A state of emergency is declared. The special forces of the Third Bureau are summoned in preparation to combat the "barbarians" who are rumored to be planning an assault upon the town. Barbarians are captured, tortured, and, in some cases, killed. The forces retreat in preparation for a more extensive campaign. In their absence, the Magistrate begins to doubt the brutal actions and policies of the Empire. He cares for a barbarian girl blinded and tortured by members of the Third Bureau. The Magistrate decides to take her back to her community, which is in the hinterlands. Along the way they become sexually intimate. When they reach the destination, she resists his entreaties to remain with him. The Magistrate is subsequently arrested for deserted his post and fraternizing with "the enemy". He's imprisoned in a make-shift cell and manages to free himself. More barbarians are caught, more beatings, more torture. The Magistrate tries to intervene. The result is that he too is tortured by soldiers who hang him by his arms from a tree dressed in women's undergarments. He lives. Soldiers leave the frontier outpost as do many civilians. The Magistrate and some townspeople wait, winter setting in, for the rumored onslaught by the barbarians.

That's the plot, but the ominous sense of catastrophe that pervades the narrative, the relentless pursuit of an enemy who lurks in the shadows, never seen or even really identified, the endless campaigns by the Empire against the barbarians who may or may not exist conjure up a Kafkaesque landscape that immerses the reader in an unremitting nightmare. Toward the end of the novel, after a failed expedition intended to destroy the barbarians, one soldier comes as close as any to acknowledging defeat.

We froze in the mountains! We starved in the desert! Why did no one tell us it would be like that? We were not beaten—they led us out into the desert and then they vanished! . . . They lured us on and on, we could never catch them. They picked off the stragglers, they cut our horses loose in the night, they would not stand up to us! (Coetzee, 1999, p. 144)

All assertions by the authorities to the contrary, nonetheless, there's no hard evidence of marauding barbarians. Perhaps they're "destitute tribespeople" or "river people" or "pastoralists". Maybe they're hungry or scrounging to survive. Whoever they may be, if they exist at all, gradually the reader begins to wonder if the actual "barbarians" might, in fact, be the "civilized" inhabitants of the Empire (Shaffer, 2006, pp. 130-131). Indeed, when the Magistrate opposes the brutality Colonel Joll and his soldiers are inflicting upon the barbarians—just before he's bound and hoisted to hang from a tree—he says as much: "You

are the enemy, *you* have made the war, and *you* have given them all the martyrs they need. . . . History will bear me out!" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 112).

The novel is presented in first person, present tense. Here's a passage toward the conclusion of the novel that gives the reader a sense of Coetzee's compelling style.

I stand out in the open watching the coming of the storm. The sky has been fading till now it is bone-white with tones of pink rippling in the north. The ochre rooftiles glisten, the air grows luminous, the town shines out shadowless, mysteriously beautiful in these last moments.... I think: "I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of the Empire laid upon them. How can I believe that this is cause for shame? (Coetzee, 1999, pp. 150-151)

While the *Life & Times of Michael K* received the Booker Prize, an acknowledgment of Coetzee's immense literary talent, these days I'm inclined to agree with Christopher Lehmann-Haupt's assessment rendered in 1983 that "for all its effectiveness, *Michael K* does not generate the force that *Waiting for the Barbarians* does". In large measure this is, as Lehmann-Haupt suggests, due to the author's "heavy debt to Franz Kafka" clearly evident in the text: those referrals to "K", one call in the novel to "the Castle", K's likeness to insects, even his eventual assumption "of the role of hunger artist" (Lehmann-Haupt, 1983).

Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*, winner of the author's second Booker Prize in 1999, is in many respects a successful post-apartheid re-imagining of his flawed second novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), so let's begin there. *In the Heart of the Country* presents the story of Magda, a white woman living with her widowed father in the remote Western Cape. The daughter imagines her father remarrying and her vengeful desire to murder her father and his new bride. Life mirrors fantasy in distorted ways. Hendrik, a black laborer on the farm, brings home a bride, Anna. She is seduced by Magda's father, and the daughter, hearing their sexual congress, kills him. She struggles to maintain the farm, unable to compensate Hendrik with wages. The black couple begins living in the house and racial power shifts from white to black. Hendrik rapes Magda, and his nightly conquests of her begin. White men come to the farm looking for Magda's father. Hendrik and Anna take flight. The story concludes with Magda alone, slowly starving to death on the farm as madness takes hold. It's an odd sort of story, a manifestation of Afrikaner fears, as well as a vehicle for Coetzee's examination of the taboo subject of race relations in South Africa. As Irving Howe noted, the novel "showed patches of high talent but finally broke down under the weight of emotionally overwrought Faulknerian prose" (Howe, 1982).

