Review Articles/Resensie-artikels

A Politics or an Ethics of Writing?

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J.M. Coetzee. South Africa and the Politics of Writing
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Attwell's book on the novelistic œuvre of J.M. Coetzee makes, as the title indicates, political claims for Coetzee's writing, but within the framework of a *more* extensive problematics, that is "the politics of writing" in South Africa. Coetzee's work articulates, according to Attwell, the problem of writing in "colonial postcolonialism". With what authority and legitimacy can a white writer involve himself with "the power of narrative", when his very mode of writing makes him complicit with a white, European canon, complicit with colonialist domination whilst the writer himself rejects such domination? What validity would such a critical rejection have when the victims of this order with which he is complicit, are the only ones who can overcome domination and are a group for whom he, the writer, cannot speak? It is, of course, this very mode of writing which Coetzee's political critics have focused on. Attwell's project is to interarticulate the two poles between which criticism and interpretation have placed Coetzee: history on the one hand and poststructuralist textuality on the other. His premise is that Coetzee's writing is "located in the nexus between history and text" and that "a reflexive examination of the constitutive role of language in placing the subject within historicity" (Attwell 1993: 3) arbitrates between these two poles.

Picking up the notion of heterodiegetic narration, Attwell postulates an implied author as agent "behind" the writing. This allows him to see Coetzee's writing as "itself a historical act, one that must be read back into the discourses of South Africa" (p. 3). In the chapters which follow, every novel is contextualised by historical events in the South African political reality of the time. In a sense this contextualisation is meant to allow the "politics" in Coetzee's writing to speak for itself. Similar contextualisations by other critics did not provide such an extensive political background to each of the novels. These historical contextualisations, however, do not always lead up to what, in my opinion, is the more interesting and innovative argument Attwell offers in respect of the problem of discursive

positionality.

Attwell's new interpretive effort is situated, by himself, against the backdrop of a consensus he claims exists in respect of Coetzee's novels articulating "the breakup of the dominating, rationalist subject of colonialism" (Attwell 1993: 1). In the first two novels, the implied author as historical agent intervenes in and subverts colonialist systems of meaning and domination. Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee in *Dusklands*, as well as Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*, are narrators who are "not one of the primary agents of colonization but who live ... in the conditions created by such agents" (p. 56). Displacement characterises this position. Here, Attwell employs the master/slave relation as analysed by Hegel, as Dovey in *The Novels of J M Coetzee. Lacanian Allegories* (1988: 22-28, 69) has done before him. One cannot escape the feeling that Homi Bhabha's analysis of colonialist discourse might be just as apt. Attwell ventures a new interpretation of Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* when he diagnoses her problem as a lack of reciprocity. This interpretation by Attwell invites extension by means of the notion of the other and of othering.

The magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* discovers that domination is embedded in sign systems which are imposed on the "Barbarians" by Empire, and which, therefore, cannot read the other at all. Attwell argues that the "possession of this difference would consolidate the Magistrate's subject position" (Attwell 1993: 78). The Magistrate's discourse becomes a discourse of lack - the lack of continuity and of reciprocity. Domination shatters signification. History, too, cannot be read and loses its continuity. However, if history is demystified by showing that it is merely a discourse allowing for empire to impose a meaning on the colonised, then, Attwell argues, this leaves a limited amount of freedom for writing. This freedom of textuality is realised in *Life and Times of Michael K*.

Attwell allocates to *Waiting for the Barbarians* a central position in the œuvre. It is the only novel which in Attwell's book merits a complete chapter to itself. The novel deals with forms of closure such as those imposed by Joll and Empire which, in an effort to repeat the colonising gesture, are also imposed by the Magistrate in his more humane approach to the colonised. To the existing analyses of this novel Attwell contributes a late-semiotic reading. If meaning systems are systems of signification, dependent on language, and if, therefore, neither the other nor history can be read, then the subject itself is also determined by such systems of signification. One might add a few points to Attwell's exposition here. Systems of signification are historically embedded. Thus, the subject position, dependent on systems of signification rather than on autonomous subjectivity of an idealist kind, indicates historicity.

