

*THE LANGUAGE OF THE SELF IN JONATHAN COE'S THE TERRIBLE  
PRIVACY OF MAXWELL SIM*

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*Abstract: Jonathan Coe's novel, The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim, is a compelling story of the contemporary society with all its anxiety, fears, wishes and hopes, a society which may create, alter but also swallow up, even annihilate or dissolve identities. The present paper aims at illustrating the resourceful ways in which the quest for identity and the image of identities (dis)connecting one another are depicted.*

*Keywords: identity, self, dialogue, communication, otherness*

Identity has been given multiple interpretations, one of them considering it as a “configuration of the self that develops over time” (McAdams, 2006:7). This configuration may result from “the interaction in the social world” and may “in turn guide interaction in the social world” (Simon, 2004:2). These assumptions may well function in case of Maxwell Sim, the main character of Jonathan Coe's novel, *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, a novel that tells us about people and the paradox of feeling lonely in a world in which human interconnection should be more facile due to advanced technology. Max, as he is called throughout the novel, is a genuine embodiment of a “dialogical self”, or a “dynamic multiplicity” of different “positions or voices in the self” (Hermans, 2010:7). One of Max's “positions” seems to be that of a “modern self” (Hermans, 2010:4), engendered by his tendency to isolate himself and by his failure in establishing basic contacts with those around him. He is also an instance of a “post-modern” self, as he is characterized by “sensitivity and openness to the multiplicity and flexibility of the human mind”, but also by “pessimism and lack of hope” (Hermans, 2010:6). These two facets of his own self, or identity, intermingle, but they may also have a “dialogical relationship” with other people's identity, each contributing, thus, to Max's own development. Max, a forty-eight after-sales customer liaison officer, finds himself

alone in his travel through life. He lacks powerful social skills and makes great efforts to communicate with those around him. The permanent dialogue carried on within his “self as the society of mind”<sup>1</sup> (Hermans, 2010:1) reflects his place on the road of his own becoming. His positions on this road are in a continuous change and reconfiguration dependent on the circumstances and people he meets, yet unified by his utmost desire to define his own self and establish contacts with people. His story is written both by himself and those around him and reveals the easiness with which identities may be dissolved and recreated in a world in which everything seems to be predicted in detail: fears, feelings, emotions, plans. As a modern man, he projects his own disquietude on everything he does, he plans, anticipates, and imagines, he is always on motion in a dynamic and consumerist society which, despite offering many material facilities, intensifies the feeling of isolation and loneliness, especially in big urban places: “We mill around every day, we rush here and there, we become within inches of touching each other, but very little real contact goes on. All those near misses. All the might-have-beens. It’s frightening, when you think about it.” (Coe, 2010:8)

In all this frantic flow of life, Max feels rather incomplete. Incompleteness and loneliness are what Max experiences while being in Australia, in a trip in which he unsuccessfully tries to rebuild his relationship with his father. Recently left by his wife and daughter, and, moreover, having problems at work, Max feels “terribly alone in the world”, especially at the sight of a Chinese woman and her daughter playing cards at the restaurant, and laughing together. The image of the two becomes iconic throughout the novel, as they have something “precious”, something he “wanted badly” and he “wanted to share in” (Coe, 2010:7); it is the perfect representation of an ideal relationship between two human beings. It has rekindled the wish to be part of a community, but also makes him aware of the differences which exist between people belonging to the same community. It has reawakened his imperative needs to make “face to face, let’s-meet-for-a-coffee-and-catch-up” contact with people, instead of sending text messages or posting “cheerful, ironically worded status updates on Facebook”, only to show all of the seventy friends in his list, “most of them complete strangers” (Coe, 2010:19), what a busy life he has. But not all his attempts have the expected

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<sup>1</sup> According to Hermans (2010:7), “People are continuously involved in a process of positioning and repositioning, not only in relation to other people but also in relation to themselves” (...) “actions that take place between people (e.g. conflicts, criticisms, making agreements, and consultations) occur also within the self (e.g. self-conflicts, self-criticism, self-agreements and self-consultations) illustrating how the self works as a society of mind.”