Which brings us to *Disgrace*. It's a story about modern South Africa, about a father and a daughter, about the sins of the father visited upon his daughter while symbolically a modern dystopia of South Africa's post-apartheid society. The plot is bifurcated. In the first portion of the novel, we are presented with David Lurie's story. He's an academic who teaches communications at Cape Technical University, although he is no communicator. He has an arrangement with a dark, exotically featured, prostitute, who initially meets his sexual and personal desire to avoid a committed relationship with a woman. Later, however, he seeks an emotionally sustaining relationship with her that she rejects. David Lurie's moral decay continues. He seduces a secretary, abandons her after his conquest, and plies a fragile student, Melanie Isaacs—who is dark complexioned—with alcohol to have her submit to his desire. He longs to continue his domination over her even after having been confronted by her

boyfriend and approached by her father. An academic hearing is convened at which Lurie is silent, providing no defense and evincing no remorse.

Following his dismissal, he retreats to the Eastern Cape to live on a farm with his daughter, Lucy. Initially, perhaps, it offers a kind of solace that obviates the need to assess too closely his ruined life. Until, that is, his daughter is gang raped by three intruding blacks and David is nearly burned alive by them. Lucy becomes pregnant by one of her attackers. David eventually deduces that they were aided and abetted by Petrus, a black landowner who lives nearby and helps Lucy on the farm. He dismally concludes that Lucy will end up marrying Petrus, thereby effectively giving him title to her land.

*Disgrace*, as Elizabeth Lowry noted, "is the best novel Coetzee has written". It is, as she has observed, "a chilling, spare book, the work of a mature writer who has refined his textual obsessions to produce an exact, effective prose and condensed his thematic concern with authority into a deceptively simple story of family life" (Lowry, 1999). Indeed, what makes this depressing story so compellingly readable is Coetzee's exquisite prose. No one today writes fiction with his lean clarity. He remains one of only a meager few authors whose fiction I have passionately embraced because of his sinister narratives and his minimalist style that permeates our moral consciousness.

What makes *Disgrace* far more compelling than *In the Heart of the Country* is not only the crystalline narrative, but the reversal of fortune for David Lurie and what this signifies. In the first section of the novel he devolves into a remorseless predator with a predilection for dark-skinned women while in the second half of the story he himself is victimized, unable to exert his fatherly desires to protect his daughter from harm when she is attacked by black Africans. As Lowry emphasizes it's no mere coincidence that "both the prostitute Soraya and Melanie-Meláni are 'used' women and, significantly, they are both dark". This is important since, as she points out, "the analogy with a certain kind of exploitative colonial paternalism is so lightly and deftly set up that it is barely noticeable" (Lowry, 1999).

As readers we are witness to Lurie's slow, painful unraveling as he witnesses his daughter's trauma, helpless to reverse the course of events or ameliorate the outcome. Certainly, his daughter's anguish is greater than his, and she meets her punishing fate with stoic resignation. But it's David Lurie's descent into a metaphorical purgatory in the second narrative that captures our imagination. For he now inhabits a half-life where he's condemned to live and relive his daughter's pain, a process likened biblically to a punitive sentencing by which he must expiate his sins. Thus, over the course of the novel, power and abuse shift from a predatory white man's disregard for young, dark-skinned women to black men's abuse of a white woman with David Lurie's physical and psychic wounds as collateral damage. While readers may deem David Lurie's suffering as a kind of retributive justice, the reader's perception of Lucy is that she is innocent. Nevertheless, the racial history and tensions of apartheid and its post-apartheid circumstances have tentacles that extend seemingly everywhere to encompass racial and class-based crimes and repercussions reaching backward and forward through the corridors of time. Nothing in the first half of the novel prepares the reader for Lurie's reversal of fortune and its moral significance. It's a story woven together by what appears to be almost two almost separate narratives, and it is that tenuous link that binds them that makes for a psychologically riveting story.

