

Life Below the Equator

An interview with **Krzysztof Warlikowski** by Piotr Gruszczyński

(A)pollonia, The End and African Tales After Shakespeare. Three plays whose scripts draw inspiration from Coetzee's texts - Elizabeth Costello, In the Heart of the Country and Summertime. Do you remember the first book by Coetzee that you read? What was it and when did you read it?

It all began before *(A)pollonia*. I was looking for a new style, not so much a new style of writing, but of my dialogue or contact with a viewer. I started reading *Elizabeth Costello*, which is not actually a novel but a collection of lectures, and each lecture is an amazing monologue. That is what hit me in this book: the new form which is further from fiction and more straightforward. I realised that such monologues and other non-monologues would be perfect for theatre. These monologues would take us outside the theatre, which is what I wanted to get away from. I also suspected that this was what the Polish audience needed: a straightforward message, shared experience of what one hears, reflection and diagnosis of that shared experience. A lecture serves this purpose best.

When I think of you and Costello, who is Coetzee's mask, and who might be one of your masks, I see a relation to what you call an irresponsible fantasy, or more exactly: to responsible irresponsibility. A lecture allows for statements bordering on scandal, forms and situations in inverted and hanging commas. If you are brave enough, you can play *va banque*, breaking every societal norm.

All of Costello's lectures are very special to me, because they are permeated with psychology and are tinged with emotionality. They are not just dry, scathing speeches. They are placed within a specific context – age, disappointment, artistic compromise and the madness of someone who used to ask fundamental questions and could not find the answers. It is also of great significance to me that they are spoken by a person born South of the equator.

“Even us, born in Australia” - Costello says self-ironically.

I wanted to speak with the voice of strangers. Costello is a stranger to Coetzee too, and he also needs strangers. He tried to fit into the Anglo-Saxon frame and he failed. He did not get established in England and he did not settle in the U.S. He has become a South African emigrant and a European expatriate at the same time, since his whole spiritual heritage is located here, in Europe. He also tried different frames when he was working on Dostoyevsky. I would not know what he needed this experiment for, but I think that by walking in the shoes of an Englishman or a Russian he was trying to break free from South Africa. Later on, what remained in his books were landless outsiders, very much like him. Perhaps this is due to the specific character of South Africa, which makes you feel as if you lived in a place you do not belong to, a place you have to keep getting out of or, even more so – a place you should leave forever.

All Coetzee’s characters live on the margins of society. It is either for reasons beyond their control, like in the case of Michael K, who has no place to stay after his mother dies, or because they send themselves to those margins, like Costello who is convinced that she can use her ageing to her advantage to do whatever she feels like.

In such circumstances your thought becomes your only true motherland. The main character of *Age of Iron*, the retired classics professor who is dying of cancer, was left behind in the race of life, and has become anachronistic. Her disharmony stems from the discovery that she lived a hoaxed life. When you are young, you have a different philosophical perspective. You indulge in fantasies. The humanities are a smokescreen. I see Coetzee’s ideas here again, since he operated on the margin of the academia and continually encountered the academic world, but still felt that he was incompatible with it. Such are the symptoms of a split personality which all of us experience. This split personality is the beginning of the road to the margin, and – possibly – to the out zone.

Actually, what was it that this classical antiquity professor achieved? She taught classical languages believing that the world once used to have a common point of departure. Later it turned out that all these common points were rapidly perishing. Ultimately, they should all be considered history, even if still mourned over.

Is Coetzee indicating that after all the disasters of the 20th century, the process of man’s spiritual and intellectual restoration, failed? Is he implying that we are witnessing the final collapse of utopian hopes which, though moribund, were still present at the end of the previous century?

No, Coetzee does not have such a perspective, which is good. He writes about the failure of an individual life or just about the sense of defeat. He shows a life which has barely touched anything and has hardly laid its finger on anything, and which has already started plunging into chaos. In the final instance people wallow in chaos and cease to understand the world. Coetzee, who is not excluded, reflects that

very moment perfectly. But Coetzee always implies chaos from the perspective of individuals. His responsibility is the responsibility of individuals. It may be a result of living below the equator. It seems to me that those who live there are just individuals, while those who live above the equator are Polish, Russian, German, etc. But there, below the equator, or outside Europe in general – the human perspective is much stronger.

