

## *Voluntary Opacity: On Action and Gaining Voice (I)*

An interview with **Derek Attridge** by Waldemar Rapior

1.

“Let me add, *entirely* parenthetically, that I as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering. These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defences against that being-overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so” (JM Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, p. 248)

The passage seems to me to pull in two directions, both entirely characteristic of Coetzee: (1) “The fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering” is clearly a major theme in Coetzee’s fiction, from the suffering inflicted by the USA on the people of North Vietnam and by European adventurers on the indigenous peoples of South Africa to the misfortunes of the aging or disabled body to the lives of animals. Coetzee is thus offering a key to his fiction.

(2) Coetzee insists that he is *not* offering a key to his fiction, but a personal comment, “*entirely* parenthetically” rather than as a significant contribution to the discussion with David Attwell; he is warning us, as it were, that his work may operate in different ways in the world even though it seems to him “transparently” just a defence against the power of the spectacle of suffering over him. He does not present himself as a better reader of his own work than, potentially, other readers.

2.

“Why has he taken on this job? To lighten the burden on Bev Shaw? For that it would be enough to drop off the bags at the dump and drive away. For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honour and dishonour anyway?

For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing [...]

Curious that a man as selfish as he should be offering himself to the service of dead dogs. There must be other, more productive ways of giving oneself to the world, or to an idea of the world. One could for instance work longer hours at the clinic. One could try to persuade the children at the dump not to fill their bodies with poisons. Even sitting down more purposefully with the Byron libretto might, at a pinch, be construed as a service to

mankind. But there are other people to do these things – the animal welfare thing, the social rehabilitation thing, even the Byron thing. He saves the honour of corpses because there is no one else stupid enough to do it. That is what he is becoming: stupid, daft, wrongheaded.” (David Lurie, *Disgrace*)

Lurie – and I would add, Coetzee, at least the Coetzee that emerges through the fiction – refuses the notion of an instrumental or utilitarian ethics. Acts that are of no obvious efficacy in the world may still be ethical, since, as Kierkegaard, Levinas and Derrida argue, ethics is not a matter, finally, of calculation. Lurie, like Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron* or Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals*, acts to “save his soul” but this has nothing to do with the idea of a Christian afterlife, suggesting rather that the motives for ethical action may be a sense that to do otherwise would in some way betray or deaden or besmirch the self. Such an act, since the subject cannot advance a rational justification for it, may feel stupid or wrongheaded; ranged against it is all the conventional wisdom of social and religious convention. A philosophical justification of an ethics of this kind would be unconvincing, but in a brilliantly written novel the reader can be led to feel its rightness. Coetzee invites the reader to experience the rightness of Lurie’s actions, motivated not by a theory of the good but by an obscure sense, or ‘idea’ (but not a philosophical idea), of the kind of world he wants to live in.

3.

“And all of this pleading and petitioning I had to do alone, unaided, with my bad English that I had learned in school out of books. In Brazil it would have been easy, in Brazil we have these people, we call them despachantes, facilitators: they have contacts in the government offices, they know how to steer your papers through the maze, you pay them a fee and they do all the unpleasant business for you one-two-three. That was what I needed in Cape Town: a facilitator, someone to make things easier for me. Mr Coetzee could have offered to be my facilitator. A facilitator for me and a protector for my girls. Then, just for a minute, just for a day, I could have allowed myself to be weak, an ordinary, weak woman. But no, I dared not relax, or what would have become of us, my daughters and me?” (Adriana Nascimento, *Summertime*)

The section of *Summertime* in which Adriana is interviewed gives a powerful picture of the difficulties and suffering of the immigrant – a topic particularly relevant to South Africa, which is suffering from increasing xenophobia, but of course relevant in many other places too. In York in June 2011, Coetzee read from his novel in progress, a passage which also conveyed with great intensity the experience of the outsider, at the mercy of an inscrutable and bureaucratic system – shades of Kafka, of course. In *Summertime* this evocation of the troubles of the immigrant is played out against the irony of an author offering self-criticism: the young John could have done more to help (though we do not know if this episode is autobiographical or fictional). This irony runs through all three memoirs, in different keys; it is another mode in which the sense of helplessness against suffering alluded to in the first passage above is revealed, and at the same time the writing serves in its own way to make some amends.

