

An Ordinary Man

An interview with **Nicholas Lens** by Dorota Semenowicz

Who proposed working together on an opera, you or Coetzee?

Me. I wrote to him ten years ago, probably in 2002. I admired his output. I talked about it a lot with my friends. Many of them found it overintellectualized, too heavy. But I considered him an important writer with works to become classics.

How did you know that Coetzee would like to write an opera?

I read it between the lines in *Disgrace*. Scenes in the book where Lurie takes care of old dogs, takes their dead bodies to a crematorium, were full of unbelievable sorrow – I felt that Coetzee loves opera and music. I do not know in which sentence I felt it but I did.

In *Disgrace*, Lurie also writes an opera about Byron. I did not expect that Coetzee himself would write a libretto though.

I took the risk of writing for the first time to someone I did not know but whom I admired. I sent it to his editor in London and I added “if you ever work on an opera, I would like to work with you.”

And what was the result?

A lot of time went by, but no answer came. What I did not know is that John changed publishers in that period. So my letter got to him practically one year later. Then he wrote that if my offer still stood, he wanted to talk about it. That must have been in 2003.

But Coetzee only wrote *Slow Man* in 2005!

We did not rush into writing the opera. We communicated for a long time. In 2005 I showed him a film I made: *Love is the Only Master I Will Serve*. He watched it and wrote that he was busy writing a book and one of the scenes could be our starting point. He was thinking about *Slow Man* and the meeting of Paul Rayment and Marijana arranged by Elizabeth Costello. It is the most theatrical scene in the whole book.

I did not find either this scene or the whole book theatrical at all. I was genuinely surprised when I heard that you were working on *Slow Man*. In the scene you are talking about, Paul is blindfolded and Marijana is blind – the characters are immobile. Is there anything theatrical in this scene?

But we doubled the characters with contemporary dancers. Which liberates them of a literally static posture. So there is a tension.

The novel plays out in Paul's head. It is a record of thoughts of a frustrated, desperate man who does not really feel comfortable, not in relationships, not in anything actually, a man who does not come to terms with his unhappiness: it is almost a monologue. And this particular scene is not happening in his head: it is real. Paul does not know what he can expect of this meeting. The tension grows slowly – we get into a kind of a trance state. It is a very intimate scene, also due to the sexual intercourse which takes place. John and I wanted to keep this intimate mood. We agreed that three characters were sufficient: Paul, Marijana and Costello. Later, they were joined by a choir which was supposed to reflect Marijana. This is the only person in the book Paul fantasizes about. At first, we wanted a female choir to wear nurses' outfits.

How was it possible to transfer Coetzee's writing style, which is usually described by critics as reserved, clear and analytical to a theatrical language? Maybe this is the reason why it was so difficult for me to imagine his works as opera, which is rather associated with emotions. His writing style is very direct, even rough.

I would rather say that it is purified and controlled, a writing style which is very literary and devoid of all unnecessary fillers.

Maybe this creates an impression of emotionlessness, especially in *Disgrace*. In *Slow Man*, he is more affectionate towards his characters.

In *Disgrace* the story is told from the professor's perspective. The style is emotionless because this is what the character is like. We do not want to identify with him.

Neither with Paul Rayment.

But what Paul does is nowhere near a crime. As John says: "He is just a guy." There is nothing interesting about him. From my point of view, Coetzee starts where many other writers stop. He does not hide behind and from anything. There are no compromises. Suddenly, something happens that terrifies us. Following the characters in his books may be painful but also enriching and it leads everyone who makes an effort to self-exploration.

There is also a lot of love in his books. Bev Shaw says: "I do not think we are ready to die, any of us, without being escorted." Elizabeth Costello talks about intimacy, the need to be with somebody: "we old people do not need love, we need care" – your opera ends with these words, Costello also talks about it in the book. At the end of *Disgrace*, Coetzee writes that Lurie learned to give it "what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love."

Or *The Master of Petersburg* – a seldom discussed book. The way in which a father describes love to his son! It is a prose full of emotions. So to me, his writings are not analytical. Even if others have different opinions, I think that one needs to have a lot of love for humanity to write about people in such a cogent and accurate way; to explore and expose them. It demands a lot of courage and years of self-exploration to stimulate such emotions in oneself and rake them up.

So what Paul says to Costello: “Have a little charity. Then perhaps you may find it in you to write” could also be Coetzee the writer’s motto?

It might be better to ask Coetzee directly about that.

And what are the feelings between Paul and Marijana in relation to their meeting?

They wanted intimacy, but the meeting went wrong. It could not go well. Both have not made love in a long time, and Paul looks for love to give and/or share. He does not have children, his wife left him, he does not live an exceptional life. Paul loses something in an accident, but at the same time he gains something else. He has to reorganize his life. We open ourselves more in such situations. When I lose everything I have, I might think about what there is still left instead of wallowing in grief. Is it not strange that he agrees to become a character in the book Costello is going to write? He voluntarily becomes her puppet. If it was not for the accident, he might not have decided to do that. He might have said: “we do not have anything in common, leave me alone.” In these circumstances he is weak and vulnerable. In the scene we are discussing now he is not only legless, but also blind.

What is Costello to Paul? Sting of remorse, the voice of his fate? How do you show their relationship in the opera?

It is difficult to say who she is to Paul and Marijana. She always turns up unexpectedly; she is omnipresent and she organizes everything. I was shocked when she appeared in the book. She is a character from another novel; a writer with her box of literary tricks. We do not know if she is real; whether she is a phantom living only in Paul’s head or a real person who comes to Paul and organizes his meeting with Marijana. And maybe it is he who organized this meeting himself? We can also see Costello as a symbol of old age. When we do not control our lives any more, we do not have anything to say. We were active and now we depend on others. Paul resists Costello, he constantly opposes her, till the end. Costello humiliates him: “How did you feel as you tumbled through the air?” It is cruel. And he replies: “I felt sad.” He shows his emotions. Costello is the heart of the dramatic tension, she visibly marks her presence.

