

The Case of Coetzee: South African Literary Criticism, 1990 to Today

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Summary

The 1970s and 80s witnessed a vigorous, often polemical debate in the South African literary field between those dubbed “instrumental” (or political) critics and those of “art” persuasion. The end of apartheid promised a new phase of discussion. What has happened, however, is not so much a turn to artistic issues, but a turn to continental philosophers (Derrida, Foucault, Levinas) as theorists of an ethical respect for and responsibility to “otherness”. At the centre of such critical attention has been the novelist, J.M. Coetzee.

The “case of Coetzee” provokes consideration of what, by the end of the 1990s, was in danger of becoming a new orthodoxy, in which the abstract language of theory is imported onto the text, often erasing the very character that grants the literary work its experiential distinctiveness.

The article asks: is it not time to go beyond Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999), to seek a new critical project for the new millennium? Perhaps Coetzee himself points a way forward.

Opsomming

In die 1970's en 1980's was daar 'n lewendige, soms polemiese debat in die Suid-Afrikaanse letterkunde. Die deelnemers was die sogenaamde “instrumentele” (of politieke) kritici en dié wat op “kuns” gerig was. Die beëindiging van apartheid het die belofte van 'n nuwe fase van debatvoering meegebring. In der waarheid het kritici hulle egter nie op kunsvraagstukke begin toespits nie – hulle het hulle gewend tot Europese filosowe (Derrida, Foucault, Levinas) as teoretici van 'n etiese respek vir en verantwoordelikheid teenoor “andersheid”. Die romanskrywer J.M. Coetzee was die fokuspunt van hierdie kritiese aandag.

Coetzee se “geval” het gelei tot 'n beskouing wat teen die einde van die 1990's die gevaar geloop het om 'n nuwe ortodoksie te word. Daarvolgens word die abstrakte taal van teorie in die teks ingevoer, dikwels ten koste van die karakter wat in werklikheid 'n eiesoortige ervaring aan die literêre werk verleen.

Die artikel vra: Is die tyd nou geleë om Coetzee se *Disgrace* (1999) agter te laat en 'n nuwe literêrekritiekprojek vir die nuwe millennium te soek? Miskien kan Coetzee self 'n voorstel maak oor die rigting wat ingeslaan moet word.

I spent much of the 1990s writing up the book *Southern African Literatures* (2003: 1996). As a result, I lost touch with the state of our criticism as reflected in academic journals pertinent to the field. Several months ago I began a systematic reading of relevant journal articles published after 1990 (the year symbolising the end of apartheid) up to 2007. My observations follow. But first, why the title “The Case of Coetzee”?

Well, Coetzee in the last decade and a half has attracted from critics more attention by far than any other author from this country, attention that predates his receiving the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature. One might say that such attention permits us to regard Coetzee as a leitmotif in the field of South African literary criticism. Just as a leitmotif in a literary work suggests patterns of significance, the case of Coetzee suggests patterns of significance in the literary-critical domain.

Coetzee’s output escapes any overarching interpretative grid. His critical commentary is suggestive, not prescriptive; his novels are characterised by ambiguity and elusiveness. As he said in his oft-cited paper, “The Novel Today” (1988: 2-5), his novels seek not to “supplement”, but to “rival” history. Philosophical concepts lend depth to his fictional landscapes; and his novelistic forms, in various mutations, challenge conventional expectations of realist or, indeed, symbolist genres. He says that he is written by his writing: it is an exploratory process which begins without his quite knowing where it is leading him and ends, he hopes, in new forms of telling, in new forms of experiential insight. Whereas, he says, he lacks the commitment to an art of criticism (that is, to writing creative criticism), novel writing grants him a “creative irresponsibility” (1992: 246). Yet his book, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), is a creative intermeshing of fiction and disquisition (he himself calls the pieces “lessons”); and his latest book, *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), interleaves public and personal voices in – to give the term its original meaning – a *novel* form.

