
To Write Liberty

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Abstract

The keynote for the International Conference, Writing for Liberty, held in Cape Town in 2017 is a response to the contradictory demands made on writers: to respond to the suffering in the world and to refrain from appropriating the pain of the marginalised. Taking a cue from Isaiah Berlin's analysis of the two kinds of liberties: liberty to be free and liberty from interference with freedom, an argument is made for the freedom of a writer to write what she wants. This freedom is radically tempered in a reading of some novels by JM Coetzee. Here I explore the quality of skill, anguish and powerlessness to which a writer has to submit within the structure of her text.

Before we talk liberty, perhaps we should ask: what are the books that the corrupt, the dictators, the intolerant, the tyrants, the fanatics and the millions who voted for them, tolerated them, fought for them, read? We know that they are often zealots of the One Book –interpreted by men who deny that even that special book is a metaphoric and historical text. On one-dimensional, one-sided YouTube slivers they whip together the destruction of especially women in tractates shot-through with religion, a big dose of ignorance, and a Twitter-manufactured ego. We know that very few men of power have ever read books by the great writers of the literatures of the world.

And this is the tragedy: that they forfeited that which could have changed them into humane human beings. Novels instrumentally “inflect the anguish of the actual in a way” that theoretical discussion of the same issues cannot achieve, “making possible a kind of understanding not accessible by other means – something akin to participatory understanding”, says Annie Gagiano (2000: 37). “The very order of being in the world is like an intricate weave of perception and response, of reacting and embracing the world we see” (Bell 2002: 15). Reading literature creates a reflexivity within our beings and a dialogical knowing and understanding of the world. It is disturbing to think enormous power is given or grabbed by men who have never lived the life-changing experience of being somebody else...

This forms the landmark of self-understanding: becoming somebody else through reading, experiencing art precencing itself, art being truth setting itself to work (Heidegger 2001: 165). The question I am asking is not why powerful people seldom read, but something else: to what extent would the novels, plays and poetry, that we as writers produce, change a person? For me, literature is not there to entertain, or to enhance the ego of writers or

places or civilisations, or fill the pockets of publishing houses, or be the vehicle of misplaced ambition, but in a very real way to take a reader and move him or her to another place. One wants to be a changed person at the end of the text, even in the minutest way, but something must have happened inside one among those words, something that makes one see life more intensely, more profoundly, differently.

Readings by writers that go viral – a million likes for a poem, more people writing blogs than buying books – make one forget that the experience of literature (whether written or oral) honed on being driven to say what is not sayable, is necessary to awake the human being to its fullest humaneness. Through literature one becomes alive into a sensitised and conscientised thoughtfulness – Ein andenkendes Denken (2001: ix) – to a kind of being that stands “in an authentic relationship as mortal to other mortals, to earth and sky, to divinities present and absent, to things and plants and animals” (2001: x). In other words: to experience how all of these are ‘beingnesses’, to allow yourself to be trained by literature to live in total awareness of all this presencing of things.

Art grows out of being and reaches into its truth ... it is the topology of being, telling being the whereabouts of its actual presence (x) ... because language, understood rightly, is the original way in which beings are brought into the open clearing of truth, in which world and earth, mortals and gods, are bidden to come to their appointed places of meeting. (xii).

Without it, we would be “brutes, or what is worse and what we are most like today: vicious automata of self-will” (xv). Art is the only way the world can be humanised.

Before we continue, it is befitting to look at the title of the conference, ‘Writing for Liberty’, against the background of the noise from the US, Brexit, the political right-wing and religious intolerance, as well as the recent plea of writer Lionel Shriver to be freed from politically correct demands (2016: n.p.).

Generally, a difference is made between liberty and freedom. Freedom is primarily, if not exclusively, the ability to do as one wishes and what one has the power to do. Liberty concerns the absence of arbitrary restraints and takes into account the rights of all involved. As such, the exercise of liberty is subject to capability and is limited by the rights of others.