Jane Poyner has argued that Lurie's academic trial for his sexual abuse of a student represents an allegory of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a court-like judicial process that sought social justice for crimes of inhumanity manifested through the

years by the state's institutional support for racial discrimination and its embrace of apartheid. Hearings were held beginning in 1996. Crimes were publically aired; symbolic legal justice was metered out with reparations, rehabilitations, and, in some cases, grants of amnesty (Poyner, 2000, pp. 67-77). While this public airing undoubtedly was cleansing and essential for moving forward, it is doubtful that it could or would bring comprehensive restorative social justice.

**MFS: What about Coetzee's fictive memoirs. Is this fiction or representative memoir?**

**DS:** Coetzee has published three fictive autobiographical narratives thus far: *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002), and *Summertime* (2009). As with all his novels, these are beautifully but sparsely written. Each book in this autobiographical series representing a distinctive phase in the life of J. M. Coetzee. The first two autobiographical stories are presented in the third person, present tense to suggest the fictive nature of his story, each representing a distinct stage in Coetzee's development. The third volume, *Summertime*, shortlisted for the Booker Award, is a departure. It imagines the author dead and Vincent, his biographer, fashioning an initial draft of Coetzee's story based on the author's formative years (1971-1977) derived from the author's notebooks—rendered in third person—as well as interviews with former lovers, acquaintances, and relatives. It would be reasonable to conclude, as does Jonathan Dee in reviewing *Summertime*, that “much of Coetzee’s self-portrait in *Summertime* is substantially falsified” (Dee, 2009). Thus, in this third installment of his fictive autobiographical narrative, Coetzee is depicted as a young author who has published his first book, *Dusklands*. He appears inconsequential, seemingly wasting away, living with his ailing father and reflecting about the loss of his mother. However, during this period, Coetzee actually had a wife and two young children with whom he lived, and his mother was still alive.

For Coetzee, the entire “autobiographical enterprise” by which the author attempts to convey his life is suspect, as I noted in my essay “Memoir as Lie” posted on Literary Gulag. Indeed, the very act of creating a “truthful autobiography” for him is fraught with difficulties, as Coetzee emphasizes to David Attwell.

[But] what is truth to fact? You tell the story of your life by reselecting from a reservoir of memories, and in the process of selecting you leave things out. . . . So to call autobiography—or indeed history—true as long as it does not lie invokes a fairly vacuous idea of truth. (citing Coetzee in Sheets, 2007c)

Why is it so hard for Coetzee—and other authors—to render truth to autobiography? Because “the act of composition may be conceived as a mediating term in the autobiographical enterprise, reaching back into the past not merely to recapture but to repeat the psychological rhythms of identity formation”, suggests scholar Paul John Eakin, “and reaching forward into the future to fix the structure of this identity in a permanent self-made existence as literary text” (citing Eakin in Sheets, 2007c). The result is that autobiography is not truth per se, but a fictive rendering of the narrative as the author wishes the reader to perceive it.

In Coetzee's case, he wants his narrative to reveal "the gaps and evasions, perhaps even the lies . . . [that are] elements of the life story" (citing Coetzee in Sheets, 2007c).

There are enormous challenges, therefore, in writing a "truthful" autobiography given that we reinterpret our life story in light of our current perception of events and in keeping with how we want our story perceived by our audience. In creating a series of autobiographical novels to represent the stages of the author's life, Coetzee is self-consciously attempting to overcome the difficulty Marcel Proust encountered when he represented "I" throughout his novel/memoir *In Search of Lost Time* to reflect the different "selves" he had become over the course of a lifetime (Sheets, 2007c). Coetzee is also responding to the French writer and critic Alain Robbe-Grillet who called for the creation of a "new autobiography" crafted in the present tense to reflect how we reorder the events in our lives to reflect our "presentist" perception at the moment when we craft the narrative (Eakin citing Robbe-Grillet in Sheets, 2007c).