Coetzee’s challenges, among others, are the challenges of the postgraduate seminar and the academic conference: his works provoke interpretations that never exceed the object of the interpretation, and many Coetzee papers in journals have returned vitality to what remains a valuable approach to the literary text: that of intelligent and sensitive close reading. We have papers that ponder the intertext *Foe/Crusoe*, or ponder the relevance of classical allusion in South Africa’s age of iron. *Disgrace* (1999), in particular, has undergone critical excavation. Does Coetzee share in Lurie’s misogyny and lurking racism? Is this simply a book about an embittered white male – there is symbiosis between the author and his character, Lurie – in the time, to quote Lurie/Coetzee, of “the great rationalization” (1999: 3)? Should the rape of Lucy be read literally or symbolically? What do we make of Lurie’s ministering to dogs when his “not quite” raping of the coloured student Melanie produces neither remorse nor contrition, but a melodramatic posturing? What purchase has the Byron/Wordsworth subtext on the harsh,

nonliterary, mainly mimetically depicted, reality of post-apartheid South Africa? And so on, and on.

In the seminar room it was once Jane Austen – how does the device of free, indirect speech permit, almost simultaneously, emotional colouring and ironic observation? – or Joseph Conrad: how far is Marlow his author's mouthpiece? Now it is Coetzee's rich, ambiguous, ambivalent, even ideologically suspect, novels that may return literary study from the issue-driven critique of theory back to the intricacies of the text. (See, as examples, Cornwell 2003; Beard 2007.)

This, however, is not the whole story. There is another persistent strand in Coetzee criticism that brings to bear on his texts the concepts of continental philosophy, the purpose being twofold: to prise the texts from a too-localised context of reception thus shifting the emphasis from Coetzee as South African writer to Coetzee as world writer; second, and related to the foregoing, to defend Coetzee against would-be antagonists who have attacked the author's political commitments.

The argument, in summary, is that in the 1970s and 80s South African literature and its criticism, operating within the binaries of apartheid/liberation politics, reflected the urgency of the times in literary forms of realism, or even agitprop, while criticism fought a political war of authority: the realist text had substantial content and therefore conveyed political truth, the argument continues; whereas the symbolist text reduced content to formal device, distanced itself from events, and in consequence was guilty of social irresponsibility. Coetzee, we are led to believe by symbolist (or "art" critics), was unfairly and ignorantly undervalued, sometimes in direct comparison with our earlier Nobel laureate, Nadine Gordimer, who in her big novels directly addressed the then national question. Gordimer's review of *Life & Times of Michael K* (1984: 1-6) – does the passivity of the coloured protagonist suggest that Coetzee denied the will of black South Africans to resist evil? – is used as a measure of the times; Coetzee's article, "The Novel Today", to which I have already referred, is cited as a defence of the singularity of fiction. I use the term "singularity" deliberately as it reminds us, in Attridge's two closely related studies, *The Singularity of Literature* (2004) and *J.M. Coetzee: The Ethics of Reading* (2005), that a defence of Coetzee is inextricably linked to a defence of his work beyond local, political constriction.

A refutation of the so-called politically irresponsible Coetzee began systematically in the early 1990s with Attwell's (1993: 3) identification of Coetzee's novels as "situational metafiction". The point was that the experimental style of modernism and postmodernism need not compromise responsibility to the ethical issues of the day, whether in colonial or global manifestations. The category and character of the "ethical" also constitute the consistent defence of Coetzee by both Attridge and Marais. Unlike Memmi's (1990) "coloniser who will" (the apartheid racist, he who excludes the Other from the human community) or the "coloniser who

won't" (the liberal humanist who wishes to turn the Other into an image of the Self, or the Same), Coetzee subscribes, we are told, to Levinasian ethics: that is, the Same is obliged to acknowledge the singularity, the irreducibility, of the Other. As Levinas (1981) has it, it is the radical otherness of the Other that renders the apparently autonomous subject responsible for that otherness. Marais's articles throughout the 1990s and up to the present day continue to propound the Levinasian interpretation of Coetzee's work. (See, as examples, Marais 1993, 1998, 2003, 2006.) Attridge's (2005) argument is similar. To quote Gaylard (2006: 154-155) on Attridge, "Otherness expresses the desire and fear at the heart of all culture ... Attridge's argument is that Coetzee's work finds the ethical in responsibility towards the Other, rather than finding the moral (which is judgmental) in rules or formulations about that Other". Gaylard goes on to issue a reservation: in seeking an analytical mode that respects the singularity and elusiveness of Coetzee's writing, Attridge's study "tends to reproduce precisely the single overarching mode of analysis it seeks to avoid; too many of the individual chapters on individual texts are so concerned with alterity that the sense of the individuality of each text becomes diluted".