To return to Attwell's argument: the magistrate becomes aware both of the mystifying role of signification and of his own historicity. In the œuvre itself, the link between history and representation is broken, according to Attwell (p. 84), and the novels begin to display "a sharper turn towards discursivity" (p. 88). Against this semiotic, poststructuralist and, later in the book, deconstructivist backdrop, Attwell can demonstrate that Coetzee's writing investigates the "scope and limitations of novelistic discourse within a culture obviously in crisis" (p. 88). In this way, Attwell can provide a new dimension for the by now well-known relation between Coetzee's novels and South African "white writing". He can also make the concept of metafiction useful for the analysis of Coetzee's work. It furthermore allows him to respond effectively to Coetzee's political critics:

> When Coetzee chooses not to represent mass resistance or project ... a utopian future, it would be appropriate - because we are dealing with fiction that has always put the speaking subject in question - to ask whether this decision might not be attributable to Coetzee's sensitivity to the problem of authority within the fractured and unequal context of South African nationhood.
>
> (Attwell 1993: 93)

The political defence of the use of allegory in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and the analysis of textuality in *Life and Times of Michael K*[1] are possibly the most convincing and innovative interpretations in Attwell's book. War disseminates meaning, in Attwell's formulation. Of K the medical officer says:

> Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory ... of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence within a system without becoming a term in it.
>
> (p. 228)

In Attwell's reading, *Michael K* is also the refusal of the text or of writing to "take up residence" in existing systems of meaning, including existing structures of politically interpreted meaning, demands for relevance, accountability, historical representation, etcetera. Attwell's interpretation is particularly innovative when it explains how this mode of writing refers the act of interpretation back to its own in-built tendency to appropriate by subjecting the text to a closed set of signifieds.

It is a feature of this book that it rests heavily on Coetzee's academic and cultural articles and interviews, of which some crucial ones have been collected in *Doubling the Point*, edited by Attwell and framed by a set of interviews between Attwell and Coetzee. Quoting Coetzee on Nabokov,

Attwell suggests that *Michael K* is literature defying "history-as-interpretation" (p. 100). *Michael K* offers this resistance because of "the open-endedness of writing" (p. 103). Attwell avoids insinuations of textual "free play" by arguing that this textually registered freedom is historically constrained. Unfortunately, this statement is not motivated and it is not clear why this freedom is "marginal" (p. 103). One suspects that Attwell here merely repeats late-semiotic and poststructuralist claims to the subversive power of the marginal as a political effect, and for this reason adopts the over-hasty description of this writing as being marginal. Similarly unexplained is his view that *Michael K* is Coetzee's "attempt to produce the narratological equivalent of deconstruction's gesture of erasure" (p. 102). If *Michael K* is to be read as erasure in Derridean terms, then it denotes a text (Michael K himself) beyond self-presence and idealist substance subverting the "camps" of meaning which propose that they themselves are infinite and substantial. Attwell does not provide such an additional motivation of his statement. Apart from being insufficiently motivated, the comment implies that Coetzee uses deconstructivist motives to close the text, which would be an eminently un-deconstructivist move.

Foe examines "the historical and discursive conditions under which white South African authorship must operate", drawing in its wake a serious questioning of the authority of writing (p. 103). Defoe, the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, in the novel represents a specific Western literary tradition, and he becomes a father figure to Barton who is confronted with her inability to read Crusoe and, especially, Friday, that is to read the colony and the colonised other. To existing interpretations of *Foe,* Attwell contributes the conclusion that "Coetzee allows the representation of Friday to be shaped by the obvious political and epistemological limitations of colonial discourse" (p. 103). As white writer, Coetzee will not speak on behalf of the other. As has been argued elsewhere,[2] the "other" is precisely the place where existing discourses discover their limits. Attwell consolidates the basic point of his book when he reads the author as agent in a neat formulation: "... in Friday's silence Coetzee acknowledges where he stands" (p. 103). Barton articulates the "position of semi-marginality that I have called colonial postcolonialism" (p. 112). The white writer is marginalised from postcolonialism proper. Friday is placed in a position of authority in respect of Barton, but also on a metafictional level, and Attwell's conclusion is convincing:

> Coetzee takes his reader as far as it is logically possible to go into a recognition and dramatisation of the historical constraints that influence his fiction writing.
> (Attwell 1993: 118)

The subject is "doomed to live out the forms of subjectivity imposed by history" (p. 118). In this, the interpretation notably adds to Teresa Dovey's work on Coetzee's œuvre and specifically on *Foe*.

