

Discussion/Bespreking

Critical Response

The editors have received the following responses to M. Chapman: "The writing of politics and the politics of writing on reading Dovey on reading Lacan on reading Coetzee on reading ...?" *JLS* 4(3): 327–341.

Teresa Dovey

It is questionable whether Michael Chapman's review/article, "The writing of politics and the politics of writing: On reading Dovey on reading Lacan on reading Coetzee on reading ...(?)," merits a response. It is writing which is purely prescriptive in nature: Chapman does not want a poststructuralist framework applied to Coetzee's novels, does not want Coetzee to be writing in the way that he does, and indeed would like to do away with poststructuralist theory altogether. Neither poststructuralist nor Lacanian psychoanalytic theory are belief systems: they are historically situated hermeneutic frameworks which are susceptible to critique. Sophisticated and meticulously argued critiques are being produced, for example Stanley Rosen's *Hermeneutics as Politics*, which Coetzee (1988b) has reviewed very favourably. Chapman's article, however, has the character of a religious fundamentalist's rantings against an atheistic point of view, and as such is unlikely to generate any fresh academic debate – for that is what we are engaged in, whether Chapman likes to admit it or not. It is also unlikely to land us in detention, which seems to be Chapman's touchstone for effective writing.¹ It is, however, necessary to respond for two reasons. Firstly, certain errors have to be corrected:

1. In order to save Rhodes University the trouble of denying responsibility for my Ph.D. thesis, I should point out that it "emanated" from Melbourne University.
2. The label "deconstructive" cannot accurately be applied to Stephen Watson's "Colonialism and the Novels of J.M. Coetzee." It is also not possible to deconstruct people: deconstruction is a mode of reading applied to texts.²
3. The Spivak article, "Imperialism and Sexual Difference," is not from the Special Issue on Sexual differences (see Chapman, References, p. 341); it is from the Special Issue on Sexual difference. (There is a difference.)
4. The Gordimer 1984b article is not "The essential gesture: writers and responsibilities." (See Chapman, References, p. 341). It is "The Essential Gesture: Writers and Responsibility," and it is from *The Age Monthly Review*, which is a literary supplement to a Melbourne newspaper.

Secondly, it is tedious, but necessary, to reiterate certain points which have already been made.³ It is disappointing to find that while Chapman has paid the book the compliment of reading it so carefully (even, if one is to judge by his list of references, going to the trouble of locating and consulting its sources, which must have cost him considerable effort, since some of them are in Melbourne newspapers), he has understood it so little. Let me spell it out then. Poststructuralist theory does allow for a historical reality made up of material events or experiences such as low wages or the police cell (see Chapman, p. 327). We do, of course, "need to intervene, at certain times, in important issues in the life around us" (Chapman, p. 334), but for writers, as writers, this intervention is a discursive one. Other forms of intervention are incidental to the act of writing: the writing of Breyten Breytenbach or of Jeremy Cronin is informed by their experience of the prison cell, but is not equivalent to it. There is something very simple and (for white South African writers and critics) something very hard to face:⁴ we can be productive⁵ only in terms of the output of texts, and, in attempting to assess the effect of these texts we have to, let me say it once again, take into account the material conditions of their production, conditions which include "the institutionalization of certain modes of discourse (amongst them "Literature" and "literary criticism"), and the processes of publication and distribution amongst a specific set of readers" (Dovey, 1987: 25). Chapman uses the term "intellectual bourgeoisie" (p. 331) to describe Coetzee's readership: does he imagine that he himself and the readers of his own writing do not fall within that category? One cannot simply talk or write oneself out of one's class position. Coming back to the subject of publication, I find it somewhat surprising that Chapman, a director of Ad. Donker Publishers, who published *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee*, should choose to write such a vituperative review of the book. Is he playing devil's advocate, one wonders, in order to stimulate debate and boost sales, or is he simply establishing his ideological distance from the book so as not to alienate the black poets upon whose continued support he depends if he is to pursue his work of appropriating/editing their poetry? I should also mention that it was the publishers who insisted upon the necessity of applying for an HSRC publication grant on my behalf in order to be able to publish the book.⁶

If I may be permitted to cite Coetzee here, we have to face the fact that literary writing works alongside other processes of social change

in an extraordinarily complex way – so complex that no-one has . . . succeeded in describing it adequately. When there is what one can call an epoch, a change over the whole spectrum of culture and society, it is such a complex of interplaying forces, and the dynamics are so complicated, that to say that A causes B is almost immediately a falsification.

