

# Coetzee / Beckett

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**Abstract.** This article presents an analysis of relations between works of J. M. Coetzee and Samuel Beckett. The primary research material covers novels and essays written by the former, and particular attention is given to those essays by Coetzee which deal with writings of Beckett (e.g. "Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett"). Because Coetzee's professional interest in Beckett has lasted for over forty years, it enables us to talk about certain shifts in his literary attitudes and evolution of his professional stance. It seems that among the key features which put these two writers together are the following: their profound belief in the integrity of form (style) and content, their fascination with philosophical dualism and existential homelessness, and, finally, their skeptical attitude towards the academic world.

**Keywords:** J. M. Coetzee; Samuel Beckett; integrity of style and content; philosophical dualism; existential homelessness

"I am not a Kafka scholar. In fact, I am not a scholar at all.  
My status in the world does not rest on whether  
I am right or wrong in claiming that Kafka read Kohler's book.  
But I would like to think he did, and the chronology makes  
my speculation at least plausible."

(J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*)

## 1.

J. M. Coetzee's unwillingness to address the public at celebratory events is well known. Perhaps it is then interesting that over the years – even after he was awarded the Nobel prize – Coetzee has attended a number of Samuel Beckett conferences all over the world. Beckett's work was the core subject of Coetzee's

academic career in the 1960s and 70s (he wrote his PhD and several articles on the style of Beckett's novels). Since then Coetzee has commented on Beckett, still keeps up-to-date with present developments in Beckett studies and is an honorary member of The Samuel Beckett Society. It is perhaps enough to mention his detailed review of the first volume of Beckett's letters, published on 30 April 2009 in *The New York Review of Books*. In it, he authenticates some mechanisms of academic discourse relevant to Beckett's work, and supports with his own authority the demanding – and expensive – project of editing Beckett's letters.

This is not the only gesture of this kind. In 2006 – at the centennial Beckett conference in Tokyo – Coetzee presented an article titled "Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett," later published by Rodopi in *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*. He is also the author of the foreword to the fourth volume of the centennial Grove edition of Beckett's work. In June 2011 Coetzee was a key figure at the University of York's Samuel Beckett conference *Out of the Archive*, where he not only attended some of the academic sessions but also became the centre of public attention during the prose reading by John Banville, which he listened to, sitting in the first row of the auditorium.

The meeting with Coetzee at the York conference was noteworthy in itself. The university's largest lecture hall gathered crowds of renowned academics, university authorities, students and about a hundred Beckett specialists.

A welcoming address was delivered by one of the conference hosts, Professor Derek Attridge, himself a literary scholar born in South Africa. At some point in the speech Attridge compares Coetzee to Beckett on a personal, not artistic, level:

But an introduction can also express the personal feelings of the introducer, and I will seize this opportunity to say how much, over the twenty or so years I have known him, I've admired John Coetzee's integrity, honesty and generosity – qualities that he shares with the writer whose importance to him he has often acknowledged, Samuel Beckett. (Attridge 2011, unpublished)

Following the address, Coetzee expressed his gratitude for the warm welcome and announced that for the next forty minutes he would read an opening fragment from the book he was working on then. After exactly forty minutes he stopped, thanked the audience for their attention and – after a round of applause and a short break, with no time devoted to questions from the public – sat down to sign books for a long queue of readers.

## 2.

In the interview published in the post-conference issue of *Modernism/Modernity* Coetzee claims that the role of Beckett in his life should not be overestimated

("There are writers who have meant more to me than he has" (Rainey et al. 2011: 847)). However, the opinions he expresses on Beckett are in a similar vein to those Beckett expressed on Joyce and Proust in his renowned essays: <sup>1</sup> they tell us more about their author than about the matter they discuss. On the one hand, they offer insight into themes and literary issues important to the writer himself, and on the other hand they show us what interests him in authors he appreciates on an artistic level. In other words, they offer the writer's reading of the works he considers important. Coetzee's essays on Beckett are yet more important, for the simple reason that they were written over a period of more than forty years. What seems interesting then, is not only the transformation of writing style but also Coetzee's awareness of his own changing status.