It's an interesting effort on Coetzee's part and clearly *Summertime* is the most inventive of the three narratives under consideration. Nevertheless, I find the process of reading a series of unsympathetic portraits by Coetzee of his autobiographical story not only tedious, but repugnantly narcissistic. Who wants to inhabit the seemingly endless fictive narratives of a contemporary writer whose life is lived in a fictive consciousness, rather than actively engaged in the real world? Not only does the series become boring, this reader, anyway, begins to suspect that the author has exhausted his literary material.

Best then, in examining Coetzee's work, to begin with *Waiting for the Barbarians* and end with *Disgrace* in the anticipation of at least one more breathtaking novel.

**MFS: Will Self was born in England, educated in England, published in England and worked in England. Juxtaposing these two writers, how would you contrast these writers, and what can you tell us about Self?**

**DS:** Well, I wouldn't say these geographic distinctions between Coetzee and Self are that significant. Coetzee grew up in South Africa, a former British colony, and all the other countries he's lived in for any extended time—England, the United States, and, of course, Australia—are part of Britain's colonial heritage. Will Self (1961), along with another contemporaneous English writer we're considering in this Q&A collection, Edward St. Aubyn (1960), both had American mothers. Will Self's mother was Jewish-American and domineering. St. Aubyn's mother came from a wealthy midwestern family, but was submissive and cruelly treated by her husband. Both Self and St. Aubyn were deeply damaged by the family circumstances in which they were raised. Both had parents in terrible marriages who caused great harm to their children; both were classmates at Oxford University; both took heroin together while at Oxford, and both have had a history of serious substance abuse, an outcome, I would argue, directly associated with their dysfunctional childhoods.

What does distinguish Coetzee and Self more than their geographical differences are their generational circumstances that have framed their perceptions of the literary landscape. Coetzee was born during the waning years of the British Empire and that colonial perspective influenced his worldview and shaped his global perspective. Self—and by extension St. Aubyn since they're contemporaries—is a generation younger, the empire receding in the

rear-view mirror, Britain diminished, and literature by the 1980s increasingly marginalized and, after the widespread use of the Internet in our new millennium, almost irrelevant. While Coetzee matured during the high noon of 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, Self and St. Aubyn struggle today to attract literary readers in a society deluged by vacuous Internet content. Not surprisingly, they're forced to exert increasingly greater efforts to attract an audience in the post-twilight of literary fiction when dedicated and serious readers are becoming scarce.

Thus in 2014, Self noted that "the literary novel as an art work and a narrative art form central to our culture is indeed dying before our eyes" (Self, 2014). He subsequently noted, by way of emphasis, "my own royalty income has fallen dramatically over the last decade" (Flood, 2014).

Nor was Self a solitary example since a comprehensive analysis of some 2,500 "working writers" in the United Kingdom for 2013—the first such study since 2005—suggested a 29% decline in earnings for professional writers over the past eight years to a meager \$15,616.31 measured by the current (2014) exchange rate, well below the estimated minimum necessary for living. Indeed, the earnings have declined so substantially in this period that only 11.5% of authors who spent most of their time writing were able to live solely on their professional earnings as compared with nearly 40% in 2005 (Flood, 2014).

But the decline of readership and earnings represents much more than the loss in the writers' livelihoods. It reflects the diminished state of the marketplace that increasingly limits the range and vitality of narratives, which in turn reduces the reader's palate for variety and especially demanding fiction that defies the dismal mean. The result is fewer and fewer authors competing year after year for the same literary prizes—generally all writing the same kind of stories, all fashioned for that feminized, politically correct audience whose literary palate increasingly only tolerates easily digestible stories drenched with empathy, rather than narratives that place intellectual demands upon the audience (Sheets, 2007a; Sheets 2007b; Sheets, 2007d; Sheets, 2008a).

Indeed, that's what makes Will Self all the more remarkable. He has defied the market trend to produce fiction that refuses to confirm to the "dumbing down" metrics driving literary fiction today.