(Thorold and Wicksteed: 5–6)

This approach at least has the value of being more honest, less hypocritical, than the approach which would validate certain modes of art or writing which, it is claimed, are "concerned fundamentally with the question of address to

Africa" (Chapman, p. 339). One has to ask what, at this moment in history, can possibly be meant by "Africa"? (used not once, but several times in Chapman's article – he also appeals for "a more African-directed investigation of the politics of writing," p. 336). By introducing this imaginary construct, Chapman denies historical and political specificity to the sociopolitical arena which is South Africa, and by choosing as his models a German artist (Hans Haacke) and a black South African writer (Es'kia Mphahlele) he conflates the problem of being a writer or artist with the particular problem of being a white South African writer or artist.

None would want to argue against the fact that black people's poetry and black people's theatre, such as that performed by the Natal Organization of Women, has the potential to achieve "productive ways of *moving forward* in sociopolitical life" (Chapman, p. 340). For obvious reasons Whites can't write it. As literary critics we should be grateful that a small band of white South African writers do continue to find diverse ways of remaining discursively productive. This is not to say that their writing should not be susceptible to critique, but that it should not be subjected to the prescriptiveness of Chapman's brand of criticism, and that the anger which permeates his article is an inappropriate response. One cannot help wondering at the source of this anger: his repeated sympathetic returns to the "character" of the Magistrate (from *Waiting for the Barbarians*), and the way in which the tone of his article is a perfect example of the kind of self-endorsing moral outrage represented in that novel, would suggest that it is the impotent anger of a liberal humanist fighting a desperate rear guard action from a place that has long been caricatured as a last outpost.

One last item to set the record straight. I have already undergone the apprenticeship – or is it penance? – that Chapman⁷ recommends for both Coetzee and myself: I spent 1987 teaching ESL. If white South African scholars of English literature find that their path to salvation, paved in the past by their role as guardians of moral and aesthetic values, has been barred, let them not seek salvation through the teaching of ESL, for they will find that path, too, strewn with thorns. In this respect the warning of Njabulo Ndebele should be heeded.⁸ Responding to the issues surrounding the teaching of ESL, he points out that

The problems of society will also be the problems of the predominant language of that society, since it is a carrier of a range of social perceptions, attitudes and goals. Through it, the speakers absorb entrenched attitudes. In this regard, the guilt of English then must be recognized and appreciated before its continued use can be advocated.
(Ndebele, 1986)

It seems there is no way around the guilt. Ndebele's comment brings us back to my rejection of the "view of language as a transparent medium for transmitting the realities of an empirical world, and [the] failure to see language itself as constitutive of those realities we are able to perceive"⁹ (Another error to be set right – Chapman incorrectly attributes this perception of the function

of language to Saussure.) Finally, then, the passage that Chapman chooses to cite from Mphahalele¹⁰ is a give away:

[Black people] need to be told now who they are, and where they come from, and what they should be doing about these things that we're talking about. That's where the scholar comes in; he must exploit that consciousness, the black consciousness, so as to probe deeper into the personality and move forward.

This authoritarian attitude hardly seems appropriate in the present context of democratic people's organisations. Be that as it may, Chapman's use of this quotation is revealing in that it tells us what white scholars such as Chapman have lost: the sense that they have the power to tell others who they are, where they come from and what they should be doing. It is a loss as irrevocable as the loss of Eden.

