

Review Article/Resensie-artikel

Derek Attridge in the Event

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The Singularity of Literature

Attridge, Derek, 2004. London & New York: Routledge.

J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading

{*Literature in the Event*}

Attridge, Derek, 2005. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

“I don’t think or act in sweeps,” says Coetzee in one of his interviews with David Attwell, “I tend to be rather slow and painstaking and myopic in my thinking” (Coetzee 1992g: 246). A cursory perusal of the titles of some of Coetzee’s nonfictional essays bears testimony to the measure of his statement: “The Manuscript Revisions of Beckett’s *Watt*”; “The First Sentence of Yvonne Burgess’ *The Strike*”; “The Rhetoric of the Passive in English”; “The Agentless Sentence as Rhetorical Device”; “Time, Tense and Aspect in Kafka’s ‘The Burrow’” ... Coetzee’s cheerless linguistic analyses scarcely hold out promise of the airy stuff of fiction, of the “ethical impulses and acts” that Attridge finds in Coetzee and undertakes to explore. Yet it is precisely Coetzee’s attention to the exigencies of a grammar that spills over from the order of the linguistic onto that of the literary that provides a trajectory for appreciating the complexity of Coetzee’s ethical engagements. At least, this is what I shall briefly sketch out. Attridge does not explicitly root Coetzee’s ethical explorations in the author’s preoccupation with linguistics, but in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading {Literature in the Event}*, Attridge pays scrupulous attention to the literary inventiveness of Coetzee’s work, showing how it constitutes a sustained fictional staging¹ of contests in which questions of ethics come to

1. Coetzee uses the term himself within the context of the possibilities opened up by fiction, rather than academic prose. “When a real passion of feeling is let loose in discursive prose, you feel that you are reading the utterances of a madman The novel, on the other hand, allows the reader to *stage* his

bear – questions of “responsibility to the other”, of “trust and betrayal”, of “confession and truth to the self” (Attridge 2005: xii). At another level (although Attridge himself never makes a clear-cut distinction), literary texts are performances: they come into existence in the anticipation and instantiation of a reader, before any analyses of the happenings, ideas and lives internal to the fictive world take place. At this level of performative event, the ineluctable *address* of a literary text has the potential to interrupt familiar comfort zones, demanding that the reader respond to something other than the already known. Thus, the literary text (so the argument in *The Singularity of Literature* goes) provokes unsettling thoughts about the ethical implications of the literary encounter itself, about the responsive engagements of writer and reader in the very act of reading.

But let us trace these ethical explorations back to Coetzee’s rigorous attention to linguistics; this will give us a clearer sense of at least one of the theoretical conversations informing Attridge’s two recent books. In his essay on Achterberg’s sonnet sequence, “Ballade van de gasfitter”, Coetzee refers to the linguist, Emile Benveniste, on the topic of pronouns. The pronouns “I” and “you” (and other deictics, such as “here” and “this”) Benveniste tells us “do not refer to ‘reality’ or to ‘objective’ positions in space or time but to the utterance, unique each time, that contains them”. They are “‘empty’ signs that are nonreferential with respect to ‘reality’”. Furthermore, “[t]hese signs are always available and become ‘full’ as soon as a speaker introduces them into each instance of discourse” (Benveniste 1971: 219). Coetzee’s reference to Benveniste reads: “As elements of a system of reference, *I* and *You* are empty. But the emptiness of the *I* can also be a freedom, a pure potentiality, a readiness for the embodying word” (Coetzee 1977: 72). From origins of apparently seedless linguistic assiduity, Coetzee’s discussion begins to take on a suggestive ethical resonance, especially in his linking of Benveniste’s observations to Buber’s preoccupation with what the latter calls the “I-You word pair”.

“When one says You,” writes Buber (and Coetzee cites this sentence), “the I of the word pair I-You is said, too” (Buber 1970: 54). Buber goes on to elaborate: “I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You” (p. 62). Yet, “Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing. *But he stands in relation*” (p. 55; my italics). Buber speaks of the I-You relation” as an “encounter,” a “relational event” that “take[s] place and scatter[s]” (p. 80). The difficult task is to maintain an open responsiveness that enables us to say “You,” without objectifying the “You” to an “It”.

To bring this back to Benveniste: if “I” and “You” are embodied in

passion” (Coetzee 1992h: 60-61). “Staging” is a key term in Attridge’s readings of Coetzee.

relation to a discourse, rather than to an objective, static reality, then a literary text can be understood to be the site that instantiates an I-You relation, in each event of its being read. Primordially, the literary text is an address to you, the reader. Further, the *potential* embodiment of you and I in relation to the discourse brings about a peculiar understanding of the responsive engagements that the text's address initiates. Coetzee speaks of this from the perspective of the writer: "The *feel* of writing fiction is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road" (Coetzee 1992g: 246).²

Further, the becoming-I of the reader requires a responsiveness to art's address, which comes from an elsewhere. Thus the German poet, Paul Celan writes,

[T]he poem speaks. It is mindful of its dates, but it speaks. True, it speaks only on its own, its very own behalf.