Attwell's interpretation of *Age of Iron*, however, seems to let go of the premises and project as regards a politics of writing. Instead, Attwell concentrates on "ethicalism" (p. 120), a neologistic reference to ethics which he does not explain. He does, however, read *Age* as dealing with the lack - not the problem any more - of authority and the death of discourse. It is not clear how this links up with the discursive self-reflexivity which seemed to be Attwell's main argument. The problem of authority is linked with ethics, and Curren is read as articulating an ethical discourse which has lost its authority. One wonders whether Attwell is in this interpretation building too strongly on Coetzee's remarks in the interviews in *Doubling the Point* (Coetzee 1992: 250). Attwell's willingness to pick up deconstructivist strands in other novels makes his omission of this aspect of *Age of Iron* striking. Attwell's project in this book allows for a reading of *Age of Iron* as a final self-reflective, metafictional inquiry of writing into itself by means of writing. Attwell misses this opportunity to consolidate his thesis of a politics of writing.

The strong thesis *J.M Coetzee. South Africa and the Politics of Writing* wants to make is undermined in various ways. For an argument which avails itself of theoretical concepts such as agency, subject position, historicity and discursivity the failure of a theoretical underpinning is remarkable. Foucault comes to mind, but Attwell does not use him systematically. Foucault is, for example, used rather metaphorically for an interpretation of the Magistrate's reading of archaeological remnants (Attwell 1993: 77-78) in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. One cannot help but compare Attwell's deployment of the notion of subject position with the elaborate and practical use of the same concept by, amongst others, Chris Weedon (*Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* 1984). Conclusions such as the following invite a Foucauldian underpinning:

> One will therefore ask not what is the proper self-definition of a writer but, rather, what forms of self-definition are *available* within the culture.
>
> (p.13)

Waiting for the Barbarians is given centre stage since it is, according to Attwell, the first time that history appears as itself, as "discursive field" (p. 72) in these novels. Semiotic, late-semiotic and deconstructivist theoretical constructs are put to good use but Attwell does so eclectically, without any attempt to build up a systematics for his mode of interpretation.

Chapter 1 of the book, which provides "Contexts: Literary, Historical, Intellectual" outlines certain theoretical frameworks. The particulars cited are very sparse and the conclusions on which the interpretation purports to build are, therefore, vague and appear to be arbitrary. So, for example, Attwell proposes to read Coetzee's work as "situational metafiction". This proposal is neither properly founded nor referred to again in any systematic manner in the rest of the book. It is not clear what the "Contexts" of chapter 1 are supposed to refer to.

One is left with the impression that the book merely makes theoretical gestures, as if prescribed by convention. If one grants that Attwell did not want to make a theoretical point with this book, the problem is even more apparent. Why then include a first chapter which even ventures into a discussion of the problem of referentiality in literature? When this problem is introduced with the poignant (for Coetzee's work and his political critics) question: "Is the turn towards textuality ... a turning away from history?" (p. 17) the sparseness of theoretical detail is all the more troubling. Why propose a postmodernist theoretical interpretation such as "situational metafiction" with reference to Hutcheon and Waugh? By the end of the relevant subsection one does not yet know what Attwell means by "reflexive narrative" (p. 20). The use of late-semiotic and deconstructivist terms are never founded. Are we to presume what is so often presumed - that Coetzee builds on these theories anyway? Even if this were the case, the interpreter is not relieved of the obligation to explain his interpretive procedures. The criticism is not that there is a lack of theory, but rather that there is an unfounded and unexplained use of theory, all the more striking because of the central argument of the book.