Perhaps, then, you can see the fall of humanity more clearly from this perspective? Costello's lecture about the animal holocaust says that we have been becoming worse and have not been able to learn our lesson.

Take a look at the time sequence of getting to know and understand the world: how much time did we need to acknowledge women as human beings? We needed even more time to acknowledge black people as humans. Has the time come to start including animals in humankind too? Spain granted some human rights to apes. But are we really ready for that? Mind you, this lecture does not reflect on the holocaust, but on the shock it caused.

Is that why Coetzee's characters are women, children, coloureds and socially deprived people? The untouchables deprived of any social position whatsoever? *Age of Iron* adds even more to that: it reveals that only these people can understand each other. Communication can only be horizontal.

Coetzee homeless, landless, defeated and lost, but he still fights to be understood. This situation fosters the creative writing process, but Coetzee remains entangled between the idyllic and hell, mainly for geographical reasons. Take the example of the writer Jonathan Littell: the grandson of Jewish emigrants from Russia, raised in Long Island, but at the same time raised by emigrants who chose Europe. All aspects of his legacy are great. For Littell his legacy is departure, while for Coetzee it is the desired destiny. These are opposing directions. Considering yourself a visiting fellow whom no one takes serious or lets into their affairs, and who knows that he will never become anyone's true partner, makes you develop a certain state of mind. Now that I think about it, Coetzee's mythology of geography and mine are very similar since they are both place-focused and place-driven.

Paradoxically, the main character of *Slow Man*, who is half-French and half-Australian, has the legacy but becomes a cripple doomed to an emotionally painful life. This happens to him late in his life so he never has time to get used to it. The image of a perfectly healthy man still comes to him as he dreams at night.

Mental phantom pain...

Coetzee brings this man into contact with a Yugoslavian emigrant, disinherited, sentenced to be one of the servants, almost a slave. Because of this matter, a man with a legacy is sentenced to being dependent on other disinherited people.

There is a similar case of the so-called *brasileira* in the autobiographic mystification *Summertime*. This time, it is Coetzee himself who falls in love with the *brasileira*, since he is the subject of interviews collected by the biographer. He wants to take care of her and help her somehow, but she humiliates him, calls him a wooden man, incapable of loving, and she rejects him harshly. The humiliation strategy is a requisite in Coetzee's books. *Summertime* is a whole series of humiliating portraits of the Nobel Prize-winner.

It is similar in other books: there is a woman suffering from an incurable disease which is her death sentence, there is a woman on the edge of madness ... A parade of the humiliated.

The author who so meticulously conceals his identity from public view, who creates fictional autobiographies and says nothing about himself in interviews, completely reveals himself in his novels, as if that concealing meant revealing too. Do you operate similarly in the theatre?

I think that this is talking in the language of weakness, with the *esprit* that makes you keep running away, despite the historical impetus which is so hard to run away from. Coetzee runs away from his black continent, at the same time enjoying it, immensely but painfully. Here in Poland we know this escapist's perspective very well: it is the perspective of all those who left and fought for the right to be human again. Coetzee succeeded in regaining freedom as an emigrant. He understands the situation of women and of blacks - because he was born in South Africa, where these two histories of emancipation have not been covered with graves, and do not let us sleep at night. The ghosts return, while we still cannot talk about ourselves or take care of ourselves. Coetzee's perspective of this is liberated and purified.

Are these uncovered histories, which you are talking about, your tools, enabling you to get closer, for instance, to Shakespeare? Is Coetzee your trampoline, helping you to move to other texts? Does he give you a more fundamental view?

I find great structures in Coetzee, traces of Greek and Shakespearian structures, which are reflected, for example, in father-son relationships and in lovers' relationships. However, most importantly, it is the story of the land, of building a house on this land, of rebuilding the house and coming back home. The history of a people who should have taken up the hard work, the grindwork, in 1652.

1652 is the year when the Boers started colonising and ruling South Africa. It has been almost 400 years since then and we, Poles, are still wondering who would take over the grindwork for us.

No, I would rather say that we have been wondering who wronged us and whose fault it is that we cannot succeed. Are the Russians, Germans or Jews to blame? We keep trying to trace it back. It is not until we give ourselves a wake-up call, shock ourselves

- and go abroad - that we, the Polish, learn to breathe again and realise that our success depends on us. I still think that we as a nation do not want freedom because freedom also means responsibility, and when individual persons manage to get freedom, it often results in rejecting themselves as a whole, together with their language.