But one cannot talk about liberty without considering the important distinctions that philosopher Isaiah Berlin brought into the concept. In his essay, ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, he distinguishes between liberty FROM and liberty TO (1996: 21–2): Liberty FROM coercion, the absence of interference FROM other people (127); Positive liberty is Freedom TO: TO self-determination, TO being one’s own master, TO fulfil one’s aspirations (131).

At first sight it looks as if these two liberties complement each other, but Berlin shows that since individuals are often seen by their leaders as being ignorant and uneducated, the ideal of positive liberty (Freedom TO) slowly begins to imply coercion: the unenlightened individuals must ‘be forced TO be free’. A leader decides that his people cannot be truly

free, because their freedom is being thwarted by immigrants, gays, women, atheists; therefore, coercive legislation – walls, fatwas, bans, censorship, are all justified to guarantee the liberty TO be free. Berlin warns us: this distortion that happens with positive liberty has in the past served to justify much political oppression (158; 257).

This warning, as well as the two kinds of liberties, is important for any argument about liberty. Shriver's lecture carries these components: she wants Freedom FROM admonishing of political correctness and Freedom TO determine her own theme and way of writing, how and about whom. We shall return to this.

It is also true that all of us who are writing come into contact with the entreaty of the marginalised. The cries of those suffering and those at the borders of the prosperous world, where writers usually find themselves, are fleeing past our computer screens and keyboards. And if your antennae as a writer are attuned, then you sit torn and quite devastated, assailed by decisions, anguish and self-doubt.

The most important question put to the serious wordsmith is: how do the marginalised manifest in your work? Daily one asks oneself this. The Nobel Prize Committee perhaps also asks this (the candidate should bestow "the greatest benefit on mankind" delivering "the most outstanding work in an ideal direction", Nobel Prize: n.p.) and it is, of course, the question with which all the great writers through the centuries have grappled. Some called it The Other, but I am talking about the marginalised: how do they manifest themselves in one's work?

First, we have to remember that we have probably been schooled in a particular concept of the individual. We have to be aware that this kind of individual is one of the most enduring of all Western myths. It is this individual who stands there with his skin glowingly thick with celebrity-hunger and ego, his ears clogged by consumerism and his eyes blinded by privilege. He and his agent and publishers think his house, his clothes, writing desk, recipes, relationships, children, twitterwit, facebook-fury are just as important as his work.

To write about the marginalised, the subaltern, the oppressed, the foreigner, the stranger, the other, demands an enormous destabilisation of the writing and even more of the writing self. It is more than just reading news articles, than gathering material on Facebook, than doing an interview, than having a friend among the marginalised, than searching the archives, than going and living 'among the natives'. It demands of you to give up your power. All of it.

In the words of Wittgenstein (1953: 455; 457): "When we mean something, it's like going up to someone, it's not having a dead picture ..." We go up unto someone – it means more than face-to-face, more than heart-to-heart, more than intellectual acknowledgement, empirical fact and experience. It begins as a two-way stream, as a reciprocal process. You have to give up your dominance, let go of the dominance of your culture and release yourself to the vulnerability of losing everything that you are, especially your writing. You have to become decentred. Become minority, go where you can't, and be honest in the text about how you can never get there.

The most important thing I would suggest matters about writing about the marginalised is not whether, but how. Do we dive like the former colonisers into the pools of poverty created by our forebears, but this time with oh-such goodwill and best intentions, to rob once more of what there is, misinterpret again, speak on behalf again, again clueless of both self and other? Do we mind that we cannot speak the languages, that we interpret the interpreters and that it doesn't even dawn on us that we may be in the presence of a context, a world-view and a philosophy of which we cannot even begin to imagine the circumference?

There is indeed something obscene about writers equipped with the best education, knowledge of world languages and literatures, loaded with technical support and bursaries, with access to world-famous writing schools, sought after agents, PRs and publishers, who then feel they should package the marginalised to save Western readers from ignorance. And the obscenity lies especially in the packaging – the HOW?