But I think ... that the poem has always hoped, for this very reason, to speak also on behalf of the *strange* – no, I can no longer use this word here – *on behalf of the other*, who knows, perhaps of an *altogether other*.

(Celan 1986: 48)

Taking the cue from Celan, Emmanuel Levinas stresses the priority of the interruption of the "altogether other" in a literary encounter, before any subsumptive content can be appropriated as a familiar "theme". The poem is a "saying", rather than a "said", a "fact of speaking to the other [that] precedes all thematization" (Levinas 1996: 44). Further, poems are "important by their interpellation rather than by their message; important by their attention!" (Levinas 1996: 43) The logic of address instantiates a site of response. In recognising myself as the "you" of this address, I may refuse to respond – but that will never be a simple nonresponse; it will be a refusal to respond.³ In responding as the addressee, the reader is responsible for calling into being the "I" of the I-You word pair. Ethical considerations (specifically about the relation of Self to Other) are thus brought into play.

2. Attridge cites this passage on p. xii, and in the footnote on p. 111 of *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. I am reminded of the closing pages of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, where the magistrate meditates on his own (failed?) attempt to write the "annals of an Imperial outpost": He writes something other than he intended, and casts himself as 'a man who has lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere'" (Coetzee 2004: 170).

3. See Derrida's "Passions" in *On the Name* for an enquiry about the invitation, and the conditions of response.

This intricate path from linguistics to ethics comes to a clearing in Derek Attridge's two recent books. Any "act of literature" demands a responsiveness to the other on the part of the writer, as much as on the part of the reader. It is the writer's openness to alterity that makes for literary invention (Chapter 2 of *The Singularity of Literature*). Further, the readiness to engage you, the unknown reader, in ways that will not have been determined in advance, constitutes the freedom, but also the risk, of the literary encounter. As for the reader, "[r]eading a work of literature entails opening oneself to the unpredictable, the future, the other, and thereby accepting the responsibility laid upon one by the work's singularity and difference" (Attridge 2005: 111). This confrontation with the other, both as fictional staging *within* the text (the medical officer's relation to K; Mrs Curren's relation to Verceuil; the magistrate's relation to the unnamed barbarian girl ...), and with reference to the actual event of reading the book itself in all its strangeness, means that Coetzee's novels, Attridge argues, resist straightforward allegorical interpretations: "Allegory, one might say, deals with the *already known*, whereas literature opens a space for the other. Allegory announces a moral code, literature invites an ethical response" (Attridge 2005: 64).

In a series of meticulous close readings of Coetzee's fiction (ending with an epilogue on *Elizabeth Costello*), Attridge demonstrates precisely the ways in which an ethical response as a relation to otherness⁴ is played out within the worlds of the novels. In his discussion of *Life & Times of Michael K*, for example, Attridge shows how Coetzee's repetition of phrases such as "he thought" insistently reminds us – probably contrary to expectation – that we are *outside* Michael K's consciousness. Here is one of Attridge's ingenious demonstrations. He cites the following passage from the novel:

[H]e wondered whether by now, with his filthy clothes and his air of gaunt exhaustion, he would not be passed over as a mere footloose vagrant from the depths of the country, too benighted to know that one needed papers to be on the road, too sunk in apathy to be of harm.

(Coetzee quoted in Attridge 2005: 50)

and then rewrites it in the first person: "I wonder whether by now, with my filthy clothes and air of gaunt exhaustion ...". What is "instantly clear," Attridge observes, is that "this is not word-for-word representation of K's thought" (Attridge 2005: 50). This, in turn, provokes further difficult questions about subjective agency, about the modes of representing it in a

4. *That* ethics should be a relation to otherness is never questioned by Attridge – but surely there is more to be said.

work of fiction.

Throughout *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Attridge directs us to *The Singularity of Literature* for “fuller theoretical developments” of questions “raised briefly” in the Coetzee volume (Attridge 2005: xii–xiii). Certainly, the exercise of cross-referring is instructive in many instances. In a discussion of Friday’s silence as a trope for *Foe*’s “challenge to the literary canon”, Attridge writes (in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*):

All canons rest on exclusion; the voice they give to some can be heard only by virtue of the silence they impose on others. But it is not just a silencing by *exclusion*, it is a silencing by *inclusion* as well: *any voice we can hear is by that very fact purged of its uniqueness and alterity.*

(Attridge 2005: 82; my italics, except for “inclusion”)

My guess is that anyone not versed in philosophical debates about ethics that span the writings of Levinas, Blanchot and Derrida (to name some) would find a passage such as this one puzzling, to say the least, especially since it seems to contradict Attridge’s insistent call to be *responsive* to the *singularity* of the text in each reading event. (How are we to respond to something we have not heard? Or are we forever doomed to respond to that which is purged of its singularity?). However, in *The Singularity of Literature*, Attridge sustains one line of argument (across ten chapters) that makes a case for a delicate interrelated balance of concepts such as literary invention, singularity, alterity, performance, responsiveness and responsibility. Thus, for example, Attridge can cite a stanza from George Herbert, and comment on it in ways that do not take responsiveness, singularity, and the recognition of canonical poetic devices to be mutually exclusive:

To hear or read this as literature is to experience the singular event of its four lines, to be carried forward by a familiar, rather insistently regular rhythm ... [and] to participate in an ambiguous, perhaps even contradictory, tonal and emotional complex – reverence? whimsicality? awe? disappointment? delight? triumph?

