

J. M. Coetzee in Context and Theory
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As both a Nobel Laureate and the only author to win the Booker Prize twice, the South African writer J.M. Coetzee occupies a distinguished position in contemporary international letters, attributable to the thematic complexities underpinning his work. The editors of this collection, comprising a diverse range of literary-critical analyses, note that his novels and non-fiction are characterised by ‘an intense though oblique involvement with the political, intellectual, aesthetic and philosophical issues of our times’ (p.1). It is this breadth of ambition that underpins Coetzee’s position of significance and warrants the publication of such collections. The book gathers work from major Coetzee scholars across the globe; as well as being indispensable for academic researchers focusing on the author it will be of interest to any scholars examining the relationships between the literature, history and politics of post-apartheid South Africa. The standard of the contributions is high throughout, and the editors stress the book’s ambition to demonstrate that the relevance of Coetzee’s work resides not merely within the academic realm, but rather that his works ‘have transformed the canons or histories to which they lay claim’ (p.4). To this end, the collection is divided into two sections: the first part, ‘Context’, comprises six articles that focus on Coetzee’s connections

to the wider history and politics of his time; while the second part, 'Theory', features eight articles offering more traditionally literary-critical perspectives on his texts.

Given the diverse and boundary-crossing nature of many of the contributions here, this separation feels slightly awkward and artificial. Although the editors assure us it reflects 'not a watertight division between these two categories but a differential sense of emphasis' (p.4), even in this weaker sense, the distinction is not always evident. Derek Attridge's contribution 'Sex, Comedy and Influence: Coetzee's Beckett', for example, is a paradigmatic example of closely-read literary criticism that is nonetheless placed in the 'Context' section. One of the standout pieces, Attridge's article notes that critical recognition of Samuel Beckett's influence upon Coetzee has tended to overlook their shared comedic sensibility. Offering readings of several lesser-studied Coetzee texts, including *Dusklands* and *Slow Man*, Attridge convincingly argues that his tendency to emphasise 'the sheer absurd mechanics of the act of sex' (p.86) imbues Coetzee's sex scenes with a dark humour strikingly similar to Beckett. It is not the 'famous negativity' of the latter that makes him such a significant influence so much as 'the secret of [...] a style capable of transforming the disappointments and dead-ends of quotidian experience [...] into intense pleasure' (p.74). Such insights make this article typical of the strongest pieces here, both in its exploration of texts outside the Coetzee canon and the boldness of its thesis.

Attridge's interest in the quotidian also reflects the editorial determination to avoid narrowly political readings of Coetzee; more specifically, to examine how his works politicise the everyday. In this respect, the opening contribution from Coetzee's compatriot novelist

André Brink, 'Post-Apartheid Literature: A Personal View', deserves recognition. Brink's article offers little direct discussion of Coetzee's work, instead offering general reflections upon their wider literary, historical and political context. Its key insight is that of a move within South African literature 'away from politics as drama and spectacle and social phenomenon towards internalisation and interiority' (p.11). Such perspicacity is characteristic of the article, and the editorial decision to blur boundaries between conventional scholarly contributions and this kind of personally reflective piece should be applauded. Nonetheless, its inclusion feels slightly incongruous; not for its unconventional style within the field of literary criticism, but rather for the simple fact that the piece engages only tangentially with Coetzee or his writing. The suspicion that Brink's high profile within the literary world may have overridden the better judgement of the editors in including it is thus not entirely allayed.

This should not give the impression, however, that the collection is lacking in overall thematic coherence. Brink's essay does serve to establish certain themes that recur throughout the collection, such as the previously-noted politicisation of the quotidian which reappears in Mark Mathuray's contribution 'Sublime Abjection'. Another standout article, this posits that Coetzee's lesser-studied novel *Foe* can be read in terms of what Mathuray terms 'the stalled sublime': 'a rupture, a stalling of the sublime movement, which presents an intervention of the transcendent and hence interpretative fixity' (p.161). This refusal of Coetzee's work to submit to unambiguous interpretations, argues Mathuray, is central to its ongoing relevance: its ability to perpetually challenge 'the reconciling fiction of a transcendent escape from the quotidian' (p.169). Although appearing in the 'Theory' section, Mathuray's article shares several

key characteristics with Attridge's: the recognition of the centrality of the concept of the everyday to Coetzee's politics; the reading of non-canonical texts; and the presentation of a theoretical position that argues persuasively against broader currents within Coetzee scholarship.

Mathuray's article also deserves credit for its perceptive analysis of the ways in which Coetzee's work tends to challenge borders, be they racial, social or class-based; or, more generally, between nature and culture. Anne Haeming's contribution 'Authenticity: Diaries, Chronicles, Records as Index-Stimulations' analyses this quality of Coetzee's writing in terms of genre, specifically, its tendency to challenge the boundaries between fact and fiction, author and narrator. Haeming argues that Coetzee's work produces a literature which is 'acutely aware of its own imprisonment in language (and ideology)', and which therefore 'problematizes [...] crucial notions of representation' (p.173). By investigating these formally transgressive elements of Coetzee's writing, the article therefore illuminates those pieces in the collection which analyse its challenge to thematic borders and classifications. This ability of Coetzee's writing to elude fixed interpretation, and its consequent ongoing political relevance, thus emerges as the most significant underlying theme in the collection. Aside from the unhelpful editorial decision to divide the contributions into two sections, that embrace of ambiguity – thematic and generic – is also the great strength of the book. For its boldness, both in terms of the breadth of content, and the contributors' willingness to engage with unorthodox texts and readings, this is a valuable contribution to Coetzee studies.