What is the difference between a concern with alterity and a concern with the Other? Not much in contemporary literary criticism as filtered through postcolonial preoccupations. Most literary critics, like myself, are neither trained in philosophical disquisition nor alert to the context that provoked the particular philosophical enquiry – what influence did Foucault's French-colonial Tunisian experience, or Derrida's experience (he was doubly "othered" as a Jew in Algeria), have on their attacks on French mainstream power, mainstream assimilation of the Other? (See Young 2001: 395-410, 411-426, respectively). Earlier, the Other had invoked an epistemological question: if the new (Renaissance) individual was defined by Descartes's "I think, therefore I am", how might the "I" learn to know the "Other"? Alterity, initially a Bakhtinian formulation, neither excludes nor absorbs the Other, but seeks to turn negative associations of apartness into a positive precondition of dialogue, in which the "I" and the "you" – now beings in the body politic – must learn to respect the autonomy of the intervening culture while seeking difficult interchange ("conversation" is too malleable a term).

Such a formulation – an amalgam of Foucault, Derrida, Levinas and other continental philosophers of "différence" – has struck a chord in North Atlantic literary studies, where a humanistic literary academe has had to contend with a brash nation-state confidence in a mainstream, homogeneous command of language and power: French assimilation of its former colonies; British Thatcherism; US global reach. (In opposition, they have a sensitivity to difference.)

What has all this to do with South Africa, indeed with South African literary criticism? For otherness is embedded in our history: colonialism and apartheid were both predicated on negative othering. The new ANC ruling

elite, which enjoys political power without the confidence of business power, pushes its own othering agenda: there are two economies, a white-rich economy and a black-poor economy, as President Mbeki has it, in a binary collapse of complexity. I am saying, instead, that there is no simple fit between philosophies of the Other in the North and philosophies of the Other in the South. Yet former colonies in the South wish to continue to be imitators of the North. When we in the apartheid-scarred divisions of South Africa should be seeking a tenuous commonality, scholars in literary criticism pursue a determined othering, in which Levinas's epistemology of the Other is imposed as a material entity. In his article on Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) Marais (2006: 79) embodies the Levinasian concept of the Other as the black face: "Friday's face", says Marais, "opposes the autonomous reading-subject's violence", the Face being a Levinasian term. Or is the Other in this article on *Foe* actually the Island? In Attridge's (2005) discussion of *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) the Other, the *arriviste* whom one awaits with trepidation, it is suggested, is the new Russia. (In his *The Singularity of Literature* the Other is the irreducible literary artefact.) Does Lurie meet the Other in the Lucy rape scene? Sometimes it is convenient in Marais's defence of Coetzee that the Other remain abstract: so the rape scene is denuded of flesh and blood to become a kind of structural parallel to the "not quite rape" of Melanie: an "analogue", or allegory, of the Orpheus/Eurydice encounter in the underworld (Marais 2000: 176). When Graham (2000) objects to Marais's reliance on Levinas – because of Levinas's emphasis on abstract otherness, he ignores the suffering body – she is, unfairly I think, given short shrift by Marais (2003).

In my own view, the Levinas defence of Coetzee's ethical responsibility is not only misguided, but largely unnecessary. Misguided because Coetzee's novels, if not about the Same, are also not in any absolute sense about the Other. Despite his occasional retreats into somewhat mechanical justifications of "alterity", or otherness actually located in a social context (see, later in this paper, Attwell 1998: 167), Attwell (1993) is correct, I think, that Coetzee's novels seek a reciprocity that is not easily forthcoming. It is a reciprocity that harbours its selfish desires. In *Slow Man*, for example, the Croatian ("Other"?) nurse who arrives in the protagonist's life arouses his sexual anticipations. Just as the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) has to learn to respect the barbarian girl without her returning favours, so this later "slow man" has to learn to give of his own self, of his own resources, in excess of what he will receive in return. It is a relief after reading many critics on Coetzee to return to Coetzee's own simple, but resonant, fictional prose:

The texture of the days, on the other hand [says the Magistrate], is as dull as porridge. Never before has my nose been so rubbed in the quotidian. The flow of events in the outside world, the moral dimension of my plight, if that is what it is, a plight, even the prospect of defending myself in court, have

lost all interest under the pressure of appetite and physical functions and the boredom of living one hour after another. I have caught a cold; my whole being is preoccupied in sniffing and sneezing, in the misery of being simply a body that feels itself sick and wants to be well.