Let's acknowledge, however, the patent absurdity—*chutzpah*—denoted by the author's name—WILL SELF. In our narcissistic age, what literary author has, let alone uses, the surname SELF? Initially when I read reviews of his fiction I was convinced that his name, if not the man himself, was a hoax, a deliberately conceived pseudonym selected to satirize the self-driven myopia of our age. Alternatively, I speculated that the author was an imaginative reinvention of Martin Amis's fictive character John Self, the crass consumer capitalist in the novel *Money: A Suicide Note* (1984) who imbibes "pornography, drugs and fast food" as if they're oxygen (McCrum, 2015a).

Will Self, it should be emphasized, places demands on his audiences, which makes him the most interesting literary writer in Britain—and, arguably, the most fascinating English-language fiction writer today. His fiction has been likened to William S. Burroughs, Anthony Burgess, Martin Amis, and J. G. Ballard for its demanding literary content and its embrace of science fiction's dystopias and meta-realities. As Self has suggested, "I don't write fiction for people to identify with and I don't write a picture of the world they can recognize. I write to astonish people" (Self cited in Hayes, 2007, p. 1). His objective, he has suggested, "is to disturb the reader's fundamental assumptions. I want to make them feel that certain categories within which they are used to perceiving the world are unstable" (Self cited in Finney, 2001).

Not only are his narratives unrestrained and transgressive with elements of satire embedded with the fantastic, Self's stories impose literary rigor that necessitates effort on the part of readers. One reviewer in *The Guardian* noted "he writes like [Martin] Amis going cold turkey with a thesaurus". Julian Evans emphasized, "Self leaves no adjective unsaid, no metaphor unturned, . . . no synonym unexplored, no tiring digression unpursued" (*The Guardian* & Evans citations in Finney, 2005). English literary reviewer and editor John Walsh has complained that "not since the heyday of Anthony Burgess has there appeared an author so belligerently keen on strange words" adding that the outcome "is often to obscure rather than to illuminate" (Walsh cited in Hayes, 2007, p. 3). Nevertheless, Self has defended his wordiness and his reliance on a thesaurus: "To me, a writer saying he doesn't use one is like a mechanic saying he doesn't use a socket set" (Self cited in Hayes, 2007, p. 3).

**MFS: Will Self's novels and short stories appear below: The Quantity Theory of Insanity (1991), Cock and Bull (1992), My Idea of Fun (1993), Grey Area (1994), The Sweet Smell of Psychosis (1996), Great Apes (1997), Design Faults in the Volvo 760 Turbo (1998), Tough, Tough Toys for Tough, Tough Boys (1998), How the Dead Live (2000), Dorian, an Imitation (2002), Dr. Mukti and Other Tales of Woe (2004), The Book of Dave (2006), The Butt (2008), Liver: A Fictional Organ with a Surface Anatomy of Four Lobes (2008), Walking to Hollywood (2010), The Undivided Self (2010), Umbrella (2012), Shark (2014). Can you give us an overall feel for his themes, concerns and politics?**

**DS:** Again, let's focus on specific stories, rather than overarching themes since these ultimately give us a better grasp of Self's talent and approach to writing.

With the publication of his initial collection of stories, *The Quantity Theory of Insanity* in 1991, Will Self's fiction has been praised by many of Britain's most esteemed writers. Martin Amis, who many regard as his literary predecessor, characterized the author as "a very cruel writer—thrillingly heartless, terrifyingly brainy". Not to be outdone, Salman Rushdie has noted that Self is "someone who stands as a one-off" and Doris Lessing characterized him as "a genuine comic writer" while Beryl Bainbridge noted that his style is "black, macabre and relentless" (Amis, Rushdie, Lessing, & Bainbridge citations in Finney, 2005). For Harold Bloom, Self is one of the few British novelists writing today that "I also now admire" (Bloom, 2002, p. 648). Indeed, the prestigious literary magazine *Granta* named him in 1993 as one of their 20 writers under the age of 40 celebrated as the "Best of Young British Novelists".