This problem goes hand in hand with the lack of a theory of interpretation. This is most apparent when Attwell contextualises Coetzee's novels politically without ever explaining why or how we should read political reality and text together. Attwell seems to expect us to settle for the glaring congruency of "history" with "text". That Attwell wants the reader to understand the similarities as a foregone conclusion of the "historical" aspect of Coetzee's writing is clear when, in respect of *Michael K*, he argues that the text meets the "requirement" (p. 101) of social conviction in respect of the historical because it designs a picture of South Africa in a state of war and siege. Why should this be a requirement for the writer? Why should history align itself with textuality only in the form of such a design based on realities? Attwell does offer theories of history, specifically some ideas of Kermode, but these do not cover his historical-political contextualisations. In short, no theory of history underpins this argument, the main premise of which is history and its relation to the text. Coetzee's

novels themselves offer an implicit theory of history, apparent, for example, in *In the heart of the Country*. A similar problem arises in connection with the theory of language, also used by Attwell, and to good effect, but not systematised. Again the writing itself offers a base for theoretical exploitation and again, *In the Heart of the Country*, could be said to provide an implicit semiotic theory of language which *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K* elaborate on. What is noticeable is that Attwell picks up the threads but refrains from spelling them out theoretically or systematically. The relationship between literary text and historical text, as that between writing and personal statements of the writer (in *Doubling the Point*) and that between literary writing and academic writing (by the same writer) is not obvious. Attwell clearly works with the hypothesis that writing as production process can and should be situated within real historical-political events. However, he never explains on what theory this hypothesis rests. From the vantage point of 1994 the state of war and siege projected in *Michael K* does not have to rest on political details of the time of writing at all, and neither does the colonialist autocracy allegorically textualised in Empire in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. One is left with the overall impression that *South Africa and the Politics of Writing* refrains from "too much" theory for a reason which remains unknown. Nowhere does Attwell explain what is meant by "politics". A suspicion as regards politics according to fashion might be strengthened by the fact that Attwell submits the novels to certain *en vogue* binarisms such as metropolis/colony (1993: 14).

One seriously has to question Attwell's interpretation of this œuvre as a postmodernism which could be understood as a form of postcolonial writing, especially considering the arguments Attwell concurs for this proposition - During and Tiffin. That Coetzee's mode of writing testifies to a "crisis of emptiness" (During quoted by Attwell p. 22) or to a confrontation with the "limited, marginal option of consistently eroding one's own biases" (Tiffin quoted by Attwell p. 22) can be contested in terms of Attwell's own arguments. In Coetzee's writing the "biases" concomitant to a certain discursive placing, a certain subject position - that of being a "colonial postcolonialist" - are being investigated, objectified and, perhaps, even lamented, but not "eroded".[3] What is confronted is the impossibility of such a humble erosion, such a moralistic correction of ideological faultiness on the side of the coloniser. Coetzee investigates and objectifies the cultural and literary traditions he finds himself in as subject - particularly those of modernism and postmodernism - by means of modernism itself. Philosophies, theories and literary conventions of modernism are used to question modernism within a (post)colonial situation. This hardly testifies

to "eroding" one's biases. In fact, such a self-questioning, such a critical application of conventions or theories to the conventions or theories themselves is typical of, specifically, poststructuralist theory and writing. It is modernism which allows Coetzee to reflect on discursive, historicist placing. It constitutes poststructuralist - not postmodernist - self-reflectivity.

Implicit to Attwell's argument in this book is that Coetzee consistently remains within the European, Western, textual literary conventions and that he, precisely by doing so, confronts and exposes, in fact co-textualises, his "subject position". To do otherwise, one might add, would, in terms of Attwell's point, have been dishonest and artificial. Not the crisis of the "agents of colonialism" who "once colonialism itself has lost its legitimacy, find themselves without strong ethical and ideological support" (During quoted by Attwell p. 22) is to be detected here, but, instead, a strong ethical bias.

J.M. Coetzee. South Africa and the Politics of Writing as a noteworthy example of literary interpretation, invites consideration of such metatheoretical problems as the function of theory and the theory of interpretation. However, I should like to investigate another proposition which Attwell's study invites, that is the proposition that this analysis of Coetzee's work might have concerned itself, not with the "politics of writing" but with the *ethics of writing*.

Attwell's study facilitates an interpretation which would conclude the opposite of a crisis of ethics and legitimation. The metafictional and textual indications of an awareness of a discursively determined subject position on the side of the writer indicates an ethical stand. There is, as Attwell indicates, a tendency in Coetzee's writing to remain consistent with the restrictions imposed by discursivity and historicity and the subject position these produce. This position, as Attwell explains, has a variety of facets. South African "white writing" is a discursive placing as much as the English novelistic tradition or high modernism is, and as, most important, the "politics" of the position of a white South African writer is - the "politics" of a writer who rejects the very regime and system which upholds him or, at least, which represents, or claims to represent, the cultural and intellectual values in terms of which he writes the way he writes. I would conclude from Attwell's analysis and from my own reading of Coetzee that, if the displacement this position entails is articulated in the fictional figures of Coetzee's writing, if this is what he writes *about*, then it is not the position *within* or *from* which he writes.