Notes

1. Chapman complains that "while Coetzee was receiving the 1987 Jerusalem Prize as a writer against apartheid, the 'people's poet' Mzwakhe Mbuli was once again being held in detention" (p. 336).
2. Chapman says: "Perhaps a more African-directed investigation of the politics of writing would have allowed for a different kind of attention to *Foe*. . . . It would have been prepared . . . to subject the texts, the class/culture bound novelist, and the critic herself to the sort of "deconstructive" reading of Coetzee as a colonial writer that characterises Stephen Watson's illuminating article, "Colonialism and the Novels of J.M. Coetzee" (p. 336).
3. In my book and two articles on Coetzee, and in Coetzee: 1988a.
4. Chapman says that "Lentricchia is saying something very simple and (for white South Africans) something very hard: that we need to intervene, at certain times, in important issues in the life around us" (p. 334). I suspect that Lentricchia is not saying something quite so simple.
5. Chapman insists upon this notion of productivity. He says, for example: "It is questionable whether either Coetzee or Dovey has found a voice which can address, productively, the urgent dilemmas of writing and politics in contemporary South Africa" (Abstract, p. 327), and "if poststructuralism has any value for us it is as a tool for interrogating power, but . . . it is only one tool among others and, in South African practice, has so far proved to be distinctly limited in the urgent search for productive ways of *moving forward* in sociopolitical life" (p. 340).
6. Chapman argues that "Supported as it is by a Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) publications grant, Dovey's book is unlikely to be understood outside the rarefied air of the academic-theoretician" (p. 339).
7. Chapman concludes by saying "Possibly Mphahlele's view is problematic for the white intellectual. While we ponder the dilemma, a spell of ESL-teaching might be of benefit to all of us, including Dovey and Coetzee" (p. 340).
8. Ndebele's talk refutes Guy Butler's position as articulated in the article "English and the English in the New South Africa," *The English Academy Review*, 3 (1985).
9. This passage from the book (Dovey, 1988: 53), is cited by Chapman, p. 337.

10. Chapman, pp. 339–340, cites Manganyi, N. 1981, p. 44. Looking in: in search of Ezekiel Mphahlele. Interview. In *Looking through the keyhole*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.

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Annamaria Carusi

During the 1987 parliamentary elections, one of the many ploys used was the construction of a simple equation which ran as follows: PFP = UDF = ANC = terrorism = communism = Soviet Union. This was achieved by a simple manoeuvre of linguistic terrorism, which effectively dismisses opposition by blurring distinctions and encouraging generalised paranoia.

This type of linguistic terrorism is unfortunately not limited to state politics, but regularly finds its way into the sacred halls of academia, and even more dishearteningly, into those precincts of academia which see themselves as the last bastions of liberalism, democracy, white bad conscience and good intentions. A recent example is Michael Chapman's review of Teresa Dovey's *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee* where the following equation is made in the most facile and facetious of ways: post-structuralism = deconstruction = difference = psychoanalysis = desire = libidinal (anything) = pluralism = literary theory (of any kind and any persuasion). All this to accomplish the dismissal of 'unintelligible' and above all forbidden interpretations as academic, intellectualising and bourgeois mumbo-jumbo.

It is not within the scope of this reply to go over Chapman's rendition of Dovey's work, or his 'explanations' of Lacan. Whether or not Chapman has read Lacan, Foucault, or any other so-called post-structuralist thinker is not at issue; it is not my prerogative to be telling anyone what they should or