The challenge with Self is that he creates books as if seized by an intense, verbose logorrhea. In his case, it's not necessarily a medical condition—although he has been diagnosed as having schizoid and borderline personality disorders—but some writerly variant of logorrhea that necessitates that he constantly write, write, write or seemingly perish. The result is a sustained mania of creation, not all of it interesting or even necessarily good. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of all this effort has been some very interesting fiction, particularly his recent work. So for our purposes, let's briefly examine what I regard as three of his more meaningful stories, *The Book of Dave* (2006), *Liver: A Fictional Organ with a Surface Anatomy of Four Lobes* (2008), and *Umbrella* (2012), the last of which was short listed for the Man Booker Prize.

*The Book of Dave* draws upon two canonical post-apocalyptic science fiction novels: *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1960), written by American Walter M. Miller Jr., and *Riddley Walker*, penned by British author Russell Hoban (1980). The premise for Self's story is patently absurd, and some readers might object to what appears to be a sustained and gratuitous critique of religion. Dave Rudman, a London taxi driver, divorced and fighting for custodial rights of his son, is both filled with rage and psychologically distraught. He writes *The Book of Dave*, a book of rants towards woman and strategies for men to obtain custody of their children, which, of course, closely parallels the personal obsessions in his life. Dave's "manifesto" also contains strategic insight to "The Knowledge", information critical to cabbies navigating London's streets. *The Book of Dave* is composed on metal plates and strategically buried in the back yard where his son lives in Hampstead in hope that the boy will discover it and learn the truth about his father. Dave gets therapy, regains his sanity and even obtains a measure of enlightenment. He also discovers that his son, Carl, is actually the biological son of Cal, his wife's new partner. No matter. Dave writes another book steeped in tolerance and founded upon freedom. He mails it to Carl and is then killed by loan sharks. Carl and Cal bury the second book in a canister, also in the garden, having never discovered edition one, *The Book of Dave*. This narrative is presented in our contemporaneous era.

The second narrative begins on an isolated island Ham that is, naturally, inhabited by human "Hamsters". *The Book of Dave*—edition one—has been discovered and elevated to a sacred text, a revelatory scripture based on violence, tyranny, and misogyny that espouses Dave's canonical rants. The time frame is now 523 AD, which, of course, is "After Dave". The reader time travels back and forth between these two narratives. In 523 AD everyone speaks Arpee, a grossly distorted vulgarian English and much of the conversation is presented in Mokni, a dialect that emulates Dave's street-wise Cockney. Priests are referred to as "Drivers", scripture is comprised of instructions for driving, souls are referred to as "fares", and Dave, naturally, is God. A Hamsterian, Symun Devush, claims to have discovered the second rendition of *The Book of Dave* that repudiates the first. Devush is accused of heresy and taken to New London where he is tortured, rendered speechless, and exiled to a remote island. He too has a son, Carl, who forms an alliance with Antone Böm, appropriately enough, an exiled heretic. Together, Carl and Antone search for version two of *The Book of Dave*. They are captured and sentenced to death, but escape. They arrive on the island outpost where Symun was exiled, although he has died. They discover no revised rendering of *The Book of Dave*, only a metal container comprised of debris. Carl and Antone return to Ham where New Londoners are mistreating the islanders. With the possibility of rebellion brewing, Carl and Antone divulge their heretical beliefs.

This kind of story doesn't readily lend itself to excerpts, so we'll leave it at that.

Self's most intriguing story collection is *Liver: A Fictional Organ with a Surface Anatomy of Four Lobes*. It consists of two novellas, as well as another two longish short stories—all addressing variations of the liver theme with characters all possessing liver maladies. The stories have connective links, whether characters or places, that tie one tale to the other. "Birdy Num Num" presents one day in the basement apartment of a junkie narrated by the hepatitis C virus that gleefully anticipates the disease's infectious transmission from one human to another. We're witness to the anticipatory rush, the sense of desperate urgency. As Justine Jordan notes, "Self may not be particularly interested in building character, but he is fantastic at building worlds" (Jordan, 2008). The most emotionally effective story is "Leberknödel"—translated from the German as "liver dumplings"—which is about an old

English woman with advanced liver cancer who travels to Zurich to end her life by means of doctor-assisted suicide, but briefly forestalls that end for what seems a living afterlife poised in the here and now.