I want to illustrate how thoroughly and radically we should be thinking about the how, through some remarks from David Attwell's book, *JM Coetzee and the Life of Writing* (2015). I choose Coetzee deliberately because he also started off by being angry at Nadine Gordimer's packaging of a group of people:

I always felt that Gordimer disliked and despised and (most hurtfully of all) dismissed Afrikaners, and that her dislike and contempt and dismissiveness came out of ignorance. Not that I thought Afrikaners did not merit dislike and contempt; but (I thought) only people like myself who knew them from the inside qualified to dislike and despise them, in a properly measured fashion. ... Perhaps it is a comparable sense of being dismissed – dismissed from the banquet table of history – that fuels the hatred of young Muslim nationalists for modernizers and the West. (Coetzee in Attwell 2015: 43)

One of the most astonishing facts in this book on Coetzee by Attwell is that Coetzee not only writes on a daily basis, but that he keeps a diary in which he questions and even attacks what he is writing – a kind of metafictional diary, writing about writing – because, concludes Attwell, of Coetzee's fear of living inauthentically, a brutal honesty about facing up to the conditions of one's existence (as a writer) (27).

And what is our existence? Middle class. Safe. Brutally, Coetzee looks at his work:

I show no advance in my thinking from the position I take in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. I am outraged by tyranny, but only because I am identified with the tyrants, not because I love (or 'am with') their victims. I am incorrigibly elitist (if not worse); and in the present conflict the material interests of the intellectual elite and the oppressors are the same. There is a fundamental flaw in all my novels: I am unable to move from the side of the oppressors to the side of the oppressed. Is this a consequence of the insulated life I lead? Probably. (Coetzee in Attwell 2015:134)

Atwell says: a lesser novelist might have buckled under the pressure. Because Coetzee spells out “the problem of finding a class position that would render credible the feelings of outrage and alienation that were the novel’s point of departure” (2015: 137).

Coetzee understands on a very deep and intimate level that no matter how he feels driven ethically to write about the oppressed or the marginalised, the class gap between them is insurmountable. “It is an unbridgeable gap (and must be so with all comfortable liberal whites), and the best one can do is not to leave it out but to represent it as a gap” (144–5).

There are several interesting lessons to learn from Coetzee. In the first place, we are ethically driven to write about the painful points of the world. Second, “One has to remind the dominant culture that its representations are representations” (Coetzee in Atwell 2015: 27). This means that somewhere in the text (just like oral story-tellers often do) the reader has to be reminded that the writer is aware all too well that she is giving a representation, an effort to imagine. She does not claim that she imagines the truth; the reader must be aware that the text is trying to take responsibility for the impossible. If a writer understands this, it means that she understands her material and that she is witnessing her own act of writing.

In his novel, *Foe* (1986), based on the famous Robinson Crusoe story, Coetzee deliberately confronts his own limitations with the character of the slave Friday – the man saved by Crusoe and forming a master-slave relationship on the island. The questions Coetzee asks himself are the following: who has to give words to Friday? Who is to decide how he will speak, how he will sound, what his vocabulary will be? It cannot, once again, centuries later, be a white writer. But, if it is not the writer, then who? Instead of thinking, I should not write about Friday, Coetzee develops out of this dilemma the idea that Friday cannot speak because he is maimed, his tongue has been cut out.

“Friday’s mutilation is undoubtedly the enigmatic heart of the novel” (Atwell 2015: 155). With this, Coetzee honours for me the ethical imperative not to turn a blind eye to Friday, to bring him into the novel, while at the same time understanding that he, as a middle-class white writer, dare not put words into Friday’s mouth; while acknowledging that the maiming of Friday has always been done by white writers. In his diary Coetzee writes:

