

Voluntary Opacity: On Action and Gaining Voice (II)

An interview with **Derek Attridge** by Paweł Mościcki

1. In your book *The Singularity of Literature* you stress the fact that both writing and reading literary text has much to do with the encounter with the other. In deconstruction there is always a distinction made between two kinds of otherness: otherness of national, social, gender (relative) difference and an original alterity of the other. What is happening with this distinction in the process of reading Coetzee's fiction?

All fiction, all literature, when it is read as literature, operates on the basis of a singular encounter with a singular other. Of course, both singularities – that of the reader and that of the text (and the world which the text embodies) – are constituted within national, social, gender and many other frameworks, so an engagement with a novel, say, is an event in which my idioculture is exposed to a singular, and possibly inassimilable, arrangement of these forces. The “original alterity” of which you speak is not an absolutely independent entity, as if it arrived from Mars; it is a fabrication from the familiar materials of the culture and its psychic deposits. Coetzee, I believe, is among those writers who most fully integrate the two types of alterity, or, putting it differently, enable the reader most fully to participate in an event in which the singular other – the unique world of this text – is at the same time a nexus within a larger array of forces, political, social, economic, and so on.

2. Could we call Coetzee a realist writer? In recent years the question of realism – defined widely and not classically – has returned to the debates around literature and arts in general (e.g. traumatic realism of Mark Rothberg, the return of the real by Hal Foster). How can we place Coetzee's work in this context? What are effects of the real he produces in his books?

A huge question, of course. I am reminded of Coetzee's comment in an interview about the vast Atlas-like labour required to invest a fiction with all the trappings of a “real-world” environment. And of course in the chapter on realism in *Elizabeth Costello* he shows how easy it is to puncture the realist illusion and still convey compellingly

a simulacrum of the world we experience. Realism being the default mode in the tradition of the novel, I think what Coetzee has done across his many fictions is to play it like a keyboard, exposing its constructions while at the same time drawing on its power. It is interesting, though, that his challenge to *psychological* realism was greatest in his earlier fiction: Jacobus Coetzee is not an attempt at a convincing portrait of the inner life of a recognizable human being, and one might say the same about Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*. The later novels and memoirs maintain believable psyches – even when, in *Slow Man*, that psyche appears to belong to the author of the novel one is reading.

3. What is the role of metatextuality in Coetzee’s fiction? Can we say that in his recent books (*Slow Man*, *Elisabeth Costello*, *Diary of a Bad Year*) there is a growing importance of the forms that explicitly question the status of the literary text? It seems particularly important in the ways Coetzee is staging the figure of the writer mixing his own speech with the fictional biography of Elisabeth Costello (*Elisabeth Costello*) and inscribing her in the fictional world (*Slow Man*).

Metatextuality was present in Coetzee’s first works: the layers of (fictional) authors/editors, and the impossible narrative, in “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee;” the numbered paragraphs of *In the Heart of the Country*. But you are right that it has surfaced again very forcefully in more recent work. This question ties in with many of the earlier questions about the role and power of the artist: Coetzee in these recent works explores the figure of the writer, and turns reflexively on his own writing, in new and surprising ways. I think the essay on Erasmus in *Giving Offense* offers a clear account of the role of the writer as deriving his or her power, such as it is, from *not* espousing a fixed position, and Coetzee has tried to produce a kind of art that embodies this ironic commitment-without-finality.

4. Every writer uses in his work certain patterns, references or tropes from the literary tradition making them parts of a new literary arrangement or, as you call it in *The Singularity of Literature* as well as in *J.M Coetzee and the Ethics of Writing*, literary performance. In this sense every writer is a practicing literary historian. What history of literature can we read in Coetzee’s writings?

Coetzee himself has written perceptively about his own sources and allegiances, while admitting that the writer can never be sure where his or her own deepest resources have been derived. His predecessors are Beckett and Kafka, most obviously, for style and language and much more; Dostoevsky and Tolstoy for their ethical explorations; and beyond that a host of other writers he has read and absorbed, from Vergil to Shakespeare to T. S. Eliot and Joseph Brodsky. I think what appeals to him in particular in certain writers is something like integrity or honesty, which is not only an ethical question but also, and inseparably, a question of *style*: that is to say, these writers shape the language they use not to create effects, not to impress or move readers (though of course they may do this), but first of all in an attempt to express a truth – probably a dimly perceived, hard to access, and often painful truth – that demands articulation. Coetzee’s

essay "Confession and Double Thoughts," to which he gives particular importance in giving an account of his writing life to David Attwell in *Doubling the Point*, is the fullest discussion of this understanding of what it is to write a literary work. The distinctiveness of each writer's style is a sign of this attempt to be true to the self at the deepest level. At the same time, Coetzee is fully aware of the tradition of thought in which this places him – his writing on Rousseau and Wordsworth indicates the centrality of Romanticism for his outlook, for all his hard-edged scepticism and the distinctly unRomantic quality of his own style.

5. How could we describe "the politics and ethics of form" in Coetzee's work? Is his fiction able to respond to the recent renewal of the debate around "politics of aesthetics" (Jacques Rancière)? Or maybe it is a good starting point to deconstruct their hidden presuppositions?

