

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

essential qualities, like that of a stable moral or political system, the ability to love or trust, to feel shame, or even to communicate. Choices made in such a context are far from uplifting or entertaining in their nature, but serve as thought provoking reflections on the fillers (ethical presuppositions) we, the readers, apply automatically in those gaps, and then are forced to reconsider and distrust.

In his *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* Attridge redirects our attention from customary patterns and studies the forces that form and sustain both the conceptual gaps in Coetzee's novel and the store of possible fillers around. He is – as it were – engaged in drawing and making us aware of the borders of the gap. At the same time, the ethics of reading is far from being a set of values or moral guidelines to be applied to the literary work. It is not even definable, it can only be experienced in the very process of writing and reading – 'literature in the event.' Recognisibly and admittedly Attridge's ethical criticism builds on Derrida's thought.

Apart from the scholarly reflection on Coetzee's ten novels, there is also another strong argument about the – practical – importance of literature and thus a great potential assigned to it in the ethical and political formation of the individual and ultimately, of society. (A significant break from postcolonial thought is that here the ethical overrides

the political.) The cohesive texture between the two seemingly distinct traits is Attridge's theory of literature as 'an ethically charged event.' It makes the tasks constantly lend themselves to each other, so much so that it is hard to decide if we read an application of a theory or experience it as being distilled from the very novels. A supporting fact for this observation is that Attridge's approach for discussing Coetzee's oeuvre is the first application of another critical writing of his, *The Singularity of Literature* (2004, see review above), which he wrote in parallel with the work here discussed. The key to his concept is that literature should be considered as a linguistic and social practice, the crucial element in it being the response to 'otherness' (a key term taken from Derrida and Levinas) – characterising both the writing and the reading process of a work of literature. Derrida's 'other' here gets a significant new role that Grant Hamilton praises as the most refreshing and unexpected development that saves the reader from thinking of Coetzee's writing as "always and only a 'postcolonial' literature" but rather as "literature that stages experience," which allows it to "truly become a dynamic event."²

Attridge's more or less deconstructionist approach and peculiar close reading are therefore not of the texts in themselves as finished works of literature, and in tracing their historical or autobiographical background and criti-

cal reception he directs the attention to their *making* and *working* as inventive and ethical procedures. A work of literature is more of a process, an event, an action than any kind of result, outcome, or effect. Likewise, the process of reading is characterised as a dynamic event, personal involvement and ever-changing interpretation. Attridge brings this point home by a linguistic analogy: “the meaning of a literary work, then, can be understood as a verb rather than as a noun” (9). Thus literature should be experienced, and a responsive and responsible reading evokes a creative transformation (be it in language, thought or ethics) through its singularity constituted in its inventiveness, its other-directedness. The intimate and highly formative relationship between the literary text and reader (or writer) serves as an ultimate proof for Attridge’s basic tenet: ‘literature happens.’

Attridge’s book therefore offers to find out *how* Coetzee’s novels work. Their individual treatments are permeated with Attridge’s “trinity” of crucial issues, which themselves undergo a process of conceptual development in his text: the underlying concept of the ‘other’ (later ‘arrivant’), evoking literal innovation or invention (later accommodation), and resulting in the singularity of the artwork (later ‘the literal’).

The discussion of Coetzee’s novels is chronologically and thematically ordered – through them the different traits

of the argument are developed in a way that they make very good reading, but give quite a difficult job to the reviewer. In the summary hereafter I try to follow the general pattern of the book itself and highlight some of the main arguments about each novel as well as the parallel theoretical trait.

In chapter one, after a – later disclaimed – attempt at a theoretical placement of Coetzee’s work as a “modernism after modernism” with a “re-working of modernism’s methods” (5), a discussion of formal singularities starts where the intensity of language, the denial of ethical guidance, conscious mediation through narrating figures, “the aura of something like irony” (7), awareness of the limits of writing are highlighted as contributing to the more intense experience of otherness – all of which lead to the theoretical foundations to Attridge’s approach. In the discussion of *Dusklands* (1974) and *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) we find the first demonstration of the ‘other’ through the puzzling moments of ambiguity in the rendering (a report; numbered entries in a diary) and the flow (episodes retold in a different way, change of mood) of the story, always considered as “a moment in the reader’s experience of the work” (18). A characteristic thematic locus where this otherness can be seen as the classical master-servant relation, and the means is a self-reflexive and alienating use of language.

The message of the second chapter is perhaps best paraphrased as showing how openness is the key to a fruitful close reading – and not only – of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983). Urging to abandon our tendency to allegorise and “the urge to apply preexisting norms and to make fixed moral judgements” uncertainty and open-endedness gain an important role in reading a literary text. Thus – in the spirit of deconstruction – failure to interpret becomes a valid way of interpretation. Accepting the domination of “perhaps,” Coetzee’s readers, too, are directed to appreciate “the value of openness to the moment and to the future, of the perhaps and the wherever” (64).