A consistent awareness of the restrictions one's discursive placedness as a writer imposes on one can be detected in Coetzee's writing in textualisations such as the following, most of which have been pointed out by

Attwell: the textualisation of an "other", the refusal to "represent" directly the body of torture especially when this is also the "other", the relativisation of those voices which speak from within specific culturally and historically determined discourses such as the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Barton in *Foe* and Curren in *Age of Iron*. However, the strongest testimony to such a consistency is the tendency towards textual self-erasure, markedly clear in the closing chapters of both *Foe* and *Age of Iron*. This is, however, not a humble acknowledgement of the relativity of writing in the face of its discursive displacement, its imposed subject position, or in the face of the crisis of the colonial-postcolonial subject. Humility would, in fact, be the opposite of self-erasure and ethics, being a gesture of discrete self-affirmation which allows the subject of the gesture a moral high ground. Similarly, to accept one's subject position in "colonial postcolonialism" as one in which one is "without strong ethical and ideological support" might simply be another way of transcending historicity, of "saving" oneself from one's complicity.

An ethics of writing would have to avoid such transcendentalisations and "savings". I would argue that Coetzee's writing achieves this by fully accepting a "subject position" as the only position from which one can speak, should one wish to speak. Discursivity might be a law for all speaking subjects, whether admitted or not. The ethical gesture of Coetzee's writing is an act, deductible from the textualisation, by which the writing subject makes this a law unto himself, enforcing a consistency by which speech or voice is dependent on the observance of this law. If writing strives to make voices heard - a textualisation again obvious not only in *Foe* and *Age of Iron* but, pertinently so, in *The Master of Petersburg* - then it can legitimately do so only inasmuch as it does not claim to be such a voice.

A certain law of discursive positionality is made to reflect on the writing as such - not as an intellectual law, and not because a displaced subject wishes to save himself by means of moralism, but because the subject position structurally creates a space for an ethical position, a space the writer can ignore or actualise. Accepting the restrictions of discursive positioning within the South African situation of the "white writer" could become a pre-condition if writing wants to open up discourse to "other" voices, to the absent and the unheard. In Coetzee's writing the absent and unheard are not, in the final instance, the specific, empirically suppressed and marginalised, the colonised and the persecuted, but all voices which discourse - the very same discourse which enables and places the writing - of necessity excludes and makes inaudible.

To open up discourse to its own beyond is consistent with the acknow-

ledgement of discursive relativity and restrictions. One cannot hear beyond oneself, as the closing chapters of *Foe, Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg* seem to textualise. Ethics is, however, not a task the writer sets himself, but it is part and parcel of a structure - the structure of the position of the speaking/writing subject - which is a condition for writing itself. There is not *a* law for literary production, but there is a position for the writing subject in which observing a law becomes productive since it is legitimating. In Coetzee's writing the law of discursive relativity is made incumbent upon the writing so that writing can question discourse, especially the prevailing discourses of colonialism, of a South African and English writing tradition, of white liberalism, of political state violence or of self-destructive but apparently tragically called for death in the liberation struggle.

One could extend Attwell's study to propose that J.M. Coetzee's writing acknowledges the subject position *ethically* in order to legitimate the questioning of discourse from within discourse and historicity.

This investigation is undertaken in an article which has already been submitted to the *Journal of Literary Studies.*

Notes

1. In the rest of the text titles will be abbreviated as follows: *In the Heart of the Country - Heart*; *Waiting for the Barbarians - Barbarians; Life and Times of Michael K - Michael K; Age of Iron - Age.*

2. Carusi, Annamaria 1991, The Postcolonial Other as a Problem for Political Action. *Journal of Literary Studies* 7(3/4): 229-230.

3. A similar critical comment on self-erosion has been made by Leon de Kock. See De Jong 1989: 229-231.

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