endings. On his way back home to England, he tries to initiate a conversation with his flight companion, Charles Hayward, the first person to whom Maxwell manages to speak after deciding to reconnect with the world, but, eventually, this proves to be a failure as Charles suffers from a heart attack and dies while Max keeps talking to him so deeply absorbed that he does not even notice the sad event occurring next to him. When he realizes what has happened, he feels depressed, and blames himself for talking so many to Charles, for having “unburden” himself “so shamelessly of so many words. After this unpleasant incident, while sitting at a café table in Singapore airport, waiting for the next flight back to England, Max meets Poppy, an interesting young lady who works as a “junior adultery facilitator” (Coe, 2010:35), a job which involves travelling to various airports, making recordings of announcements and compiling them into CDs which are sold to adulterer clients who use them in their actions of unfaithfulness towards their life partners. The job does not match Poppy’s academic education – she has got a First in History from Oxford- but it brings her material satisfaction, and moreover, allows her to spend a lot of time as she wants, that is reading, watching movies or visiting galleries. As Max is confused in what concerns the likely moral consequences of such an unusual job, Poppy finds the occasion to remind him that young people should not be blamed for their “materialism” or for “lacking in any political sense”, since the “old” generation is the only responsible - by making the same political mistakes for years - for bringing young people up to be “consumerist zombies” (Coe, 2010:38).

While on the plane back home to England, Poppy tells Max about Clive, her uncle, who contributed much to her education in her childhood and adolescence, taking her, during the weekends she visited him, to the cinema, theatre performances, art galleries or concerts. When she could not visit him, he used to write her letters about interesting things that happened in her absence. Poppy scanned all his letters and photos and saved them into her laptop. Max noticed a photo of an old catamaran abandoned on a beach, taken by Tacita Dean, a well-known artist. The image of Teignmouth Electron, the name of the boat, made him curious to read the letter Clive once sent to Poppy about his fascination with the story of Donald Crowhurst, the lone yachtsman who decided to take part in a round-the-world race organized by Sunday Times which stated that would award the single-handed yachtsman who would “complete the fastest non-stop navigation departing after 1 June and before 31 October, 1968” (Coe, 2010:49) rounding the capes of Good Hope, Leeuwin and Horn. Donald Crowhurst, a thirty-six British engineer and manager of an electronics company, secretly gave up the race soon after its start,

though he continued to report false positions of his yacht. His yacht was discovered in the middle of the ocean in the summer of 1969 and he was assumed to have committed suicide. His log books found on board unmasked his fraud and the notes he wrote disclosed his mental breakdown which made him retreat “into a fantasy world of pseudo-philosophical speculation.” (Coe, 2010:61)

Donald Crowhurst, an instance of “transworld identity” (McHale, 2004:17), seems to become the “hero” who inspires Max’s actions and thoughts at certain moments. All the characters in the novel seem to identify, to a certain extent, with the lone adventurer who sought, in his isolation, to find his own place in the world and whose enterprise ended up in failure. Clive admits this and wonders

...why Donald Crowhurst? Or, to put it another way, what does it say about our own time, the time we are now living in, that we found it easier to identify, not with Robin Knox-Johnston – an almost comically stubborn, courageous, patriotic sportsman – but with a lesser figure entirely: a man who lied to himself and those around him, a little man in the throes of a desperate existential crisis, a tormented cheat? (Coe, 2010:64)

Back home, Max tries to reconsider his past and to rearrange his life after his wife and daughter left him. Being diagnosed with depression after being ‘abandoned’ by them, he stays in a prolonged medical leave, deciding not to return to his job but to accept that of promoting eco-friendly toothbrushes in Shetland Islands. At the invitation of his friend, Trevor, he joined a small business team of enthusiastic people who were confident they could manage to survive the global economic recession by selling the most revolutionary toothbrushes on the market, made from sustainable wood. In order to promote the handmade toothbrushes, a team of four salesmen will depart in their cars to four different extreme points of the United Kingdom, on the same morning, from the company’s office in Reading. They have to keep video diaries of their journeys. The mission to promote and sell toothbrushes on Shetland Islands changes his whole existence. But, unfortunately, he will not finish his business trip successfully. The journey makes him feel closer and closer to Donald Crowhurst’s state of madness after a series of picaresque adventures, eventually the most “credible” connection he establishes being with his SatNav he names Emma (after Jane Austen’s character) whose enthralling voice he seems to fall in love with. Like Crowhurst, Max - the modern man- seems to be insufficiently prepared for big journeys through life though he has all the newest devices possible which might ease all his efforts.