(Coetzee 1980: 87)

What, then, can the case of Coetzee tell us about the state of South African criticism after apartheid? First, that there is a consistency in literary academics' wishing to refute what is assumed to be the instrumental, prescriptive, political criticism of the 1970s and 80s, in which not only the novel, but also the critical text, was seen to supplement rather than rival history. The reaction – as in the case of Coetzee – is to grant central importance to those works that challenge representational realism. Besides the flurry of articles on Coetzee, more attention over the last decade has been devoted to Zakes Mda and Zöe Wicomb than, say, to Nadine Gordimer. Like Ndebele ([1984]1991) who in the 1980s provided the embattled literati with a turn from the spectacular typicalities of protest to the psychologies of ordinary and therefore more credible people, so Mda has provided the current literati with a double relief: he is a black South African who plays “postmodernistically” with history, and who is not uncritical of the new ruling elite. (As in the 1980s, the literary-critical scene in South Africa today is overwhelmingly white.) Wicomb, too, avoids the mimetic convention in her exploration of multiple, intersecting, usually “coloured” identities. Brink (1998) when not pursuing the erotic fantasies of an ageing male – a Coetzee interest as well – extends the postmodern, or magic realist, mode into demythologising and remythologising the South African past. Van Coller (2005), who typifies recent Afrikaans literary preoccupations, finds the posts- (the postmodern, the postcolonial, the post-structural) to be a feature of contemporary Afrikaans literature: a literature that is not parochial but alert to global times. The motif, overall, is South Africa rejoining the globe: the unfolding of the society “after apartheid” will be more various, more variegated, more open to international trends.

As in its responses to Coetzee, so in its responses to Mda, Wicomb, Brink, Vladislavić and others, the literary-critical vocabulary of the last decade is indebted to continental philosophers and to a postcoloniality that emanates from northern institutions: the empire continues to write back to the centre. A survey of critical articles suggests that several critics have absorbed international preoccupations to enrich their own insights. Many are derivative, however, in numerous articles that follow a predictable path: “as Foucault or Derrida or Bhabha says” ... “I shall demonstrate diasporic/liminal identity in the work of Breytenbach, Mda, Wicomb, Coetzee”, etc. As in northern postcoloniality, the texts on which critics focus are mainly “high-art” novels which, as Boehmer (1998: 46) observes, are often of “second-hand, borrowed or inherited models: poststructuralist play, magic realist conjuring tricks, the treatment of history as discourse or fantasy,

recuperative autobiography as a way of narrating the self into being". The voices that interpret these texts may have shed the urgency of 1970/1980 commitment. Have the voices, however, also sacrificed a distinctive accent of response? Here is a critic on *Age of Iron* (1990):

Initially the novel's depiction of Mrs Curren's rehabilitation of selfhood appears to be fairly straightforward: she rejects the identity conferred on her by the State and re-asserts her original one. Coetzee complicates matters, however, by equating Mrs Curren's essential self with the text itself, in this way exposing the fact that it is merely a literary representation and therefore of the same ontological order as the State's representations of the Platonic essence of selfhood. This metafictional equation is clearly evident in the coincidence between the re-emergence of Mrs Curren's original identity and the completion of the novel and its emergence as a text, the self-reflexive implication being that the text is the final stage of Mrs Curren's metamorphosis.

Such reflexivity, consequently, is not simply an admission of the limitations of the novel's liminal status, but a transfer of authorial responsibility to the reader [T]hrough his or her action (or inaction) in the arena of history, the reader becomes, willy-nilly, not only the novel's co-author, but also an author of history.