I deny him a chance to speak for himself: because I cannot imagine how anything Friday might say would have a place in my text. Defoe’s text is full of Friday’s YES, now it is impossible to fantasize that YES; all the ways in which Friday can say NO seem not only stereotyped but destructive. What is lacking to me is what is lacking to Africa since the death of Negritude: a vision of a future for Africa that is not a debased version of life in the West. (Qtd in Atwell 2015: 157)

Even if one were tempted to say that Friday was again castrated by a writer, the moving and powerful concluding chapter shows in a dramatic way the limitations put on representation by history. In his imagination the teller of the story dives down into an old ship where he finds the scarred body of Friday with a chain around his neck:

‘Friday,’ I say, I try to say, kneeling over him, sinking hands and knees into the ooze, ‘what is this ship?’ But this is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday. He turns and turns till he lies full length, his face to my face. The skin is tight across his bones, his lips are drawn back. I pass a fingernail across his teeth, trying to find a way in. His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face. (Coetzee 1986: 160)

It is when one reads this heart-breaking mixture of tenderness, brilliance and honesty that one becomes furious at the superficiality of the representation debate: I demand the freedom to imagine myself a woman/a slave/a gay person, and am tired of the chorus that tells me I may not. Foe presents a lesson: you may imagine whomever you will, but investigate within the text the complete impossibility and harm thereof.

In *Age of Iron* (1990) Coetzee broadens the contact with the Other when the main character realises that the power and authority to judge others no longer lies with her: she has been completely handed over to the Other. Dying of cancer, abandoned by her children, Mrs Curren acknowledges that she is being judged by the woman who works in her house:

Florence is the judge ... The court belongs to Florence; it is I who pass under review. If the life I live is an examined life, it is because for ten years I have been under examination in the court of Florence. (129)

This is a mind-blowing confession. Socrates’s words are turned on their head: an unexamined life is not worth living. Mrs Curren says a life unexamined by the marginalised is a life not worth living. This is genius at work.

In an admirable way Coetzee sticks to this ethical principle in *Disgrace* (1999), but here he begins to take a further step in representation: he links the white character carefully to a black character – this time not as opposites like Mrs Curren and Florence, but as doppelgängers, mirror images. Like the white man, the black man abuses women; like the white man, he protects “his peoples”. With their chauvinism they sow barren destruction, but both of them try to make up for it by working the land and accompanying dogs to their deaths. Despite this close connection between the white and black man, there is a moment when the white man muses:

In spite of which, he feels at home with Petrus, is even prepared, however guardedly, to like him. Petrus is a man of his generation. Doubtless Petrus has been through a lot, doubtless he has a story to tell. He would not mind hearing Petrus’s story one day. But preferably not reduced to English. More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. (117)

Once again: the acknowledgement that there is another context, that he wants to hear it, but also realises that it would probably not have justice done to it by the thin muddy veneer that English has become. It is an important acknowledgment of the middle-class gap.

During the apartheid years it was important for many writers to keep on saying: we are the same. Whether we are black or white, we hurt the same, we love the same, we yearn the same, the apartheid laws separating us are a travesty. But in the aftermath of 1994, this very sameness exploded in our faces. Suddenly, the only things we saw were the many differences between us and how denial of these differences belied the unjustness of our past. It was an important lesson: to acknowledge and respect that difference; to keep on searching for real meaningful ways towards that difference.

That is also the goal of the ethical relation Gyatri Spivak is seeking and calling for – that the subaltern, the most oppressed and invisible constituency, might cease to exist as such. In their introduction to *The Spivak Reader* (1996), Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean suggest that Spivak is quite certain that such a revolutionary change will not be brought about by traditional revolutionary means, or by intellectuals attempting to represent oppressed minorities, or, worse yet, pretending merely to let them speak for themselves. Keeping in mind the dangers of fundamentalism in any form, Spivak insists on two meanings of the concept “representation” (qtd in Landry and MacLean 1996: 6): standing-in-the-other’s shoes and an imaginative and aesthetic representation. A staging in a theatrical sense (15). In discussing the issue, it is made clear that no amount of raised-consciousness fieldwork can even approach the painstaking labour to establish ethical singularity with the subaltern. “Ethical singularity” is neither “mass contact”, nor engagement with “the common sense of the people”... the effort of “ethical singularity” may be called a “secret encounter”; this encounter can only happen when “the respondents inhabit something like normality. ... That is why ethics is the experience of the impossible” (17). If no normality exists between the writer and his subject, even for an imagined moment, then the effort remains problematic and has to be discussed.