His journey ends up in a hospital ward in Aberdeen from where he is taken back home by his business partners, Trevor Paige and Lindsay Ashworth who inform him that the company has been forced into liquidation so all their optimistic plans about a prosperous future came into failure. The image of Max deprived of clothes and suffering from hypothermia – with which the novel opens - is a metaphor of a fragile, insecure and unprotected small business world. He is the symbol of the average man destroyed by an uninspired, improper economy. The stopovers he takes on the road to his destinations are occasions to reflect upon the economic organization of a civilization in which services represent “a perfect microcosm of how well-functioning Western society should operate.”(147), as well as upon the meaning of belonging to a community, of playing a useful part in it:

All around me, people were heading for the main food hall – business people like me, mainly, wearing dark suits, collar and tie, sometimes with the jackets slung over their shoulders [...]. I felt a surge of well-being at the thought that I was part of something again: part of a nationwide process, part of a community – the business community – that was doing its bit, day in and day out, to keep Britain ticking over. We all had a part to play. Everybody here was involved in selling something, or buying something, or servicing or checking or costing or quantifying something. I felt connected again: back in the mainstream.” (Coe, 2010:146-147)

He feels like being overwhelmed by the consumerist culture whose central image is that of the “ideal self” (Dittmar: 2) symbolized by physical and material achievements which are promoted as bringing success, satisfaction and happiness in people’s lives. The one hundred and thirty-seven e-mail messages Max receives while he is away (among which only one is ‘real’, sent by a friend of his) are instances of advertisements to all kinds of products that promise a magic physical transformation and, implicitly, a new, rather unrealistic identity. The consumerist society seems to engulf identities, to transform things to such an extent that they become unrecognizable. The entire society, in which the action of “making things” has become “vulgar”, seems to be founded “on air”:

I was driving past the old Longbridge factory. Or rather, I was driving now past the gaping hole in the landscape where the old Longbridge factory used to be. It was a weird experience: when you revisit the landscapes of your past, you expect to see maybe a few cosmetic changes, the odd new building here and there [...] but this was something else – an entire complex of factory buildings which used to dominate the whole neighbourhood, stretching over many square miles, throbbing with the noise of working machinery, alive with

the figures of thousands of working men and women entering and leaving the buildings - all gone. Flattened, obliterate. And meanwhile, a big billboard erected in the midst of these swathes of urban emptiness informed us that [...] new development of 'exclusive residential units' and 'retail outlets' was on its way – a utopian community where the only things people would have to concern themselves with were eating, sleeping and shopping [...]" (Coe, 2010:155)

Miss Erith, the symbol of the old, stylish face of England, deplores the state of a nation that seems to have lost its identity, a process that started long before:

It's not a recent thing at all: it's been going on for years – centuries even. Everything that gives the community its own identity – the local shops, the local pubs – it's all being taken away and replaced by this bland, soulless, corporate – "[...] I'm saying that the England I used to love does not exist any more. (Coe, 2010:198)

The journey, "the voyage of discovery" (Coe, 2010:101) redefines Max's own self and gives him the opportunity to travel back in time and to find out many things which explain some of the attitudes and actions of those around him that once appeared to be inexplicable. His life seems to be written through the testimonies of others, while the respective characters are disclosing their life secrets as well. He visits Mr and Mrs Byrne (his old friend's parents), he goes to Lichfield where he meets Miss Erith and Dr Hameed, then he meets Caroline and Lucy, then Alison Byrne. Each encounter adds something to Max's image of his own self, as

a self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at "nodal points" of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be. Or better: one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass. (Lyotard, 1984:15)

