

# The Ethico-Politics of Autobiographical Writings: J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*

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**Abstract:** Confessional writing in English has been burgeoning in South Africa over the past two decades. Covering a wide social range, autobiographies of novelists to political leaders, social activists and journalists, artists and scientists have all contributed to forging a considerable repertoire of individual testimonies making up the inclusive history of South African society. Outside of the instrumentalising context of the resistance struggle, in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's dissuasive tendency to subsume personal testimonies within the hegemonic national discourse of forgiveness and reconciliation, the current publishers' increased interest in individual testimonies should not come as a surprise. Indeed, the contemporary proliferation of autobiographical writings can be seen as intrinsically embedded in the general tendency of post-millennial South African fiction to turn from the public sphere towards the private one, to reclaim space for auto-critique, self-questioning and expression of personal grief. With particular reference to the trilogy of fictionalized memoirs by J.M. Coetzee, *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002) and *Summertime* (2009), this article offers a detailed analysis of J.M. Coetzee's contribution to the flourishing field of South African autobiographical writing. While acknowledging the discursive shift towards the personal domain, this paper argues that Coetzee's works maintain the principles of 'committed' writing, working largely at the level of personal ethico-political responsibility of resistance against any spiritually oppressive systems. It is through Coetzee's formal experimentation, through the author's radical disruption of the discourses of the autobiographical genre, what Jane Poyner terms "acts of genre," rather than through his works' substance, that Coetzee manages to counteract established discourses and in doing so, restores the richness of South African intellectual life, which was severely regulated and stifled under apartheid.

**Keywords:** J.M. Coetzee; autobiography; committed writing; ethico-politics