Originally published in 1970, "The Comedy of Point of View in Beckett's *Murphy*" opens with the following, very academic passage:

Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* (1934) presents itself as, among other things, a sequence of some 3,500 sentences, written down by an author who is not entirely identifiable with a fictional narrator or scribe who in some sense "knew" Murphy and his friends in Dublin and London and now records their adventures. As author, Beckett (or "Beckett") lends his authority to these sentences by printing them under his name; he also delegates this authority to his narrator, who on occasion delegates it in turn to various of the characters. He accomplishes this last by quoting their words (dialogue) or by retiring from the page and allowing them to take over his narrative authority. For the leader to assign an authority to each sentence is thus a potentially complex task. (Coetzee 2002: 31)

In this argument the budding but still unknown academic from the University of Cape Town presents his subject matter with remarkable hesitation (notice the careful "in some sense"). Coetzee announces that he will discuss Beckett's shifts in point of view, often connected with different narrative levels, and offers an apt distinction between Beckett and "Beckett," narrator and character. He indirectly refers to Beckett's obsession with numbers <sup>2</sup> ("a sequence of some 3,500 sentences").

Coetzee uses a totally different tone in his short "Samuel Beckett in Cape Town - An Imaginary History" (Coetzee: 2006). In this miniature essay Coetzee refers for the first time to a letter from 1937, found in the archives of the University of Cape Town, in which Beckett applies for the position of teacher of Italian. This time Coetzee does not employ academic style, but constructs his own story on the possible - but not factual - development of events. He imagines that Beck-

<sup>1</sup> I refer to the following essays: "Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce" and "Proust".

<sup>2</sup> The role of numbers in Beckett is discussed, for example, by Libera 2012: 63.

ett receives the job to remain for good in Cape Town and for the two writers to meet in reality – not only at the level of literary imagination. We read:

Since I would have been no less resistant to adopting Professor Beckett or anyone else as a spiritual father than Professor Beckett would have been to adopting me as a spiritual son, I would in all likelihood have left South Africa once I had graduated – as indeed happened – and have made my way, via England, to the United States. But I would certainly not have spent my time at the University of Texas laboring over a doctoral dissertation on Professor Beckett's prose style.

Whether I would have shaken off the influence of that prose style on my own – whether I would have wanted to shake it off – is another question entirely. (Coetzee 2006: 75–76)

Thus we further explore the question of style and, somehow, to the acknowledgement that Beckett's style has, to a degree, influenced Coetzee's. Both writers share a belief in the inseparable union of style (technique, form) and content. Beckett's famous sentence from the essay on Joyce ("Here form is content, content is form") resonates in Coetzee's note to *Doubling the Point*: "While trying to respect the character of the originals, I have, in the interest of clarity, done a fair amount of local revision. Style and content are not separable: it would be disingenuous for me to claim that my revisions have not touched the substance of the originals" (Coetzee 2002: vii, emphasis – T. W.).

These local changes influence the argumentation presented in the essays. This link must be even stronger in an artistic text. Coetzee the novice scholar discusses literature in totally different words – and with a completely different aim – than the now celebrated, accomplished Nobel prize-winning author. Coetzee is clearly aware that the status of his work has changed over the years. To express his admiration of Beckett's work – and to show solidarity with a group of Beckett scholars – it is enough for him to do what he did in York: to read a passage from his own narrative. Or to take part in an interview.

### 3.

We may assume that Coetzee – well acquainted with Beckett studies – was well aware of the kind of audience he was addressing. He must have known that his writing would be read against the background of Beckett's oeuvre. This kind of reading has been present in Coetzee's work throughout his career. Now, when his work is studied by academics, and at the beginning of his literary career, when he probably could not expect immediate scholarly attention around the globe or, perhaps, could not avoid some informing influences – the texts demand close textual reading.

Coetzee provokes this kind of reading in "Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett." Much of what is discussed in the essay (and I do not mean only the Cape Town anecdote) applies to Coetzee's own work as well.

Let us have a look at three aspects of this issue. Firstly, "Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett" clearly parodies academic style. Secondly, the situation of laboratory animals, presented in parts five and six, refers to a problem Coetzee touches upon in his own work. Thirdly, philosophical dualism and existential homelessness are what both writers' works definitely have in common.

As I said, the essay was presented during an academic conference and published in an academic journal. Its style only imitates academic patterns: it employs definitions, interjections, syllogisms and other aspects of scholarly diction. This is, for example, very clear in the description of the experiment. But we quickly realise that the entire text is only speculative – it parodies scholarly patterns of speech, and thus resembles the monologue Lucky presents in *Waiting for Godot*. The speaker in the essay (is it Coetzee or "Coetzee"?) plays with the possibilities this kind of discourse has to offer: "If the being, the creature, the ape, It, wants the nut (always, in these stories of bizarre situations to which you awake, it comes down to something edible), It must open the correct box, where the correct box is defined as the box containing the nut" (Coetzee 2008: 24–25).