Reading the others' stories, in which he is present, Max notices, mostly with a hint of self-irony, the place he has in other people's life. Also, the novellas embedded in the 'main' story are interesting confessions meant to mirror their authors' and characters' actions, nature, thoughts they display in the search for their own selves. The journey also gives him the opportunity to recall things that have shaped his personality and life. He remembers his former wife, Caroline, an aspiring writer, and the differences which existed between them and which, eventually, led to their falling out. After Caroline moved to Kendal, Max missed her so much that he joined Mumsnet, a site where mothers could meet virtually and debate upon various

subjects and where Caroline was very actively involved. He created a fictional identity under the name of “SouthCoastLizzie”, pretending to be a single mother from Brighton having a small business making pieces of jewellery. After several weeks of joining the conversations on the discussion groups, ensuring thus that Caroline would remark “her” presence, “SouthCoastLizzie” sent Caroline a private message saying that “her real name” was Liz Hammond and that she felt they had a lot of interests in common so she would like to start writing to each other “directly”, by email. Caroline answered positively and the two started to communicate. Max’s fear, that of discovering an unknown side of Caroline, was substantiated, as he noticed, much to his surprise, “the warmth, the friendliness, the love she put” on words addressed “to a complete stranger who didn’t even exist” (Coe, 2010:88). The messages were nevertheless welcome as they were full of news regarding Lucy and Caroline. Thus, he found out that Caroline attended a writers’ group every Tuesday evening and that she began focusing on writing about “her own experience – mainly episodes from her marriage- but was writing up in the third person, to give it a kind of ‘distance and objectivity’” (Coe, 2010:90) The short story, entitled *The Nettle Pit*, illustrating a part of a family holiday they spent in Ireland while they were still married reveals Caroline’s point of view upon Max’s role as a friend and father. They were then accompanied by Max’s best friend, Chris, and his family. Though a ‘fictional’ account, the story grasps the cultural discrepancies existing between Max and Chris, with their noticeable impact upon the two men’s abilities to act in different circumstances. Max was “perpetually nervous and uncertain”, while Chris was a “skilled and attractive conversationalist” for whom nothing was impossible to explain, and “however small the subject, he would approach it enquiringly, quizzically, endeavouring always to penetrate the truth and confident that he would get there” (Coe, 2010:119). Chris seemed to know the answers to every question asked by his children, knew how to explain simple laws and principles from physics, biology and geography, while Max did not know, for instance, how to explain his daughter, Lucy, the reason for which the grass is green. Experiencing mixed feelings of fury and dismay at reading this short story, Max eventually admits that Caroline “transcribed” his thoughts in a large proportion, as if he had been “transparent” (Coe, 2010:134). Max is affected by the others’ perception of him as a culturally ignorant father incapable of fulfilling his daughter needs of knowledge. He is obsessed by the idea that “Caroline and Lucy must have got together and had a right old laugh, some time or other, about silly old Daddy” who has the talent to spoil everything and is “always trying to bullshit his way

out of difficult questions and awkward situations.” (Coe, 2010:135) He wants to reestablish his connection with his daughter and tries to do his best in this respect, but his plans do not match reality. One of the stopovers on his road to Shetland Island was in Kendal, where he goes out to dinner with Lucy. The image of the father and his daughter sitting at a table in a restaurant is antithetic to that of the Chinese woman and her daughter whom Max admired once in Australia. Full of frustration that their talk seems to limit itself to a few words, Max tries desperately to initiate a conversation that may be of interest to Lucy, but his efforts are interrupted by a text message he receives from Lindsay, his colleague, who has been eager to find out something about the progress of his journey. The silence was replaced by their concern to text messages while uttering some short comments on the topic of “sending messages etiquette”. Aware of the ridicule of the moment and longing for real conversation (which never occurred during that evening) with his daughter, Max stops focusing on his phone:

What stopped me? It was the look on the face of a woman sitting at the table next to ours. I don’t know how to describe the look. All I know is that she took in the scene that she saw at our table – a weary middle-aged father taking his daughter out for dinner, the two of them sitting opposite each other, nothing to say, one of them sending a text, the other one playing with her BlackBerry – and she responded with a toe-curling mixture of amusement and sympathy, all contained in one expressive glance. And in that instant an image came into my mind, again: the Chinese woman and her daughter, sitting opposite each other at that restaurant in Sydney harbor, laughing together and playing cards. The connection between them. The pleasure in each other’s company. The love and closeness. All the things that Lucy and I never seemed to have. All the things that I had never been taught to create between us, by my sad fuck-up of a father.(Coe, 2010:212-213)

