

Review by Jean-François Vernay

The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy

Against all common sense, readers (and even distinguished readers like Carmel Bird,¹¹ Siri Hustvedt, or Paul Auster) still expect the novel to impart some form of truth: John Coetzee notes that “You will find some version of the beauty-is-truth plea in the practice of almost any writer. ‘I may be making up this story, but for mysterious reasons that have to do with its internal coherence, its plausibility, its sense of rightness and inevitability, it is nevertheless in some sense true, or at least it tells us something true about our lives and the world we live in’” (8). Perhaps, as René Wellek and Austin Warren put it, these believers are “fearful that if art isn’t ‘true’ it is a ‘lie’, as Plato, in violence, called it. Imaginative literature is a ‘fiction’, an artistic, verbal ‘imitation of life’. The opposite of ‘fiction’ is not ‘truth’ but ‘fact’ or ‘time-and-space existence’.”¹²

Platonic *mimesis* which “has dominated occidental aesthetic thinking”¹³ essentially comes in two strands: *autorepresentational* fiction and *heterorepresentational* fiction, itself subdivided into two categories: “illusionism,” John Coetzee’s term for illusory representation in which realistic writers are very accomplished; and “anti-illusionism,” Coetzee’s word for *anti*-representation, namely fiction which draws attention to the fictionality of the text no matter how representational it appears to be.¹⁴ If we are to veer to Peter McCormick’s opinion, “storytelling, unlike lying, is pretending without the intention to deceive, a storytelling more like charades than perjury.”¹⁵ It therefore would seem rather peculiar to make assumptions of truth or untruth in relation to fictional statements and perhaps even

¹¹ “Sometimes the only way to tell the truth, to get at the meaning of what you are trying to say, is to tell it in fiction.” C. Bird, *The Automatic Teller* (Sydney: Vintage, 1996), 147. For Siri Hustvedt, authors should be focussing on the emotional truth which, like memory mechanisms, will determine what is retained or dispensed with in fiction. Paul Auster, as for him, once said that “Novels are fictions and therefore they tell lies, but through those lies every novelist attempts to tell the truth about the world.”

¹² R. Wellek & A. Warren, *Theory of Literature* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1966), 34.

¹³ L. Doležel, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998, 6.

¹⁴ J. M. Coetzee, *Double le cap. Essais et entretiens* (Paris : Le Seuil, 2007), 24.

¹⁵ P.J. McCormick, *Fictions, Philosophies and the Problems of Poetics* (Ithaca/London: Cornell UP, 1988), 138.

more so for a novelist to exchange views on notions of truth with a psychotherapist like Arabella Kurtz. And yet, this is what *The Good Story: Exchanges on truth, fiction and psychoanalytic psychotherapy* is about—a nonfiction book mimicking the tradition of Western philosophy taking the form of an epistolary exchange. Telling examples of the kind would include Herbert Marcuse’s correspondence with Martin Heidegger and the more recent written discussions between André Comte-Sponville and three other writers (Patrick Vighetti, Judith Brouste and Charles Juliet), first published by Paroles d’Aube in 1992 as: *L’amour la solitude*.

Because heterorepresentational fiction is bereft of extralinguistic referential properties, it cannot make any reference but to itself. As Terry Eagleton has it, “the paradox of fiction is that it refers to reality in the act of referring to itself. Like Wittgenstein’s forms of life, fictions are self-founding; but this is not to deny that they incorporate aspects of the world around them into their self-making, just as forms of life do.”¹⁶ In speech-act theory lingo, novelists are great experts in pretended reference for “The writer of fiction not only pretends to describe and to assert; he or she pretends to refer because the nature of fictional sentences is such that he or she cannot refer. The writer of a nonfictional work in using nonfictional sentences intends to refer; by contrast, the writer of a fictional work only pretends to refer.”¹⁷ In short, pretended reference is just another way of saying that fiction offers *indirect* or *second-degree* references to reality—the *first-degree* reference being fiction referring to anything else but itself. If we entertain a certain idea of truth as *adequatio*, i.e. that truth is related to the adequacy of the statement to a putative notion of the real as already established beyond doubt, the very essence of the novel would render all quests for truth epistemically impossible. Illuminated by these considerations, we can see the incongruity for readers or writers wanting to embark on a quest for truth in a space that disallows it, or wanting to persuade us of a world that will never exist.

The commonalities between fiction and psychoanalysis explored in Coetzee and Kurtz’s thought-provoking book partake of a quasi-natural alliance which has already been explored by many Australian novelists like Rod Jones, Brian Castro, Philip Salom, Peter Kocan, and Christos Tsiolkas, though Antoni Jach was perhaps the first one to spell out the

¹⁶ T. Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven/ London: Yale University Press, 2012), 138.

¹⁷ P.J. McCormick, *Id.*

parallel between psychoanalysis and storytelling in *The Weekly Card Game* (1994). To be sure, other considerations on the malleability of memory, desire and emotional truth have already been discussed previously by other writers, in particular by Siri Hustvedt in *Living, Thinking, Looking* (2012) but readers will find many interesting discussions related to psychotherapy through this battle of words, of thoughts and, ultimately, of wits. Some analyses should be taken *cum grano salis*, especially Coetzee's reflexions on teaching. He posits that you will only find in tertiary institutions "the 'good' students, the students who don't 'have a problem' with authority, who have repressed their naughtiness for the sake of their advancement" (164), as if naughtiness were a drive that could only be consubstantial with oppositional defiance and not triggered by external circumstances such as, say, boredom. But as Ken Robinson puts it in *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything* (2009), "If you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original."

***The Good Story: Exchanges on truth, fiction and psychoanalytic psychotherapy* by John Coetzee & Arabella Kurtz. London: Harvill Secker, 2015. ISBN: 9781846558887. RRP \$24.99, pp. 198.**

About the reviewer: Jean-François Vernay's first monograph, *Water from the Moon: Illusion and Reality in the Works of Australian Novelist Christopher Koch* (Cambria Press), came out in 2007. The translations of his latest books will be released in 2016 as *A Brief Take on the Australian Novel* (Wakefield Press) and *The Seduction of Fiction: A Plea for Putting Emotions Back into Literary Interpretation* (New York/ London: Palgrave Macmillan), as part of the Palgrave Studies in Affect Theory and Literary Criticism Series. Jean-François Vernay was a guest at the Sydney Writers' Festival in May 2016.