Characteristic arguments of the post-colonial and the postmodern discourses are called into battle if we put together Attridge’s third and fifth chapter discussing *Foe* (1986) and *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), respectively. On the one hand, Attridge shows how Coetzee’s novels through their allusiveness “offer themselves not as challenges to the canon, but as canonic” (68), and on the other hand, he invites us to discover inventiveness within programmability. The central issue is authorship in the process of writing, which is thematised first as rewriting and later as pre-writing, resulting in a reinterpretation of the past and in future-orientedness, respectively. Taking *Foe* (1986) as a

peculiar reworking of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, he shows how it becomes a “representation of writing in writing” (73), where issues of authorship, empowerment, validation and silencing emerge. The well-known story of the island is given the potential to become an independent reality through the main character’s story telling. The processes in *The Master of Petersburg* point in the opposite direction: it is Dostoevsky’s autobiographical story that produces the plot and main characters of his own future novel, however, they appear with few but significant changes regarding both the life story and the novel. The ‘other’ of the first story, Friday is also a figure of absolute silence – but only through the oppressors’ interpretation, urging us to discover and make conscious the exteriority and conventionality in culturally validated narrative forms (in other words, the canon). In the second novel, Pavel is not only silenced but also a greatly missed and sought figure and at the same time the gateway in interpretation to Derrida’s ‘arrivant,’ a concept that later transforms the entire novel into what Dostoevsky *would have* made out of it were it not for the publisher’s objections.

The two important tasks assigned to literature in these chapters are “to fashion new cultural and political structures that will allow us not just to hear each other’s stories . . . but to hear . . . each other’s silences” (90), and to show a way

to “expecting the unexpected without even determining the unexpected as unexpected” (134).

The chapter analysing *Age of Iron* (1990) examines trust. The main character of the novel has to rely on countless “others” in the last phase of her life: an estranged daughter, a homeless intruder to her backyard, the young black boys involved in the social turmoil of South Africa of the mid-eighties. In her struggle to accept their otherness she realises that it was produced by her own values in the first place, and that she can only accept it rationally, not emotionally. Hence develops a (paradoxical) sense of love and trust that “flows directly from duty” (109) and points to an unknowable future. In Attridge’s view, a similar opening to the unpredictable, the future, the other is required when reading or writing a work of literature, which makes the “literary” ethical, its power being “in its enactment, in charged, exploratory, sometimes consciously self-indulgent language, of a number of interrelated struggles in which the reader is invited to participate with sympathy but also with critical judgement” (111).

Chapter six tackles another conventional form turned inside out by Coetzee in discussing his two autobiographical novels, *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002) By using the third person and the present tense he contradicts the conventions of confessional writing, but offers an alternative for authentically present-

ing a past phase in terms of ideologies, morals and emotions. By the technique of what Attridge calls “*autrebiography*,” the above changes are turned into profit by heightening the immediacy of narration and denying any retrospection, thus *attaining* a certain form of truth *in the process* of writing. Even the young child’s unconscious racism and the most shaming events of the youth’s love life can be presented in a special mode of secular confession where “we sense the unflinchingness more strongly than the forgivingness” (159).

Disgrace (1999) is perhaps the most unsettling novel by Coetzee depicting a phase of moral instability in post-apartheid South Africa by the powerful story of two rapes and the disturbing new ways of accommodation emerging in extreme circumstances. More remarkable is, however, Attridge’s treatment of the two motifs interwoven in the story: the role of art and that of animals (especially dogs) constituting a possible – but by Lurie untaken – way out of the state of disgrace. The recognition of the absolute other here, again, leads to that of its singularity, which in turn is one of the constituents of a possible (literary, social and political) state of grace.

The *Epilogue* provides an overview of Coetzee’s latest publication to date, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), and suggests treating the lectures of the elderly woman writer – in spite of the odd form – as works of literature. Through the

different topics of the lectures Attridge highlights aspects of authorship, such as the burden of feeling one's way into other lives, the surprising nature of true artistic devotion or the power of realistic fiction to expose the reader to human evil.

The secret to Attridge's refreshing, but perhaps not altogether new perspective lies in the masterful combination and application of different thoughts in literary theory. It could be counted as a reconciliatory achievement as it transforms a mixture of ethical criticism's terminology with postcolonial issues into a more postmodernist discourse with the help of deconstruction. Within ethical criticism's frame it is best seen if we turn to Wayne C. Booth,³ who worked with the concepts of "friend," "virtue," and "ethical" to signal fiction's function of fulfilling our desire for companionship, the range of human habits of behaviour (powers, strengths, capacities) and their sum total in any given reader respectively. Adding to them all that Attridge points out in Coetzee's fiction they are shaped into the "other/arrivant," "accommodation" and the "literal" in an even more neutral, dynamic, or perhaps more specifically postmodern set.

Postmodern theories of literature tend to be highly illuminating and well-written, but also quite hard to apply to actual literary works. As noted earlier, here the primary and secondary texts enter into a most fruitful symbiosis,

making it an original commentary and a well-supported argumentation: all in all, perhaps the best introduction to Coetzee so far. It culminates in a brilliant *practical theory*: born simultaneously with the texts it discusses. But can it be called a *theory in practice*, i.e. a theory with more possible applications? Does it work equally well with other authors or works of literature to the same level of efficiency it achieves with Coetzee? If so, it is liable to resolve ethical criticism's rather problematic situation in contemporary academe, where, as Marshall Gregory put it, "there is . . . hardly any kind of criticism more discredited and more resisted."⁴

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Notes

1. "The Nobel Prize in Literature 2003," *Nobelprize.org*. Retrieved: June 22, 2005. <<http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/2003/>>.

2. G. A. R. Hamilton, "Reading the Other: A Review of Derek Attridge's *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*," *Australian Humanities Review* 36 (July 2005).

3. Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

4. Marshall Gregory, "Ethical Criticism: What It Is and Why It Matters," *Style* (Summer 1998).