

The Creation of the Other

Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004)

*"A singularity marks a point where the curvative of a space-time is infinite, or, in other words, it possesses zero volume and infinite density."*¹

Connecting (if ever so involuntarily) Stephen Hawking's quantum physics and Péter Esterházy's *A szavak csodálatos életéből*² can be considered creative. That connection is fully subjective on my part, but induced by Derek Attridge. It seems that one cannot set out and create one single thing; it has to be and will be a universe from the start. And that is what Derek Attridge is doing. He picks a set of extensively used literary terms and redefining them forms a system, an ecology of their own. The result is a book that is creative in Attridge's second use of the term. It provokes thought forcing the *reader* to be creative.

Almost at the very beginning of his book, Attridge admits that the ideas he deals with are not original and attracted the attention of several scholars before him. His source is Derrida, but one can find parallel approaches in, for example, psychology just as easily. László Mérő³ identifies four levels of knowledge in practically any field, let it be science, art, craftsmanship, or other. The highest of these is the level of the "grandmaster" and its characteristics include translogi-

cal problem solving and intuitive thinking style. Basically, this means that when the "grandmaster" knows something she or he cannot necessarily tell how they know it. Attridge is fascinated by, and most importantly acknowledges this unfathomable realm of creative thinking. In fact, he acknowledges many (everyday) impossibilities. For example, there is no way to communicate the substance of literature through the words of a non-literary, that is non-artistic text. The other side of the paradox is that creative reading will frequently result in an inventive outlet of spoken or written words, a response. And this response, whether artistic or not, is not entirely independent of its source and will say something new about it.

In Attridge's reading an artwork cannot be labelled once and for all. Whether a literary piece is "inventive" or "original" is relative and depends on historical situation, on current theoretical outlooks and many other factors, that is, on the shifting framework in which it finds itself / we find it and ourselves. "The singular work is therefore not merely *available* for translation but is *constituted* in what may be thought of as an unending set of translations" (73). Literature is an event, an action in the present introducing the other in relation.

As his main enemy he identifies literary instrumentalism. Literature has no aim measurable in terms of politics or ethics. At the same time he fills *ethics* in

literature with a new meaning. Literature should be treated as literature, whatever that may be, with a certain degree of tolerance, or, rather, welcoming patience. "A responsible response to an inventive work of art, science, or philosophy . . . is one that brings it into being anew by allowing it . . . to refigure the ways in which I, and my culture, think and feel" (125).

The Singularity of Literature is an "inclusive" book. When Attridge is talking about a literary piece the essence of what he says can be understood in terms of other art forms, or even sciences. He is inviting us to explore human thinking under the guise of literature, allowing for the subjectivity of our own interpretation which in turn is part of the "event" of literature's two-sided creation. Giving up the demand of specificity to some extent and widening the scope of his terminology, Attridge's line of thoughts is easily accessible. Timothy Clark⁴ speaks highly of this quality in his review of *The Singularity of Literature*, but the praise sounds somewhat derogatory. He sentences the book to student use only and it is hard to argue with him. Nevertheless, it should be read by scholars for its exemplary lucidity and consistency. Attridge is moving his matter in quick spirals, and every new round fits finely into the structure of the whole. It could and should be used to freshen up literary theory.

Besides his dubious praise Clark brings up two main critical observations.

The first is that Attridge is not as intellectually challenging and satisfying as Derrida, although he relies heavily on Derrida's work; the merit of Attridge's book, he says again, lies in its readability. The second is "the risk that terms such as 'Same/other,' 'inventive,' and 'singular' may become too alarmingly applicable or empty."⁵ Clark might be right in his judgement. It all depends on how we read Attridge's book, what we take it for.

One has the feeling that Attridge did not choose the appropriate title. It is closer to books like the above-mentioned work by Méré dealing with thinking as such. *The Singularity of Literature* was written parallel with the more practical *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*⁶ focusing on prose fiction. Without its other half, *The Singularity of Literature* is not *special* enough to fulfil what the "literature" of the title promises. So, it is not surprising that reading it as an essay on literature, one of the best parts of the book is probably chapter seven, "Performance," which analyses Serote's poem, *The Actual Dialogue*, in detail. Attridge is walking around questions for which there are no absolute answers. A question without answer is alterity itself without the possibility of accommodation, which attracts our inventive capacities. A question perpetually in search of an answer is a singularity, very little, almost nothing, possessing infinite density.

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Notes

1. Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (London: Bantam Books, 1988).
2. Péter Esterházy, "A szavak csodálatos életéből," in *Mindentudás Egyeteme*, ed. Mária Hitseker & Zsuzsa Szilágyi (Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó, 2004), 7–27.
3. László Mérő, *Új észjárások: A racionális gondolkodás ereje és korlátai* (Budapest: Tericum, 2001).
4. Timothy Clark, "Singularity in Criticism," *The Cambridge Quarterly* (2004) 395–398.
5. Clark, p. 398.
6. Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (University of Chicago Press, 2004); see review below.

Theory in Practice or a Practical Theory?

Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004)

"What has mattered . . . is the event – literary and ethical at the same time – of storytelling, of testing, of self-questioning, and not the outcome." (205)

Nobody reads Coetzee for "mere entertainment" or if they start out so, they soon drop the book altogether. He is one of the most widely discussed and taught contemporary writers, and scholarship of his work has had as its domi-

nant theme what was formulated as portraying "in innumerable guises . . . the surprising involvement of the outsider"¹ upon awarding him with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003. Although his novels do share the motif of the outsider, there is seemingly more to be said about their elusive nature and disquieting quality.

By the recurring, but ever surprising blocks of flow in terms of language, story, and even ideology, Coetzee's writings provoke the reader to come up with an attitude at the least, but also urge for an immediate reconsideration of it as the works themselves re-examine and make ambiguous many discussed theoretical questions of authorship power, character formation, choice and execution of genre, ethical, social or political cases presented. In a peculiar way, these 'primary' works of literature bear and provoke a great deal of 'secondary' or theoretical thought from their very readers.

Reading Coetzee's novels always brings the 19th-century German philosopher Arnold Gehlen into (my) mind, who defined man as a creature best characterised by lack. In his theory, culture as such (in both the material and spiritual sense) is but a making up for what we have lost or did not have to begin with. Coetzee's heroes can stand as the demonstrations of Gehlen's concept: they are placed (and sometimes consciously place themselves) in a gap of