So you think that in Coetzee's world we are the only ones to be blamed?

This is the way to understand the blame and fault in ourselves. The woman from *Age of Iron* does not want to inform her daughter that she is dying, she is not shouting that the world is collapsing, she does not blame the world, but instead – she lives in it, willy-nilly. She does not even want to miss anything that existed before and which might have been better. She is like an old animal retreating to the corner which no one will see and which is giving up its life.

Can we learn something from it?

Perhaps, yes, because we are unable of separating ourselves from history, of separating the Poles from history. Even though we are apparently given the right to live with freedom of expression and in democratic society, we still need some odium. How has Coetzee managed to make the canon of the greatest writers, even though he did not have the land, the legacy or the history, but at the same time had so much? The answer is: because he decided to run away. The list of other great escapist includes Kapuscinski and Gombrowicz, though the escape of the latter was a literal one. One could also mention Hanna Krall, who travelled across North and South America and other continents, both tracing the past back and keeping track of the new histories she learned, so as not to talk about what was, but about what is and who we are. It was also an escape in search of a man who would be able to escape the Polish canon.

Kafka is one of Coetzee's obsessions. Michael K could be considered one of the versions of Joseph K. But Kafka represents the world of an absurd and rational main character, while Coetzee's world is truly rational – in the sense of the rationality of war. It is this rationality that prevents Michael from functioning normally, deprives him of expectations and desires and reduces him to a similar condition as the woman in *Age of Iron*. Also, Coetzee's fascination with Kafka eventually becomes ironic. It is a multi-level game. What is its purpose?

What do Kafka and Dostoyevsky mean to the Russian, Polish, German, French or the Jews in Israel, and what do they mean to Coetzee? The thing is that Coetzee comes immediately after Kafka and Dostoyevsky, as there is no need for literature in between. We immediately encounter his freedom of choice of legacy, which is flawless. And we can see that thousands of pages of interpretations and literary criticism, the fruit of an academic education, do not serve any purpose.

What makes Coetzee able to establish a dialogue with Dostoyevsky and Kafka?

This dialogue is a direct and a fundamental one, because it does not involve any other agents or references. It lacks contexts, which gives everyone the freedom of coming up with their own conclusions. What also appears here is his ability to be in a number of worlds at the same time. He has the academic past of a great literary critic, but each of his new novels makes you think that he has nothing in common with that past and that he only exists in the world of his misery.

Would you say that this dialogue is so good because he realises that the country which shaped him and his situation are so dangerously Kafkian, and he identifies the former with the latter?

This Kafkian situation of Coetzee's is very capacious, because, while separated from the intellect, it is installed in the imagination, instinct, anticipation and fears. It combines Christianity with the Jewish eschatology with the same intensity, and it filters the whole through Kafka. It sounds like blasphemy. In Europe we sing anthems against this and that. They are national, church and party anthems. And these anthems prevent Europeans from blaspheming.

This is what I meant while talking about Coetzee's irresponsibility and his detachment. As a matter of fact, he is full of praise of ignorance.

Nothing is more appealing to me than what could be called Costello's ignorance in the intellectual sense. This detachment does not sound like anything that was before. We, on the other hand, tend to attach ourselves to something that is or was. This is our lifestyle. We gather in illusory communities, which give us illusory points of reference, and these in turn design the way we think. Costello, however, challenges what until recently seemed important and sacred. She questions everything: children, novels, lovers, dialogues with writers and even the thesis that no one can enter the Kafkian gate of law. In this contest she contests even herself. Everything. In the end, she breaks the Kafkian gate open, defeating her morality, weakness and humanity. She throws down the gauntlet to the world, gods, religions, her beloved and unloved authors and philosophers. She does it by attacking the others. She embarks on her last battle, which is actually very simple: it is a battle with old age and dying. She joins the club of Socrates, Kant and all those who anxiously awaited the first symptoms of ageing, wondering how to escape it and how to plan this last battle.

The scene in which Costello stands in front of the Gate might be the weirdest one in Coetzee's whole literary output. A weird, odd one, and extremely symbolic, metaphoric and hypnotic. Not many people dare to describe the moment of death or the life after life and the afterworld. Moreover, Coetzee does it to emphasise his position as writer. Costello turns out to be a usurper of the title of an invisible secretary without faith and, as a result of that - without morality. She opens up the whole hell of responsibility of the artist.