(Marais 1993: 17-18, 22)

In its abstraction of language and thought this passage is characteristic of a great deal of criticism of the last decade or so, whether at home or abroad. The voice is undeniably intelligent, but does not convey – perhaps does not see its task to convey – the temper, the tone, the atmosphere, of the work under consideration. Yet the value we grant to the experiencing human subject is the primary justification for the study, to quote Coetzee (1999: 3), of literature in our time of “the great rationalization”. At the risk of being deliberately provocative, here is a voice closer to the rhetoric of urgency out of which *Age of Iron* was produced:

For J.M. Coetzee the state of emergency was the age of iron. Having suffered the personal loss of deaths in his own family during the late 1980s, he penned a powerful meditation on ageing and dying. In *Age of Iron* the ingenious intertextuality of his previous novel – a palimpsest *Crusoe/Roxanna* tale about authors and authorities, pens and penises – is stripped to the articulated passion of Mrs Curren, the terminally ill Classics teacher who, in muted literary allusion rather than showy intertext, meets ... the Virgil to her Dante, amid the death throes of Afrikaner nationalism's granite epoch. Culling her parallels from her Classical repertoire, Mrs Curren with Sparta in mind asks how long before the softer ages will return. Against the violence surrounding her and South African readers in the late 1980s, she demands in a slightly old-fashioned liberal way for the right to mourn, to die in privacy. Thus Coetzee, the arch-fictionalist, the intricate theorist, throws out his challenge to the public sphere: re-engage the individual person in her power to feel what is just and unjust. In looking sadly at the death of the child spirit

in the black township children who have been hardened prematurely by the demands of the “struggle”, Mrs Curren, when the age calls for heroism, expresses her belief in goodness. Her views are invested by Coetzee with considerable authority.

(Chapman 2003: 405)

The rhetoric of urgency, to which I refer above, is one of the phrases dubbed as “anti-art” by those who defended Coetzee against the politically driven critical discourse of the 1980s. But perhaps it requires an outsider to help us in South Africa regain perspective. Taking Parry’s (1998: 50) adverse criticism of Coetzee as a starting point (Coetzee’s fictions “owe nothing to knowledges which are not of European provenance ... his failure to articulate a transfigured social order”) Bethlehem notes Attwell’s reply (1998: 167) to Parry, in which “failure” is more accurately read as a refusal; as evidence of Coetzee’s deliberate choice “to encode a social vision ... in terms of [his narrative mode’s] commitment to aesthetic self-reflection”. Thus *Age of Iron* “will not stage its certain interclass and intercultural encounters purely as object lessons in social conduct; it will be about alterity itself, in both the thematic and the performative senses – in other words, the work thematises, performs, and thus reflects on, various modes of alterity” (p. 167).

To which Bethlehem – even as she herself condemns rhetoric or urgency – replies to Attwell:

What is clear, from my vantage point, is that this debate about “alterity”, or ethically sanctioned and ethnically motivated rehearsals of “otherness”, has the overwhelming feel of the “same” about it. In the first place there is a clear genealogy linking both Parry and Attwell to the (largely) internal debates in South Africa in the late 70s and early 80s concerning Coetzee’s reception In the second place, Coetzee has been so thoroughly domesticated by international criticism that he functions, virtually by default, as a convenient point of reference through which to hone by-now predictable aspects of postcolonial theory in its metropolitan guises.

(Bethlehem 2000: 153)

The same might be said of many other articles of the last decade, or so. Is it time to hear a new tune?

Yes, in two keys. First, revisit the 1970s and 80s and be sure that the period was really about instrumentalism, the programmatic, the rejection of forms, the denigration of the aesthetic. Second, heed a few recent calls – I use a shorthand – to go beyond *Disgrace*. Besides lending shape to a field of South African literature, the spadework in the seventies of Tim Couzens, Stephen Gray and others was not instrumental. The 1970s and 80s tackled the complex task of seeking an aesthetic that could encompass a field of texts from a diverse society. Certainly Coetzee had his detractors, usually, like Parry, of Marxist belief, but from *Dusklands* onwards he enjoyed