Indeed, Mr. Harold Sim, Max’s father seems to have failed in establishing a close connection with his son. His portrait is well depicted by the report (The Folded Photograph) that Alison, Chris’ sister, wrote while she was a student about an incident that marked her unpleasantly. Harold, who worked as a librarian at a technical college in Birmingham, is seen as a distant person both in relation to his wife and his son, “a quiet man, very introspective and rather difficult to talk to” (Coe, 2010:171). He wrote poems; in fact, his unfulfilled desire was to become a poet. His passion for poetry was not shared by his wife, a “very kind person, and very down-to-earth- as well as being extremely pretty” (Coe, 2010:172) and who did not seem to have much in common with her husband. But a more accurate account of his own self is



given by Harold in person in his memoirs kept in the blue ring binder in his apartment in Lichfield and which Max has the task to take to his father in Australia. The disclosure of his life explains his behavior and some of his attitudes which were, at a certain moment, wrongly interpreted and understood. Harold admitted that the impetus in his life was given by Roger Anstruther, an atypical man, whom he met in the City of London, when he was young, and who influenced his whole life. Roger, fond of music, architecture, painting, drama, literature, was “enthusiastic, opinionated, fascinating, indefatigable and infuriating, in equal measure” [...] “frivolous and loveable”, “impatient and cruel” (Coe, 2010:251) and dominated Harold completely. He opened up “a different, more alluring world”, “a world of shadows, portents, symbols, riddles and coincidences” (Coe, 2010:267), to Harold, a “callow” young man, unsure of himself, “alone in a big, frightening city” (Coe, 2010:266). They once planned to take a long trip together to France, Germany, Italy, “to view the splendours of the ancient world” (Coe, 2010:256). The lack of money prevented their plan from happening. Roger thought of a small financial investment which would bring them a lot of money, but everything failed, they lost even what they invested. Harold managed to put an end to their friendship, however sad this fact was, and met Barbara, with a totally different approach to life than Roger. They had an affair, Barbara got pregnant and so Harold married her. After breaking the friendship with Roger, life was unlike Harold expected, it was dull, unhappy and burdened with his nostalgic feelings towards the liveliest period of his existence. However, the two kept on being in touch after so many years. The ending of Harold’s memoirs is a promise that he will “reinvent” himself just like the City of London which “has recently been in the process of reinventing itself”, hoping that he “might even find some small measure of personal happiness as a result.” (Coe, 2010:280) Max will be the one who will help his father in the process of ‘finding’ his own self. The memoir written by his father impresses him to such an extent that he is thinking to make Harold and Roger meet again, face to face, in person, planning a sort of reconciliation between the two. He patiently puts into the chronological order all the postcards sent by Roger to Harold and stunningly discovers that the last one arrived from Adelaide, so he thinks Roger must be in Australia too, like Max’s father. By the help of the Internet, the means that “puts up barriers between people as much as it connects them” (Coe, 2010:305), he manages to locate Roger’s house and to contact him by e-mail. So, Max goes back to Australia. This time, the two, father and son, seem closer than they even expected. Max tells him about the arrangement he has made so that his father can meet Roger in Melbourne. Harold is moved by Max’s gesture.

Finally, it seems that for the first time Harold touches his son on his shoulder and his gesture marks Max in a pleasant yet uncomfortable way. He does not know how to manage the moment. Unfortunately, Harold did not succeed in meeting Roger; the two missed each other again, like they had many years before, due to some absurd state of affairs: the Botanical Garden in Melbourne has two different tea rooms so, while Harold was waiting for Roger at one of them, Roger was waiting for Harold at the other one. And, unhappily, Harold took with him the remote control instead of his phone, so he couldn't be contacted by Roger who frantically had called him fourteen times. To Harold, the fact that Max has tried hard to bring Roger into his life again means more than a simple meeting. It is a proof that, eventually, Max has accepted his father "for what he is". The wish to stay at table spending time in a pleasant way with someone close to him has finally fulfilled: he is there, at a restaurant, spending his time with his father, chatting and laughing. And moreover, he seems to look more and more like his father, not only physically, but also in his attitudes.

