

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Anton Leist and Peter Singer (eds.), *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature* (Columbia, 2010)

It is always instructive to read the reactions of scholars from other disciplines to works of literature, and what philosophers have to say is possibly most interesting of all. This book of essays, all written by philosophers, shows a range of approaches to J.M. Coetzee, of varying degrees of sophistication and explanatory power.

Perhaps it is not surprising that the works most commonly discussed in this collection include those which deal explicitly with ethical debates. Of the 16 essays, 10 deal in whole or in part with *Elizabeth Costello* or *The Lives of Animals*. The fact that only three cover *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) is probably to be explained by its recent publication date. The other novel which receives more attention than the rest is *Disgrace* (1999), which is dealt with in five essays, though they typically also draw on *The Lives of Animals* as well. Of the four sections in the book, one is specifically devoted to 'Humans, Animals and Morality', but the theme of animal rights is a major preoccupation in many of these essays.

Another issue which is frequently considered is the relationship between Coetzee and his narrators and protagonists, especially Elizabeth Costello. Given this interest, it is perhaps an unfortunate accident of timing which has precluded any discussion of *Summertime* (2009) in the essays. Reading these sometimes penetrating analyses of the author/character nexus, I often felt that they would be complicated in an interesting way by the inclusion of this late work, with its teasing and extremely complex blending of autobiographical and fictional elements. However, one might comment that the first two books in the trilogy of 'memoirs', *Boyhood* and *Youth*, also receive very little attention from these writers. Although they are, on the surface, more straightforward autobiographical works than *Summertime*, there are already signs that they are more than that, given that, to name just the most obvious point, they are written in the third person.

Leist and Singer, in their introduction, identify 'at least' three characteristics which make Coetzee's novels 'philosophical':

First, an unusual degree of *reflectivity*, meaning thereby a reflective distance to the conventional understanding of everything, which expresses itself, strangely, through a normally rather sparse, sober, precise, restrained selection of words and descriptions. ... Coetzee's typical style of literalness throws the unprepared reader into an uneasy feeling of having been given clues to important meanings but being unable to decipher them.

In a sense this first, largely textual characteristic and technique is the by-product of a second, deeper-layered intellectual attitude of *paradoxical truth seeking*. Truth seeking may unavoidably involve one in paradoxes, but in a radically subjectivized truth orientation, similar to philosophical scepticism, such paradoxes are without end.

... it is an *ethics of social relationships* that is especially at the thematic centre of most of his stories. ... As Coetzee is observing people under the most socially extreme circumstances of racism and civil war, this approach embraces, albeit unintentionally, the moral philosopher's endeavour

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to find the most secure grounding of morality or civil society. (6-8, original emphasis)

They make the acute observation that ‘readers feel uneasy once the authorial normative guidance is drawn away and frequently feel angry at being offered only vague hints of ... how to situate oneself in relation to elementary questions of life and living’ (7). Indeed, I have found myself several times confronted by bewildered friends demanding to know what Coetzee *means*, in *Disgrace* or *Elizabeth Costello* or *Slow Man*.

All these essays are worth reading, though they are demanding and sometimes difficult. Especially impressive (in its clarity of expression as well as its subtlety) is Jonathan Lear’s ‘Ethical Thought and the Problem of Communication’, which is subtitled ‘a strategy for reading *Diary of a Bad Year*’. Lear points out that Coetzee’s literary style is ‘an attempt to defeat [the] possibility’ of a type of public discourse which, however well-intentioned, becomes ‘a fashionable *substitute* for ethical thought’ (66). While some of the other authors in this volume seem to be worryingly inclined to conflate Coetzee with his narrator/characters, Lear is able to see that

there is a crucial difference between JC [in *Diary of a Bad Year*] and John Coetzee: JC is willing to publish his ‘Strong Opinions’ as a free-standing book; John Coetzee is not. Coetzee is only willing to publish the opinions as authored by JC in the context of a novel in which those very opinions, as well as the act of writing them down and publishing them, are questioned by JC himself and by Anya and are mocked by Alan. (67)

Lear teases out the reasons for this distancing device, and the ethical effect it is designed to have on the reader. Jeff McMahan, on the other hand, analyses the attitude to shame of the narrator of *Diary* almost as if he were a real person, remarking (perhaps somewhat jocularly) that, as he is a novelist, it is not in his

line of work to draw out the implications of [his] insights in rigorous but tedious detail or to test the ultimate plausibility of those apparent insights by reference to those implications. ... As someone who makes a living thinking about matters such as this, perhaps I can offer C some professional assistance. (100)

In a footnote, he rather belatedly offers that ‘my criticism of the views of one of his characters should not be understood as criticisms of Coetzee as a novelist’ (105, n13). It is a pity that this essay should immediately follow Lear’s more nuanced account of the same novel.

In ‘Writing the Lives of Animals’, Ido Geiger provides a view of ‘the dizzying *mise en abîme* down which Coetzee casts us’, the ‘embeddedness of life in writing’ (158), not as a romantic vision of the possibilities of negative capability, but as a terrifying and risky activity. Leist’s essay, ‘Against Society, Against History, Against Reason: Coetzee’s Archaic Postmodernism’, comes perilously close to treating the novels as philosophical arguments rather than fiction; trying to establish the ‘right’ position on the subject of animal ethics in *Elizabeth Costello*, for instance (217).

However, he concludes by saying, ‘Nearly all of philosophy’s mistakes follow from undue generalizations out of the particular. Reading Coetzee as literature and not as philosophy, then, could help us to improve some, if not all, of our practices’ (219). This being so, one might question what he thinks he has been at for the last 20 pages – which incidentally contain a disproportionate number of editorial errors: was it perhaps a late and somewhat rushed inclusion? Martin Woessner, in ‘Coetzee’s Critique of Reason’, acknowledges that ‘Coetzee cannot be pressed into the ranks of philosophy without damaging his project’ (230), and that ‘what Coetzee’s novels do not do is tell us how to live’ (240); and makes an interesting attempt to address ‘the question of literature’s proper relationship to philosophy’ (240). Most of these philosophers come to the conclusion that that relationship is the one Iris Murdoch (who is frequently cited) identified, of presenting ‘an education in how to picture and understand human situations’ (226). The last essay in the book, ‘Coetzee’s Hidden Polemic with Nietzsche’, by Alena Dvorakova, boldly contends that ‘Coetzee’s Costello is best read as a response to Nietzsche’s Zarathustra’ (362), and adds another turn of the screw (to repeat an expression used by Robert Pippin in the first essay, on the early novels):

It seems the real effectiveness of art cannot be divorced from its moral adventurousness in amplifying desire, thus making it potentially transgressive. Learning from fiction seems inseparable from its immorality. (378)

Despite sometimes rushing in where literary critics fear to tread, with assertions and identifications which we have learned to eschew, this book nevertheless contains many such moments of provocation and illumination, and I would recommend it to all serious students of Coetzee’s writings.

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