acclaim, even adulation from many. As Moran (2001: 220) notes, “Certainly Coetzee has been attacked with vehemence, but there is also an evangelical fervour mobilised in his defence that appears commensurately disproportionate to the task ...”. What was at stake was that Coetzee’s coming to prominence as a “non-representational” writer coincided with radical political contestation. In the cultural domain struggles for legitimisation (what would be the culture of a future South Africa?) witnessed art/politics polarities, in which neither side was willing to entertain qualificatory argument. (For a summary, see Chapman 2003: 411-435.) Slightly outside of ideological constriction Coetzee’s non-representational modes were appreciated or at least accepted by academic criticism as challenging, parodic rewritings of subgenres (the hunter diary, the farm novel), in which European discourse illuminated local reimaginations. As Wade (1994: 196-198) observed, Coetzee performed the modernist task of bringing new language, new concerns, and new forms to a petrifying old order, whether in its Afrikaner Nationalist or English liberal-humanist predilections.

A similar observation, however, might apply also to the new black poets of the 70s. Yet these poets were at times set in opposition to the “Coetzee aesthetic” as having reneged on literature as an art; as having utilised the poem to *supplement* rather than *rival* history. Whether the poets themselves spoke of splits between medium and message, serious criticism of this poetry did not. Without denigrating Coetzee, a number of critics sought to understand the “anti-poetic” forms of these new voices. The short Blakean lyric, the Brechtian epic, the closed form of the modernist giving way to the open field of oral-based expression, the last indebted to both African praises and the American Beat generation – such considerations of the aesthetic in the political constitute the collection of essays, *Soweto Poetry* (2007), which I edited in 1982 and which has recently been reprinted. Several articles at the time, including ones by myself, did adopt rhetorical positions to art in a state of emergency (see Chapman 1988). But this was rhetoric for a purpose: to ensure, as Pechey (1998: 73) has since reminded us, that we must continue in a heterogeneous society to entertain a “many-voiced” discourse – “local or global, high-cultural or popular”, that is appropriate to “particular historical phases”. In short, particular attention to, rather than generalities about, the 70s and 80s will reveal that, alongside rhetorical intervention, investigation of authors ranging from Olive Schreiner to Douglas Livingstone were not only about the *what*, but also about the *how* of literary art.

Having revisited the literary-critical voices of the 1970s and 80s, how to move forward into the new millennium? How to step beyond *Disgrace*? The novel does signal a local dead end, not only for its author, but also for those of us who must find sustenance in the actual, not only the representational, realities of difficult transitions. I have mentioned Gaylard’s reservations about the insistent deployment in Coetzee criticism of the Levinas Other. As he goes on to say, “this theoretical terrain that ethicalises alterity has

become fashionable in postcolonialism, to the extent that it is becoming an orthodoxy” (2006: 153). In contrast there is Jamal (2002), who challenges us to reconceive home not as a place of irreducible otherings, but as a place pre-eminently of love, albeit tough love. There is de Kock (2005: 77), who in saluting the death of South African literature as we used to know it wishes to embrace “a more liberalising repertoire for the improvisation of individual identity”. How might one give substance to de Kock’s comment that what is perhaps needed (after *Disgrace*?) is to keep track of the literary industry in South Africa that has become diverse and productive in the last few years – so much so that he thinks “the academy is once again several years behind the game” (p. 77).