The title of the essay announces its interest in Beckett. But the sentence I have just quoted – and especially its style – has much to do with Coetzee's own work. An issue he often explores is exactly this: the confrontation of rational reasoning, systemic order of philosophy with the inexplicable, untranslatable elements of (not only) human nature. It would seem that literary fascination can be explained not so much in philosophical context as in the way the writer is defined as somebody who does not provide answers to all questions about his work.

This is visible in *Elizabeth Costello*, a story about an Australian writer who presents lectures at academic conferences. Her presentations are not clear enough for the public. At some point she confesses: "I don't know what I think" (Coetzee 2003: 90) and later: "John, I don't know what I want to do. I just don't want to sit silent" (104). Although it would be all too naive to read Costello as a one-dimensional alter ego of Coetzee, the metaliterary aspect, as well as the insistent claim that the objectives of a writer are different from those of a philosopher, strike us as crucial elements of the text.

Let us have a look at a fragment from Costello's lecture called "The Philosophers and the Animals": "But the fact is, if you had wanted someone to come here and discriminate for you between mortal and immortal souls, or between rights and duties, you would have called in a philosopher, not a person whose sole claim to your attention is to have written stories about made-up people" (Coetzee 2003: 66).

A writer creates “stories about made-up people” and in this way answers some philosophical and ethical questions, but his primary role is to multiply questions, not answers. Beckett’s often repeated statement seems most appropriate here: “I am not a philosopher.”<sup>3</sup> Coetzee himself makes his character Elizabeth Costello utter the following words: “I am not a philosopher of mind but an animal exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word I speak” (Coetzee 2003: 71).

#### 4.

Yet another element important to both Beckett and Coetzee is the juxtaposition of different styles of discourse. Coetzee enhances the dialogic character of his work by introducing two (*Dusklands*) or more (*Diary of a Bad Year*) narrators and by diversifying the individual speech styles of particular characters and narrators. Thus the texts show very clearly that conventions of language that protagonists use determine their personal contradictions. Elizabeth Costello’s public and private means of expression, and Eugene Dawn’s notes from the first chapter and from his report, are good examples. Coetzee’s texts multiply points of view, provoke contradictions, violate the logic of narration, and often lead to inconclusive endings. In *Diary of a Bad Year* the effect is achieved in an interesting way – three completely different narratives intertwine despite numerous differences in style.

Both Beckett and Coetzee are fascinated with extreme individualism and possible escapes from schematic thinking. This sort of interest shapes the plot of many of their texts. Examples abound: Beckett’s unstaged play *Eleutheria* presents Victor, an anti-protagonist whose main aim is to make everyone give up on him. Similarly, in *The Life and Times of Michael K* Coetzee presents a consistently antisocial main figure. In Beckett’s *Eleutheria* the alienation and internal autonomy of an individual are highlighted in the last scene, when Victor turns his back to the audience. In *The Life and Times of Michael K* a similar role is played by the attitude of Michael K, who ignores the whole external world, its military conflicts and social expectations, but nevertheless tries to make his dream about a garden come true.

Both Victor and Michael K (as well as Murphy, Molloy, Watt, Protagonist from *Catastrophe*, Elizabeth Costello, Jacobus Coetzee and Eugene Dawn) are on

<sup>3</sup> This claim is discussed by H. Porter Abbott in his article “I’m not a Philosopher.” It is perhaps worth quoting the following passage here: “It is no stretch to include in this take on Beckett’s aesthetic a resistance to philosophical mastery as well, especially when reading philosophically means a happy matching of fictional content to philosophical idea, with its implicit relegation of fiction to a second-order discipline in which philosophy is the master and fiction the handmaiden. As a critical practice, this is often interpretation by circularity: finding in the text what is already known in the abstract” (Abbott 2008: 81).

the run from other people. Yet it is important to note that all of these characters do so in their most specific, private ways. Still, any civilized, culture-aware observer will inevitably find their behaviour irrational.