Probably the latter: it seems to me his fiction (and some of his comments outside the fiction) challenges much that is said about aesthetics as politics. We could say that the realm of the aesthetic – or perhaps more accurately, of art – is a realm with no particular instrumental value in social life. The opera Lurie is attempting to write in *Disgrace*, for instance, does not lend itself to a politics of aesthetics, but at the same time it is valorised to an extent that puts it at least level with politics. (It is also another example of an art work seeking to articulate a truth of the self rather than make an impression on an audience.) This valorisation is difficult to justify in philosophical terms, as it is not a matter of rational argument; Lurie is answering a demand he scarcely comprehends. But here the aesthetic is close to the ethical as Coetzee understands it: not the obedience to moral rules but the struggle to hear and respond to the demand of the other – whether that be the "invisible" to which Elizabeth Costello feels obligated as a writer, or the animals of which Lurie becomes more and more aware, or the call of Byron's abandoned mistress and daughter that dominates the opera.

6. In the reception of Coetzee's work he is often treated exclusively as an author of fiction. At the same time he has written a considerable body of essays and published them in five volumes (*White Writing*, *Doubling the Point*, *Giving Offense*, *Stranger Shores*, *Inner Workings*). What is the importance of these texts and how are they related to Coetzee's novels?

First, Coetzee is a judicious, scrupulous and hard-working reviewer, notably for the *New York Review of Books*, and these reviews have been collected in *Stranger Shores* and *Inner Workings* and will probably result in further volumes. While admirable for their purpose, I do not think they constitute a very important part of his oeuvre. Second, he has written a number of essays (though less frequently in recent years) on literary topics, some collected in *Doubling the Point*, others making up the collections *White Writing* and *Giving Offense*. Even if Coetzee had never published a novel, these essays would stand as a significant achievement: he is undoubtedly one of the most important and influential commentators on South African literature and culture, and he

has written valuable essays on stylistics (on Kafka's "The Burrow," for instance) and on more general literary topics (confession, the 'classic,' Erasmian folly). And third, he has given interviews, some of which – especially those with David Attwell in *Doubling the Point* – seem to me to be profoundly insightful about some of the most important issues in literary studies. Of course, one has to add the 'fictional' lectures and essays in *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, many of which are significant contributions to debates about the treatment of animals, the role of humanism, the question of politics and shame, etc. The Coetzee who emerges from these texts – and the soon-to-be-published biography by the late John Kannemeyer confirms it – is of an intellectual thoroughly involved in the great ethical and political issues of the day, though cautious in his expressions of this involvement (hence the use of fictional settings for his most extreme views). Perhaps he learned this caution after the traumatic experience of being arrested, and sentenced to prison, after taking part in a protest occupation during the US-Vietnam war, which resulted in his forced return to South Africa. (The guilty verdict was overturned on appeal, but a great deal of damage had been done.) The main exception to this generalization is in relation to animals: Coetzee has been willing to go on record with quite outspoken comments on the industrial slaughter of animals, for example.

7. In *Diary of a Bad Year* there is an entry: "Best to leave the question open. What interests the reader more, anyhow, is the quality of the opinions themselves – their variety, their power to startle, the ways in which they match or do not match the reputations of their author." It seems that Coetzee has done a lot to show how ideas and thoughts live incorporated in a singular life including his own biography staged and described in his auto-fictional collection (*Boyhood, Youth, Summer*). How would you place his efforts in the constellation of contemporary theory of subjectivity and philosophy (for example Butler's "giving an account of oneself," Foucault's "courage of truth" or Sloterdijk's "philosophy as exercise")? What is the meaning of this "matching" between the idea and life for literary theory?

One could write a book on this topic. As you say, one of Coetzee's long-lasting projects is to show how the world of ideas cannot be separated from the world of human subjects and their desires and fears – and this includes his own ideas, and his own desires and fears. There is certainly a relation here with contemporary thinking about subjectivity, though I cannot say whether Coetzee is aware of the current debates. In the idea of "matching" opinions with reputations, Coetzee is advancing the notion that our reception of ideas is affected by our evaluation of the promoter of those ideas: when we read a philosopher or other commentator about whom we already have a set of assumptions, our response is going to be coloured by those assumptions. So it is not only a matter of writers presenting ideas that can never be purified of their own singular situations and histories; readers, too, can never respond as pure receptacles. I would go further – and I think this is implicit in Coetzee's writing – and say that just as the writer's responsibility (an impossible one, like all real responsibilities) is to be as aware as possible of the determining factors upon the writing, so the reader too has an

impossible responsibility to ascertain what is colouring his or her response and to take it into account.

8. The body of Coetzee's autobiographical works has a significant subtitle: *Scenes from Provincial Life*. Can we treat Coetzee as a "minor writer," the writer of something Deleuze and Guattari called "the minor literature"?

We are back with the question of "willed obscurity." There are certainly connections between the notion of a "minor literature" as advanced by Deleuze and Guattari: just as Kafka used the German language to produce literary works that undermined the major German tradition, so Coetzee uses the English language to mount a challenge to the dominant metropolitan tradition of English literature. It is interesting that when he felt he could no longer live in South Africa, it wasn't to America or Britain he went, but to another marginal English-speaking culture. At the same time, Coetzee is steeped in the major literary traditions of Europe, and his work reflects that deep familiarity – all the better to defamiliarize it, most obviously in the relation between *Foe* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and that between *The Master of Petersburg* and Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, but also in other works that estrange and complicate genres like those of the adventure story or the academic novel.