Here is a suggestion that the journal *Current Writing* wishes to pursue: a volume of essays, titled “Beyond 2000”, which might have the following points of focus: Coetzee beyond *Disgrace*. To insist on the Levinasian model in the understated, suburban tenor of *Slow Man* (2005) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) strikes me as inappropriate, even slightly absurd. What about Krog after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)? This is not to ignore trauma criticism which, as Samuelson (2003) reminds us, needs to continue to explore tensions between common and deep memory in response to our past; it is rather to do justice to Krog’s achievements since *Country of My Skull* (1998). City streets and Vladislavić – in *The Exploded View* (2004) and *Portrait with Keys* (2006) the “posts-” are firmly held to local accent and account. My point is that if postcolonialism is to persist as a useful category of sense-making, it must seek its peripheral inflection: the indigenous, oral voice, chieftaincy, the spiritual – all strong elements at the edges where we live, but which have so far been neglected in postcolonial critique. I said in *Livingstone: Selected Poems* that Douglas Livingstone might yet be our first twenty-first-century poet (2004: 3). I am pleased that his “green” concerns have begun to enter the critical field. (See *Current Writing* 2007: 2, 19.) In a country of linguistic variety Michiel Heyns and Leon de Kock signal the importance of linguistic and cultural transfer in their translations of Marlene van Niekerk’s Afrikaans novels (see de Kock, 2003) Despite Nkosi’s ([1966]1983) still quoted dismissal of fiction by black writers as the imagination reduced to journalistic fact, journalism cannot be excised from literary consideration, particularly in societies of uneven literacy. Accordingly, Jonny Steinberg’s “faction” – for example, *Three-Letter Plague* (2008) – is a major new contribution. There are new Indian and Muslim voices. Is there a valuable category of the white woman writer? Eva Hunter (1999) thinks so. And what of young black writers, those of the “born free generation” for whom liberation politics is increasingly octogenarian: for example, the poems of Lebogang Mashile (2005) and Gabeba Baderoon (2006), or novels like Niq Mhlongo’s *After Tears* (2007) and Kopano Matlwa’s *Coconut* (2007).

I am not suggesting that writing published “after *Disgrace*” has been ignored (see, for example, *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir literatuurwetenskap* 21(3/4) 2005, on “New Research on J.M. Coetzee”; *scrutiny2* 11(2) 2005, on Vladislavić; *Current Writing* 19(2) 2007, on Krog; *Current Writing* 18(1) 2006, on “Animal Presences, Animal Geographies”). My concern here, however, is primarily with the critical approach. Greater “civic” gradations in the creative work do not necessarily guarantee greater critical gradations. We could end up with articles on, say, Vladislavić’s cityscape in which pavement vendors or the down-and-outs of downmarket, suburban Joburg are depicted in the language of alterity, as irreducible Others. The spirit of my paper is to say, I hope not. But let me take my cue from the post-*Disgrace* author of *Diary of a Bad Year*, who hardly bothers to hide behind his character, referred to by others as Señor C:

As a young man [in South Africa], I never for a moment allowed myself to doubt that only from a self disengaged from the mass and critical of the mass could true art emerge. Whatever art has come from my hand has in one way or another expressed and even glorified in this disengagement. But what sort of art has that been, in the end? Art that is not great-souled, as the Russians would say, that lacks generosity, fails to celebrate life, that lacks love.

(Coetzee 2007: 191)

Is this false modesty? Or is that we need to balance philosophical critique against the life of the individual human being? The latter’s experience – in the experience of the novel, the poem or the play – justifies the scaffolding of literary criticism. Without the experiential text there is no place for literary studies as a discipline in the university. Without the courage to evaluate the literary text – why, how, is it compelling? – there is no commitment to the distinctive dimension of the aesthetic. Why then is literary studies so eager to downplay the significance of literature, to position itself as an outpost of other disciplines, in which the template of the sociologist or philosopher or cultural theorist is imposed upon the literary text? Perhaps literary studies has difficulty in doing anything else. There will always be a disjunction between what creative writers produce (their subject matter) and the more abstract language of critical discourse. My view is, nevertheless, that greater congruence is possible between the language of the author and the language of the critic. This does not imply a naive subscription to mimesis: to the text as life, unmediated by artistic convention or contexts of reception: we do not interpret the same text – say, *Dusklands*, 1974 – the same way today as we did in the year of its initial publication. Neither does my view of literary-critical congruence imply a rejection of the insights of continental philosophers. Rather, I argue for a greater judiciousness than is current in the adaptation of one discipline’s discourse to another discipline’s object of study. Such correspondence, in fact, is a feature of Coetzee’s own

practice, whether in critical or creative vein. Let his Señor C, therefore, point a way forward:

And one is thankful to Russia too ... for setting before us with such indisputable certainty the standards toward which any serious novelist must toil, even if without the faintest chance of getting there: the standard of the master Tolstoy on the one hand and of the master Dostoevsky on the other. By their example one becomes a better artist; and by better I do not mean more skilful but ethically better. They annihilate one's impure pretensions; they clear one's eye sight; they fortify one's arm.

(Coetzee 2007: 227)

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