## 5.

Let us return to the way Coetzee sees Samuel Beckett (Beckett himself, not the distilled abstract construct called "Beckett"). In the review of the first volume of Samuel Beckett's letters ("The Making of Samuel Beckett") we read: "By day he kept to his room, lying with his face to the wall, refusing to speak, refusing to eat" (Coetzee 2009). Such an observation puts Beckett in line with the group of protagonists I listed above. The following description of Michael K offers a meaningful echo:

He spent a whole day lying under cover watching the farmhouse, while the sun moved in its arc from left to right and the shadows moved across the stoep from right to left. Was the strip of deeper darkness in the centre an open doorway or the door itself? It was too far to see. When night came and the moon rose, he approached as far as the dead orchard. There was no light in the house, no sound. [...] He spent the rest of the night lying on a sack in the shed, waiting. He even slept, though he was not used to sleeping by night. In the morning he re-entered the house. (Coetzee 1983: 146)

## 6.

The style that parodies academic discourse may be connected to Coetzee's scepticism towards – and textual critique of – the rules governing the academic world. From numerous examples of such an attitude presented in *Elizabeth Costello*, I would like to mention one, which perhaps aptly summarises some of the limitations of academic interest. At some point the Australian writer sits at a table with professor Godwin and his wife.

Elizabeth Costello. She can see that the name means nothing to him. His own name is on the place card before him: Professor Peter Godwin.

‘I presume you teach here,’ she goes on, making conversation. ‘What do you teach?’

‘I teach literature, English literature.’

[...]

Professor Godwin addresses himself to his salad. There is a silence. From across the table the woman in black, whom she takes to be Godwin's wife, gives her a smile. ‘Did I hear you say your name is Elizabeth Costello?’ she says. ‘Not the writer Elizabeth Costello?’

‘Yes, that is what I do for a living. I write.’

[...]

Mrs Godwin is speaking to her husband, flashing him looks. 'Elizabeth Costello the writer, dear,' she is saying.

'Oh yes,' says Professor Godwin; but clearly the name rings no bell.

'My husband is in the eighteenth century,' says Mrs Godwin.

'Ah yes. A good place to be. The Age of Reason.'

'I do not believe we see the period in quite so uncomplicated a way nowadays,' says Professor Godwin. He seems to be about to say more, but then does not. (Coetzee 2003: 166-167)

The professor, a specialist in 18th century literature, has no idea that he is talking to a contemporary writer. The observation contained in the episode seems all the more interesting when we consider the profound erudition (literary and philosophical) that emanates from both Coetzee's and Beckett's respective works.

In places both writers refer to almost the same concepts: the words dead Elizabeth Costello utters in the last chapter of the book ("We change from day to day, and we also stay the same" - Coetzee 2003: 221) remind us of *Endgame* and *Happy Days* as much as the words of Jacobus Coetzee ("I made my way to the Golgotha I had indicated, the village midden-heap, where the four thieves were waiting for me with Scheffer and their guards" (Coetzee 2004: 102)) echo the biblical allusions in both *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. As these random examples show, within the Judeo-Christian tradition Coetzee sometimes tends to follow Samuel Beckett. Which of course does not mean the two authors agree all the way. Their attitudes may differ, and yet, the selection of motifs they refer to is, at times, parallel.

## 7.

Let us return to Coetzee's opinions on Beckett. In the opening of "Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett" Coetzee writes on Beckett's dualism in the following way:

In his writings, Samuel Beckett is a philosophical dualist. Specifically, he writes as if he believes that we are made up of, that we are, a body plus a mind. Even more specifically, he seems to believe that the connection between mind and body is mysterious, or at least unexplained. At the same time he - that is to say, his mind, finds the dualistic account of the self ludicrous. This split attitude is the source of much of his comedy. (Coetzee 2008: 19)

Again we may notice attempts at making one sentence more precise and specific by adding another. Such verbal somersaulting points to academic objectivism on the one hand, and to a multiplication of the speaking subject on the other. In this way the claims of the speaking voice become relative and unreliable.

Two fragments from *Dusklands* seem a good ending that again refers to dualism:

I am mistaken if I think that Coetzee will save me. [...] He cannot understand a man who experiences his self as an envelope holding his body-

parts together while inside it he burns and burns. (Coetzee 2004: 32)  
[...]

How is it, they must ask themselves, that a fellow in a not uncreative line of work into which he has poured much of himself should suffer fantasies of being bound in a prison of flesh and lead so wretched a married life that he tries to kill his child? (Coetzee 2004: 47)

It appears that Coetzee's ways of looking at Samuel Beckett and at his own fictional characters do not differ much. The same rules seem to apply to all subjects.

We may be tempted to claim that not only Beckett, but also Coetzee's own work is governed by the same rules that apply to his protagonists. Elizabeth Costello is a good case in point. Her son talks about her in the following way: "Don't you think that that is what she has been doing all her life: measuring herself against the masters? Does no one in your profession recognize it? (Coetzee 2003: 26)

Among the masters J. M. Coetzee has been measuring himself against, we will find not only Franz Kafka, but also Samuel Beckett.

*Translation Miłosz Wojtyna*

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