## Questionnaires:

**1. Do we need, today, any alternative scenarios for how we should organise the world we live in, a capitalist world that absorbs all alternatives and turns them into products?**

Of course. I do not think this is a view that has any special relevance to my career as a literary scholar, though, or a reader of Coetzee; it comes from observing what is happening around me. However, I would say that I sense in Coetzee's work, fictional and nonfictional, a dislike of, and at times a despair at, the effects of the capitalist system which controls our daily lives with which I am fully in sympathy. The picture of the university suffering from the "great rationalization" at the start of *Disgrace*, for instance, is one I recognize all too easily.

**2. What, in your opinion, is the alternative to the world today?**

I am not an economist, and unfortunately any recalibration of the world of human relations – a valuing of community over individualism, an ethic of sharing over the pursuit of gain – would require a reconstruction of our economic foundations.

**3. Does art still have anything to say and is there any chance that the artist and their work or the thinker and their communication will be heard?**

Art can work instrumentally to good effect because of the pleasure it provides, which may enable it to operate for political ends, but *as art* it is not in the business of social and political betterment. It does change people who engage openly with it, and though there is no guarantee that these changes will be for the good, one has to trust artists to find ways of unsettling the widespread complacency of our cultures.

**4. How should meta-languages be created; meta-languages that provide motivation and meaning? Are such meta-languages possible?**

One can only work within the language (in the widest sense) that have constituted one as a subject. Since we share these languages, to find a way of opening our own language to otherness is to change the language for others as well. This is not a meta-language, but a pushing at the limits of what language enables us to think and say.

**5. J.M. Coetzee poses several questions to the artist/thinker: who are the 'We' for whom we should try to change the way we live our lives? Is 'We' restricted by any limits?**

There is no single 'we,' but there is no single 'I' either. What I have called the 'idioculture' of the subject – the singular matrix of cultural materials and proclivities that constitute an individual – consists of mental and emotional contents shared with many others across a series of overlapping and widening groups. Thus to produce the genuinely new out of these contents – to welcome the other, to disturb

the complacency – is to offer to some, at least, of these groups the possibility of change. We can't predict what those changes will be, or who the various 'we' 's are who will be changed.

**6. In your opinion, can a strategy of cultivating life or, as J.M. Coetzee writes, "willed obscurity" be effective? Do ambiguity and compliance fit our world? How do you understand the phrase "willed obscurity?"**

This question goes back to earlier questions about ethics, suffering and action. One's own choice of a mode of living does not imply a choice on behalf of others, and obscurity is only possible if others choose not to be obscure. But ethical action, including action that may relieve suffering, can occur in many different ways; and art is an example of an ethical action that does not claim to "do good" in the world in an instrumental sense, but rather chooses a kind of obscurity, a refusal of the path of didacticism or moralising, *Gelassenheit* rather than promotion and self-promotion. The phrase "willed obscurity" is used by J. C. in *Diary of a Bad Year*, so it is not Coetzee speaking *in propria persona*; and one might question this apparent approbation of passivity in the face of malign state authority. However, I suspect it does reflect one impulse in Coetzee himself as a citizen: not to march on the streets or stage sit-ins (not since the one that got him into so much trouble) but to attempt to contribute to the betterment of humanity by quieter methods. J. C. also calls it "inner emigration", which is an interesting phrase from the pen of one who chose real emigration, partly in search of a quieter, less fraught environment than existed in South Africa. The writer, or one kind of writer at any rate, needs a space in which to work that is relatively free from the stress of daily, in-your-face demands. The writing that results, however, need not be understated or quietist; I wouldn't say that Coetzee's writing has ever been that.

**7. How do you perceive the personal gesture of Harold Pinter who, in 2005, not being able to receive the Nobel Prize in literature in person, recorded a lecture containing, what J.M. Coetzee called, "a savage attack on Tony Blair". This, according to Coetzee, required "some gumption" because Pinter knew that he would be "slickly refuted, disparaged, even ridiculed", for instance with the rhetoric of democratic freedoms, including the freedom of speech, and the politicians' efforts to protect these freedoms against extremists. In this context please respond to two issues. First of all, could Pinter have actually proven anything? Secondly, Coetzee further says of Pinter: "[...] there come times when the outrage and the shame are so great that all calculation, all prudence, is overwhelmed and one must act, that is to say, speak."**

I would simply endorse Coetzee's comments, noting that Coetzee himself, though he has at times spoken out *in propria persona* in the same way that Pinter did (notably in the Jerusalem Prize speech), prefers the "wilful obscurity" of the novel to do ethical work in a very different way. So, of course, did Pinter, whose plays will have a much wider and long-lasting effect than his attack on Blair, important though that was at the time.