should not be reading; what bothers me however is that Chapman so unproblematically – and dogmatically – believes that it is *his* prerogative. And legitimises this by the certainty that he is speaking on behalf of the people, and above all, the suffering people. He asks of Coetzee whether he has found “a language with which to speak to Africa or to be spoken to by Africa?” (p.335) The assumption seems to be that if one simply ‘gets back to the story’, or bears witness to the struggle, or follows the injunctions of Es’kia Mphahlele (after all, as a black person he can automatically validate his own claim) or indulges oneself in a spell of ESL-teaching, one has either found the voice of Africa, or at least is much closer to it than the rest of us. It is far more likely that one is closer to the *creation* of the purely African; in these cases, one is not describing, one is prescribing. That is a position of power, which is as open to abuse as any other. Power, in this form is difficult to get away from. It appears to me that the only voice with even a tenuous claim to integrity, is one which declares where it comes from, and which does not unquestioningly accept itself as the only voice of the people / of political validity / of Truth. Whereas Chapman readily confronts Dovey and Coetzee (and all of “post-structuralism”) with the power implicit in any speaking position, he refuses to admit to the consequences of this statement for his own discourse: here power and its deployment have become a blind spot.

It is not therefore Chapman’s objectives that I would wish to question: an interrogation of the discourse of academic institutions is indeed required. Academics need to assume the political nature of this discourse. My quarrel is rather with the dogmatism of Chapman’s prohibitive “thou shalt not speak the language of post-structuralism”.

One of the effects of the clamp-down on freedom of speech in this country has been a restriction of debate, not only between “right-wing” and “left-wing” groupings, but also, and perhaps even more dangerously, within the general “left-wing” as well. It has become an act of heresy to even whisper a word which may be deemed to be critical of any anti-apartheid position, precisely because it *is* the only just cause. Democracy is not something that will just happen in the Utopia of post-apartheid South Africa; it needs to be borne of and nourished by self-criticism, and not self-righteousness.

Michael Marais

In my view, the most illuminating aspect of Teresa Dovey’s *The novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* (1988) is her extensive analysis of the various strategies by which Coetzee deconstructs the languages of imperialism, an analysis which situates his political relevance “in the challenge he presents to the authority and priority of sanctioned forms of sense-making and myth-making particularly within the living legacy of colonial ideology”. This account of Dovey’s argument is taken from Michael Chapman’s recent review of her study (1988: 329), a review with which I would like to take issue here. Chapman dismissed Dovey’s argument as “Standard fare” (329), his contention being that Coetzee is, admittedly, political, but that he “offers no

transcendental cure" for the "current 'colonial' nightmare" which his novels explore (330). Earlier in his review, he makes a similar point when he quotes from Leon de Kock's address at the Unisa seminar on Coetzee's *Foe*: "Can we not find a better use for the power we have than to pick at our own cultural carcass?" (329).

Coetzee, it would seem, is himself here being accused of a sort of "failure of the historical imagination" (Coetzee 1988: 10). In her brief outline of the standard criticisms levelled at Coetzee's novels by his South African readers, Dovey includes the failure to project "the ultimate triumph of the oppressed peoples of South Africa" (1988: 52). Such a charge invariably presupposes a highly teleological conception of history, a conception which automatically centres History as the principal criterion in the assessment of literature: "good" art must reflect the telos of History. But slightly differently, if the artist in the South African interregnum does not serve as the midwife of the new order struggling to be born, s/he is condemned for being the grave-digger of the old, dying order. It is therefore understandable that critics like Michael Chapman prefer a writer like Njabulo Ndebele to one like Coetzee. On the one hand, Ndebele's fictions are populated with characters who evince a teleological notion of history. For example, the prophetess in Ndebele's short story, "The Prophetess," makes the following prediction:

If the fish in a river
boiled by the midday sun
can wait for the coming of evening,
we too can wait
in this wind-frosted land,
the spring will come. (1983: 40)

"The ultimate triumph of the oppressed peoples of South Africa" is, here, seen to be as natural and inevitable as the diurnal and seasonal cycles. On the other hand, Coetzee's fictions are populated with marginal characters like Michael K, who are depicted as "escap[ing] the times," (1983: 159), as being "untouched by history" (1983: 207). No final historical solution emerges from a novel like *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) in which history is depicted as a concentration camp and revealed as discourse by a variety of metafictional ploys.