Have you noticed that female characters in Coetzee’s books are extraordinarily strong? Costello, Bev Shaw, Lucy – Lurie’s daughter, Marijana accept things as they are, they are not afraid to express themselves. Men are withdrawn, passive, unable to act; they cannot go beyond ... let us call it rational thinking.

In the opera, Paul is not withdrawn. He gets stronger with time. Costello concludes the opera, but like someone who hums in a kitchen: “we old people do not need love, we need care.” It is a very moving part. We need someone to help us go down the stairs and close our eyes. The end is very peaceful – with reduced orchestration. Only Costello sings. The beginning is very depressing – it is human. When you lose your leg, you are dependent on others. You feel sorry for yourself. Maybe Paul is a suicide from the beginning to the end, and Costello is only a character from his drug hallucination? He takes so many painkillers that such an interpretation is also possible. But he sings: “pain is nothing.” He does not want pain to dominate his life. He convinces himself that he can handle it. On the one hand, there is this courage to deal with the pain; on the other hand, there is an underestimation of the value of life. I hope I created music which speaks about the unknown in characters, accentuates them or complicates their thoughts and feelings. Some people say that opera is artificial, that singing increases distance. I think that it is the other way round. Music gives meaning to things that are barely perceptible in words. Voice is a soul, it cannot lie. At least I can hear the difference when singers lie.

In *Disgrace*, Lurie says that writing a libretto about Byron would be a way of “giving oneself to the world,” “a service to mankind.” Is it a kind of commitment?

It is a kind of commitment. I think, however, that in my case – I cannot speak for John but I think it might be the same – it is not a social commitment. My way of writing is very instinctive, basic; intellectualizing is only the next stage. Maybe it is a way of ‘giving, throwing oneself into something?’ Maybe this is the reason why I should not prejudge whether a sound I have just heard was right or not. I should write it down even if I remove it later. I can decide afterwards if it contributes to what I want to tell or not.

Is writing about people who suffer, who cannot come to terms with their disability, not a kind of judgment on our world?

It might, but it can only be stated afterwards. Not while writing. Of course, we always filter content. It always comes down to the question whether something is worth telling. We would not choose characters which do not interest us. The choice of modeling material could be perceived as a kind of commitment, although in my opinion this is an exaggeration. When I decide to write about somebody whom I find not particularly interesting, I will situate them in a social or situational context which is interesting; I am going to think about which story I want to tell, whether it is interesting, attractive for readers or not. I guess people could perceive Coetzee as a committed writer. But I do not. His commitment “is not planned.” First of all, this is a commitment to a creation of the fictional world. Elizabeth Costello, in a book titled after her, has to recite the statement of her beliefs in front of the Commission. “It is not my profession to believe, just to write” – she answers. Can writers believe in something else than the characters they write about?

Should he not believe in something else than the fiction he creates to become more authentic as a writer?

If we believe in something else, it is impossible to create authentic, independent characters. This is what Costello says. Is that true? I do not know. I think that Coetzee empowers characters which are not interesting at first glance. This is his form of commitment; he commits to people who do not mean much in society.

What is this empowerment?

Coetzee gives them a voice, as he gave it to the legless Paul Rayment. He recreates their thinking process, mental state. There are many people in such situations. We do not know about their frustrations, dreams – do they still have dreams? These are not people who appear on Saturday night shows on commercial channels. Coetzee lets them say anything: bad, good, inappropriate things. Just like the professor who behaved in a way considered to be wicked and repugnant. Was it analyzed and planned? Is this Coetzee's affection to such people in real life? I do not know. Is being committed possible only when you care about real people born and bred, and you think about how to change their lives? No. It is literature, fiction – for this reason it has been written – not a document. There are two important painters in Flanders nowadays: Luc Tuymans, who, in my opinion, is politically committed, and Michael Borremans. I saw a great exhibition of Borremans' works and I had tears in my eyes. He is not a committed artist, but he can evoke the strongest emotions. I think it might be similar with Coetzee; he is rather like Borremans. The beauty of his books is in the way he describes characters. Of course, the choice of characters does matter. We can say that he gives them a voice, but is it his goal? I honestly doubt it. People in Borremans' paintings seem to be poor, uneducated, always deprived of something. But is it relevant? Does it affect perceptions of his works? What is really important is whether our emotions are universal. A rich Californian who loses his thirteen-year-old son will perceive this loss just like a poor man who works in a Mongolian factory. They will find the same emotions in each other although they differ so much. What they both feel is what interests me. What I see in others is a form of commitment. Social context is not paramount here.

Did working with Coetzee influence the way you compose?

I write instinctively without presupposing anything. This is a moment when something just pours out of me. Even if I were to spend the rest of my life in prison, I would write. I would write even if someone burned all I wrote. The writing process itself is important to me. Sometimes I come to understanding of my work long after I wrote it; via the interpretation of someone I do not even know. I follow vibes. Notes come up by themselves. I do not know if they are useful. If they are recorded – this is a secondary issue. I can only hope so. Working with Coetzee taught me that it is possible to stop this flash and filter it at the same time, peel it like an apple. Now, I am writing in a more reserved way. But it is not only John's influence, also contemporary Flemish dance. My inspirations come from disciplines other than music.

Are you planning a new opera?

Yes. John and I decided to write two more operas together.

Translation Karolina Drejerska