(Attridge 2004: 98-99)

Attridge’s close reading acquires philosophical intricacy when it is viewed in the light of his discussions about literary creation that depends upon, as much as it cannot be defined by the familiar (Chapter 2); the notion of “singularity” (not a static property), is usefully clarified as an inventive performance constituted in each responsive encounter with a literary text (Attridge 2004: 64).

Many will heave a sigh of relief upon opening *The Singularity of Literature*: Attridge’s contract with his readers is “to write as accessible a work as possible”; and therefore, to “resist ... the temptation to identify

precursors and allies” in arguments that he presents as a rethinking, a reinterpretation of ideas in a long tradition of literary criticism (Attridge 2004: xi). But it is precisely this aspect of *The Singularity of Literature* that I find frustrating. The user-friendly renditions of philosophical debates run the risk of gainsaying Attridge’s own concern to do justice to “the singular demands of the other” (2005: xii). They beg the question whether Attridge’s own work, while constituting a just response to Coetzee’s fiction, fails to do justice to the singularity of each philosophical text that subtends that response. It is hard not to detect a tacit assumption: novels and poems demand a singular, literary engagement on the part of the reader but philosophical and theoretical texts do not. Let me follow this through briefly.

In *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, and with a cross-reference to *The Singularity of Literature*, Attridge writes:

A reading that does justice to what is literary in a literary work ... is one that is fully responsive to its singularity, inventiveness and otherness, as these manifest themselves in the event or the experience of the work.

There is thus an ethical dimension to any act of literary signification or literary response, and there is also a sense in which the formally innovative text, the one that most estranges itself from the reader, makes the strongest ethical demand.

(Attridge 2005: 11)

Attridge comes close to suggesting that the “literary” need not be restricted to works of fiction (Attridge 2005: xii). In this context, then, what are the parameters laid out for the possibility of *our* responsiveness to the larger literary-philosophical conversation in which Attridge situates himself? In the appendix of *The Singularity of Literature*, Attridge speaks of the difficulty of acknowledging his intellectual debts: “[F]orty years of reading and listening lay down their traces in a dense palimpsest, much becoming buried beyond recall” (Attridge 2004: 139). Anyone can sympathise with that, and in the appendix Attridge provides us with a retrospective, summary list of the people and papers that have been most influential in his own thinking. This appendix is helpful and challenging (if too brief) but the consequence of the structural choices that Attridge makes, and which bridge both books, is this: at several crucial nodes in the argument of the main body of the texts the philosophical references are nebulous, to the extent of being gratuitous:⁵ “Mrs. Curren’s response to the other in the form of

5. Of course, this is not always the case. See, for example, the discussion of Derrida’s notion of the “arrivant” in relation to *The Master of Petersburg* in Chapter 5 of the Coetzee book.

Vercueil can be read as a kind of heightened staging of the very issue of otherness, a story that is continuous with the attempts by such ‘philosophical’ writers as Levinas, Blanchot, and Derrida to find ways of engaging this issue” (Attridge 2005: 103).

In other instances, the philosophical pointers are blunt, even misleading: “[F]or Levinas, the ultimate other is God, an absolute, unconditioned, wholly transcendent Other” (Attridge 2004, fn 22: 151). Yet again, when I read a sentence such as “One does not need to read Bakhtin or Derrida to be aware that the attempt to write only for oneself is doomed to failure” (Attridge 2005: 146), I am bereft. Perhaps one does not need to read Derrida or Bakhtin – or Levinas, or Paul Celan, or Wittgenstein, or even Coetzee, for that matter, on the notion that discourse is always already an invocation and a response, or on the question of an absolutely private language. But surely that is to abdicate the responsibility to do justice to what is singular in each thinker’s writings? Thus, a throwaway comment like “[W]e do not need to read ...” runs counter to the central argument that Attridge develops with such poise across his two volumes.

Yet despite (and in some instances, precisely because of) these provocations, I have found Attridge’s two books to be invaluable resources – in undergraduate lectures on Coetzee, in postgraduate literary theory seminars, and also as a guide to my own reading in continental philosophy. Attridge thus achieves something rare: his works engage readers at different levels, and appeal at once to those schooled in a venerable literary tradition of practical criticism, and to those whose native tongue is poststructuralist.

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