For those who elevate history to the position of supreme legislator in determining the merits and demerits of cultural artefacts, writers like Coetzee are indeed superfluous and, since a politics of writing presupposes a politics of reading, their readers (for example Dovey and some of the delegates who attended the Unisa seminar on *Foe*), *could* be dismissed as members of a coterie of "intellectual bourgeoisie" (Chapman: 331). What worries me about this position, though, is that in its bias towards an anti-aesthetic utilitarianism, it repressively circumscribes the critical potential of literature as a counter-practice which opposes totalized conditions. I believe (and I think Dovey does too) that Coetzee's novels manifest this potential. They are subversively postmodernist, in the philosophical sense of the term, to the extent that they deconstruct hegemonic cultural practices and the relation

these bear to language and, as a result, promote an understanding of the ways in which power and language intersect.¹ Such an understanding, I would think, is a precondition for change; without it we remain imprisoned in our linguistically and culturally conditioned perceptions of "reality" – the perennial hermeneutic theme of Coetzee's critical and creative writing. As Arif Dirlik points out, with reference to cultural modes and practices: "The radicalism of the issue of culture lies in the fact that culture affords us ways of seeing the world, *and if the latter have any bearing on our efforts to change the world*, then it is essential that we confront our ways of seeing" (my italics, 1986/7: 13–14, quoted in Ryan 1988: 255).

I do not believe that Chapman is prepared to concede that confronting our ways of seeing is necessary for change, despite his claim to "appreciate the need to question discursive structures of power" (1988: 334) – narrowly equated here with ideological state apparatuses. If he were, he would be prepared to acknowledge the validity, even priority, of deconstructive practice such as that of Coetzee. As his argument stands, however, he refuses to recognize or ignores completely the obvious implication that change divorced from a procedure which seeks to disable discursive authority structures (and thereby prevent them from perpetuating themselves) is doomed to be cosmetic. Dirlik explains succinctly:

To avoid the question of culture is to avoid questions concerning the ways in which we see the world; it is to remain imprisoned, therefore, in a cultural unconscious, controlled by conditioned ways of seeing (even unto rationality), without the self-consciousness that must be the point of departure for all critical understanding and, by implication, for all radical activity (1986/7: 13–14, quoted in Ryan 1988: 255).

To outlaw such questioning – whether it takes the form of creative or critical writing – in a country such as South Africa, which is hardly immune from totalizing discourses, seems to me to constitute a failure of the historical imagination in itself. I disagree entirely with Chapman who urges that we agree to make believe, despite our knowledge of the contrary, that history is a closed and stable system:

... we do not need to deny that language is the origins of history in order to choose, at any particular time and place, to 'shut down' the play of differences and accept the necessity, however provisional, of anti-Derridean "strategies with finality" in the practice of producing a new kind of human subject: one which, to quote Terry Eagleton after Brecht, would experience not only the gratifications of libidinal language but the fulfilments of fighting political injustice (188: 328).

I feel that a conscious decision to subscribe to such a view implies a voluntary submission to the power of culture as a means of domination and, by extension, an unmindful disregard of the antihegemonic force of postmodernist procedures, their potential for political mobilization. It should be kept in mind here, with reference to Chapman's criticisms of poststructuralism, that "postmodernism is hard to conceive without continental theory, structuralism and poststructuralism in particular. Both have led us to reflect upon culture as

a corpus of codes or myths" (Foster 1983: x). So, rather than censor such critical procedures out of existence or confine them to debates in academic journals, should we not, as teachers, agree to disseminate them? If we agree to do so, they will not merely remain abstract theories, and politics will be something more than that which "the literary critic talks about longingly and hopelessly". (Said 1983: 149).

Note

1. Paradoxically, the postmodernist novel self-subversively undermines the "notion of the aesthetic as subversive, a critical interstice in an otherwise instrumental world" (Foster 1983: xv). For example, Coetzee thematizes the notion of the author as producer in *Foe* (1986).

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