Which brings us to Self's novel *Umbrella*, which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. The title is borrowed from Joyce's memorable line in Ulysses: "A Brother is as easily forgotten as an umbrella". And so it is in Self's novel where characters resembling those inconsequential objects—umbrellas—become, as Judith Shulevitz suggests, "bit players in the vast, indifferent dramas that dominate modern British life". This narrative, she emphasizes, presents "impersonal bureaucracies and brutal industrial processes" as the malevolent focal point helping us to witness events unfolding in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and taking us through time from "the munitions factories and killing fields of World War I" to "a psychiatric hospital" in the 1970s. Then, the narrative takes us into our new millennium where we are witness to a "creepily gentrified modern London" that has rendered people "as disposable as umbrellas", easily acquired and just as easily lost, when they can no longer pay the escalating rents of the metropolis (Shulevitz, 2013).

This is a novel presented in a neo-modernist style reminiscent of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century stream-of-consciousness employed by Joyce and Woolf. The story presents a moral tale, fictively borrowing from the Oliver Sacks book *The Awakening*, which presents the true story of how as a neurologist in the late 1960s he momentarily brought back to life, after decades of catatonia, a hospital ward of post-encephalitic patients by means of the drug L-DOPA. Self's novel *Umbrella* is narrated by psychiatrist Zachary Busner, a recurring character in his stories and, coincidentally, the author's alter-ego. *Umbrella* is a Cinderella story of sorts with the princess of this disturbing fairy tale named Audrey Death. During the First World War I she not only was a socialist and a suffragist but also worked in the munitions factories. In the aftermath of World War I, Audrey became infected with encephalitis lethargica, an infectious brain disease that manifests extreme symptoms of Parkinsonism. Audrey Death, a. k. a. Sleeping Beauty, lay comatose in the hospital for some 49 years. The novel shifts through time—the 1910s when Audrey worked in the munitions factory to 1971 when Busner becomes acquainted with the patient, and finally to 2010 when the asylum is gone. By 2010 the doctor is attempting to come to terms with the medical and emotional experience of working with Audrey Death while making his way through northern London.

I'll quote one passage describing Audrey's repetitive hand movements that are finally understood by Dr. Busner to be the motions she used while running a turret lathe in a munitions factory during World War I.

Busner feels no especial guilt about what is plainly favouritism, for her alternations between the dread entrancement of oculogyric crisis and the busy operation of her invisible lathe are peculiar, even for this most paradoxical of malaises. Seeing her now in the day-room, her tiny frail form enveloped in a chair, he feels she embodies a living past that forever eludes the most penetrating of thinkers—no veil of ignorance, or otherwise theoretically woven partition in the also theoretically woven fabric of the mind, but a real barrier, that *he—I!—will penetrate*, once, that is, *we actually touch*, for still it seems to him that they are forever approaching one another along all 1,884 feet and six inches of the lower corridor—*forever approaching, but yet to touch*. (Self, 2013, p. 189)

**MFS:** We are fortunate enough to now have YouTube which provides us with an actual feel for Will Self. I am herewith attaching one link (many can be found) that will provide our readers with a visual and auditory grasp of Will Self, one which will give you an opportunity to directly offer a critique of Mr. Self, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FqDoBqeV6Lc>. While on this topic—from your perspective—what are these YouTube clips doing to literary criticism? That is, will they help or hinder our understanding of these two writers?

**DS:** Certainly, the video presents readers with an opportunity to see and hear one of Britain's celebrated writers speak about the dangers of the Internet. Of course, having Will Self—a former heroin user and serial substance abuser—as a moral spokesperson for our age has its own peculiar kind of irony. But in the spirit of generosity, let's concede that writers these days have to be ubiquitous. If not, they risk losing readership, God forbid, and everything that we regard as singularly defining about their stories may disappear into oblivion, their words reduced to mere particle bits floating randomly through that seemingly infinite bandwidth of the Internet.

Nevertheless, it's important to remember that a YouTube video does not subject the author's oeuvre to impartial scrutiny and, therefore, these very declarations risk becoming entirely self-serving. Finally, any assessment of an author's work must be based upon his actual textual stories. Watching a video of a writer on YouTube is, of course, not the same as reading a writer's work, nor is it the same as reading literary assessments about that work. The author's text must be what defines a writer's creative efforts, the rest is bunk.

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