In this scene we also experience a rather desperate description of an image of eternal life: an old, scarred dog lying by the gate; desert and stones. It is an unusual image of paradise. What emotions does it evoke in you?

Coetzee touches upon my biggest fascination with fantastic characters such as Ariel, the Ghost in *Hamlet*, Puck, Caliban in Shakespeare, and the gods in Greek tragedy. What Coetzee does while brushing against these areas has nothing in common with theology. It is secular literature, despite all the kitsch and literalness of this attempt, that even Kafka did not risk, while touching on some words or rather – the Word. Here the Word is presented to us in the way Ariel and Caliban are presented; it is given a life similar to ours.

What is the result of this embodiment?

Going outside the thoughts and image. Referring to the old dispute of iconoclasts and idolaters. Creation of an image which fascinates us most in the art, an image received from that side. It reminds me of Tinker from *Cleansed* since he was located somewhere between a metaphor and a man of flesh and blood.

You have to work hard and deserve a scene like the one that Coetzee wrote.

This text aspires to join the list of texts considered sacred. It expresses man's longing for the world divided into good and evil, i.e. the categories embraced by gods. Soon, the category of holy books will extend its territory, because I do not think that they are given and closed off, or that humankind has run out of the resources that could be classified as religious texts. Then, the last chapter of *Elizabeth Costello* will be placed in the theological libraries of the world. Together with *The Dybbuk, or Between Two Worlds* by Hanna Krall.

Is it not that Coetzee appeals to you so strongly because his writing is so intellectual?

No, I do not have this impression. Now that I have reached for *Slow Man* again after many years, I have started wondering where the tension and passion are coming from in this 60-year-old man who becomes a cripple. It reads almost like a crime story. If we were just telling this story orally, it would not evoke any tension. But here, you have a terrible pressure, which stems from incredible situations. However, they are given to us in a way that makes us blush.

So what do you think is the method behind it?

Boredom with life replaced with the pain of existence in extreme images. You do your rounds in the city, you bribe people so that the daughter of your Yugoslavian nurse does not suffer. Even though there is the dirt of lust in all that which you want to hide in the great idea of helping others. Shamelessness – perhaps that is what fascinates me so much? Littell's shamelessness is actually perverse. It comes from the context of what

makes something shameless. Coetzee proves that context is not crucial to a man. In my representations I sometimes have very strong contexts: a dybbuk, a woman who sacrifices herself. Or, I try to go beyond the context and find something that would connect us as a community in the audience. Does Coetzee's character – the slow man – connect us in this way? Is he powerful enough?

Is he?

It is as if you were constantly asking about yourself in and out of context. By 'context' I mean the community behind us: Poland, Holocaust.

But Coetzee has the context created by European culture.

Yes, but in *Slow Man* this whole context is contaminated by a dirty thought which Costello points out bluntly, saying: "do not pretend to be someone who helps immigrants." At the same time, it seems to me that privately Coetzee lives a very intense life. And for this reason he is not a secretary of the invisible, but a secretary of a living man.

Coetzee seems to be suggesting that a world ruled by women would be better than the male world. Take *Foe*, which shows how a woman was erased from the story of Robinson and Friday. Men erased the one who saved that world.

Well, is the world really ruled by men anyway? That is a male illusion! Men rule in Italy, but they have mothers, who are hated by their wives. Their wives one day will be mothers too, but they hate their husbands' mothers because they see that the motherly influence over men is much stronger than men themselves.

What do you need Coetzee for?

I need the stranger that he gives me. The subversiveness which is in all his books. I am looking for such theatrical opportunity which would best express this subversiveness, this perversion. Unfortunately, theatre is a finite world, while all of Coetzee's books are infinite. That is why theatre and film are bound to end up reduced and limited when juxtaposed with the freedom of literature. I do not want to transfer Coetzee to the theatre, because that is impossible. Literature teases the theatre with its freedom.

And what if Coetzee wrote a play?

I am running away from the theatre and I would prefer Coetzee not to write plays. I need his freedom. And turning to the theatre means depriving oneself of one's freedom.

What would you ask Coetzee if you met him one day?

I do not need to ask him questions. But I would like to observe him for a while.
I would like to sit down, look and try to understand.

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