The Fairlight Beach episode makes him aware of the fact that for most of his life he has been lost in a "dark tunnel" himself as Donald Crowhurst must have been some time. At last, he feels that he has finally stepped into the sunlight, far away from the darkness that has accompanied him through his life. He finally manages to know the Chinese woman, Lian, and her daughter Yanmei. He finds out that Yanmei is adopted and she does not have the same nationality as her mother – Lian is from Hong Kong and Yanmei is from China. He starts telling her about his adventures and people he encountered in his journey of discovery, declaring that his experiences not only taught him "a lesson about the cruelty of the world"(Coe, 2010:326), but they also taught him something about himself, his own nature and problems. After listening to him, Lian confesses that she notices he has changed since she first saw him two months before: a lonely and depressed person at the beginning, he turned into a calmer one, "a man who is almost at peace with himself."(Coe, 2010:328) She tells him something that he has never admitted or thought of: she thinks that the reason for which he was invited to dinner by Poppy was not to match him with her mother but with her uncle, Clive. Lian's words shocks Max so much that he can barely breathe. The truth he could not ever recognize lies before him. He identifies more and more with his father in this respect. Eventually, he has to accept what the others think of him. Lian takes farewell but not before advising him to try "not to be angry with the people who think they know you better than you know yourself" (Coe, 2010:330), as their intentions are well-meant.

Although not skillful at reading novels, Max is very talented in telling his whole story. He is a perfect ‘metafictional self’ that needs an ideal reader capable to understand his subtle games of thoughts. Like Tristram Shandy, Max is the narrator concerned with pleasing the aesthetic demands of his readers. He is contaminated by the pleasure to tell, to communicate, a feeling that is obvious throughout the novel and which he wants to share with those who have the patience to read his story. He admits his limits and warns his readers that he might not be a consummate writer. When he depicts the physical appearance of the Chinese woman, he confesses that his strength is not to describe people, wondering if he could test the limits of his readers’ patience: “Sorry, I am just not very good at describing people. (...) I am not very good at describing clothes either – are you looking forward to the next 300 pages?” (Coe, 2010:7). Or he asks his reader directly if they can remember where they were the day John Smith, the leader of the British Labour Party, died, in 1994. To him, it was a significant data as it was the day when he met Caroline. After the encounter with Alison, his best friend’s sister and apparently one of the girls who might have wished to date with him once upon a time (which never happened), Max alludes to the endless game literature may play:

But listen – you know the end of the story, now. Or at least, now that it’s finished, now that Alison and I are together, and happy, now that the whole nightmare of what came before is over and done with, then the story has served its purpose. No need to carry on spilling words on to the paper. If we all lived in a state of perfect happiness – no conflicts, no tensions, no neuroses, anxieties, unresolved issues, monstrous personal or political injustices, none of that rubbish – then all the people who run to stories for consolation all the time – they wouldn’t need to do that any more, would they? They wouldn’t need art at all. Which is why I don’t need it, and neither do you, from this point on: you don’t need to read about the plans Alison and I made that morning [...]. Well. As I say, you don’t need to know any of that. None of it is true, in any case. No, none of it is true, but do you know what, I think I’m finally beginning to get the hang of this writing business. (Coe, 2010: 240-242)

The ending of the novel is in fact announced several pages before it occurs. The narrator/author warns the readers that they “don’t have to read any more” if they “don’t want to”, as the “story is over”, and asserts his appreciations towards them: “It’s been a long haul, I know. Thanks to all the people who have stayed with me. Really, I appreciate it. And I admire your stamina, I must say. Most impressive. (Coe, 2010:333) The ‘real’ ending is an open one. It is both of postmodern nature and of a traditional one: while letting the readers imagine a

possible development of the novel, the omniscient author intervenes and directs everything in the way he wants: just “like this” (Coe, 2010:339).

Deeply anchored in the realities of the contemporary society, mirroring them with the shrewd eyes of a witty observer, Coe’s novel is an ingenious puzzle in which nothing is fortuitous: every single piece is relevant to characters’ self-discovery and development.

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