A small reminder before we return to political correctness and the two kinds of liberties: according to the Oxford Dictionary the term political correctness means: the avoidance of forms of expression or action that are perceived to exclude, marginalise or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against. So originally, political correctness meant to avoid excluding the marginalised. It remains a bit of mystery to me why this term has changed into something so much resented.

But, to the liberties of Isaiah Berlin: the negative Liberty FROM and the positive Liberty TO. We write in order TO be. We write in order to liberate ourselves FROM narrow-minded, conservative fanatics, obsessed with power, in love with their own privilege that inflicts bleeding sores on the body of the world. Writers such as Shriver want to be free FROM what she regards as intimidation to be politically correct.

A writer is free to write what she wants, but only constant self-inquiry and destabilisation about the how will bring some kind of integrity to the project. To write meaningfully about those whom you cannot, and, according to some pressure, may not, write about takes more than just putting a hat on your head. It requires the dedication of self-questioning and scrupulous searching. You may not like Coetzee or may have many gripes about his writing, but I specifically used him to illustrate the kind of trouble a writer of his calibre had gone to when he wanted to engage – one has to be prepared to harass, surpass, even crucify one's tamed imagination.

At the same time to give up engaging or refraining from engaging because of criticism is to give up on perhaps the only redeeming feature of recent mankind. That is to dream oneself into the spaces and bodies of those not present at the 'banquet table of history'. We have to become each other, write each other, bind ourselves together, even when we cannot clearly hear each other's story – this is the only guarantee that we have against people who want to build walls, turn boats away, patrol beaches, refuse visas. We must be enabled to say: I am from Syria, from Pakistan, I am you, a fellow human being with dreams filled with beauty and longing. Ninety-nine percent of our DNA is entirely the same. Accept me as a multiple of you.

But equally important: when those patrollers begin to say: you may not write about or appropriate this or that, then we have to recognise it as a move into that kind of fateful coercion of positive Liberty that Berlin talks about.

But there is a caveat here: postcolonial scholars have pointed out many of these gaps, false premises, transgressions, stereotyping, etc., in the work of important writers who wrote about the Third World and in this way immensely enriched the experience and production of literature. That must never, never stop. But when it changes to "you may not, you have no right to", this is where coercion sets in: the unenlightened writers must "be forced TO" refrain from producing a particular kind of text. Berlin warns: this kind of distortion of and coercion within Liberty has, in the past, served to justify terrible and very damaging political oppression.

Those who believe in the decisive power of literature may never say: your work may not be about me. Then you become the dictator who, in the name of Liberty, destroys the power of Liberty and that will necessarily lead to an even more aggressive, disastrous, destructive enclave-making and wall-building in the world. We dare not give up trying, as well as assisting one another, to be closer and closer to succeeding being one another.

Every one of us needs every one of us, as well as the beauty and resources of the entire world to be fully humane. That would be true Liberty. And in this, writing as a powerful intensifier of the conscience, chasing us into the 'clearing of the truth of the world', is critical and decisive.

I want to end with a slight adaptation of the words of Ngugi wa Thiong'o: the call for the rediscovery and resumption of writing is a call for a regenerative reconnection with the

millions of revolutionary tongues in Africa and the world, demanding liberation. It is a call for the rediscovery of the real language of human kind; the language of struggle. It is the universal language underlying all speech and words of history. Struggle makes history. Struggle makes us. In struggle is our history, our language and our being. That struggle begins wherever we are; in whatever we do (2005 [1981]: 108). We dare not let go of that belief.

Notes on Contributor

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