On beyond the representational binary: Coetzee (and the women) take wing

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The essays brought together in *Reading Coetzee's Women* speak conclusively for the prominence of women—as characters, authorial presences, muses, interlocutors—in the work of the Australian-South African novelist J. M. Coetzee. Melinda Harvey and Sue Kossew's edited collection, selected from papers given at the remarkable 'Reading Coetzee's Women' conference in Prato in September 2017, considers from different angles how the writer opens up the valences of woman and women—not least women on the edge, provincial and (in some sense) excluded women, and women struggling to find expression. The cool observing intelligence of the novelist remains palpable in nearly all of these evocations, the more so now that readers have access to the archive and are beginning to read the novels through the working notes. Yet this does not take away from our sense, underpinned in these pages, that Coetzee in some sense 'gets women'. Right across his career he has determinedly explored experiences of female embodiment and composition, in ways that readers in general and women readers in particular have often found persuasive and moving, if also provocative.

Indeed, Coetzee's repeated approaches to the subject of 'woman' are—to the extent that his fictional work can be divided into a series of women-centred phases—phases associated with different woman-related themes, or with different modes of answering the 'woman question'. As more than one contributor to this book reminds us, his work gives us, from the beginning, the white women narrators Magda (1977), Susan Barton (1986), and Mrs Curren (1990), each angling for voice and position in their overwhelmingly patriarchal communities. Throughout, the novels also present characters who stand for the condition of 'being the woman' (*Disgrace* 160), or who speak to the question of what it is to occupy a woman's body: the Barbarian woman (1983), Lucy Lurie (1999), perhaps also the girlfriends

of *Youth* (2002). Indeed, how it is to ‘be the woman’ may in fact constitute *the* ‘woman question’ signalled in the title of this book’s first chapter.

Finally, we find concentrated especially in the second half of Coetzee’s career the vocal spokeswomen and female mouthpieces, the woman writers Susan Barton and the Elizabeths Curren and Costello, the narrator figures whom Coetzee enlists to help ventriloquise what it is to be a writer, to engage with the real through the invention that is story—in short, to exercise the sympathetic imagination, as he writes in *The Good Story*. For all of us interested in women and Coetzee, it is, of course, significant that he appears to locate that sympathetic imagination more frequently in female form than in male, that the issues that are central to his thought—of sympathy, the other, and the truth of fiction—are seemingly more fully explored in relation to his women characters than his men. And yet, as several commentators here suggest, Laura Wright in particular, there is sometimes an actor-like and even arch quality to the ventriloquism, whereby we retain the impression that beneath and behind these performances the default identity of the writer remains male and that the women are his Yeatsian ‘circus animals’, wheeled out to examine pet themes. Even Elizabeth Costello, Coetzee’s most serious writer-creation, can come across as drag act, or, as Wright observes, ‘a woman clearly enacted by a man’.

How does Coetzee do women? Let us count the ways. This collection charts an almost exhaustive number. If the different approaches were summarised in the form of a pie-chart, the larger slices of the chart would relate to voice, body, and perspective. Some essays consider predominantly female performance, others the embodiment of type and archetype, yet others women’s ‘knowledge’, as in Benjamin Kunkler’s essay. Women’s bodies, their pain and historical suffering, their striving to be heard, have consistently provided fertile ground for Coetzee’s imagination. Women in the woman-centred fictions certainly are more fluent and insightful vehicles than is the cold, male governing consciousness that is to the

fore in other of his works, unmistakably so in the autre-fictional trilogy, *Scenes from Provincial Life*.

Throughout, Coetzee has been interested in the sexing of narrative consciousness, even of the creative process itself. To him, this is another important aspect of the woman question. Narration, he avers, is not gender-neutral. Differences of gender perspective are constantly signalled and articulated. As his longstanding poststructuralist position requires, the self is a construct, not least the narrating self, most especially the narrating female self. Woman is if anything the ultimate construct and voicing her is the ultimate postmodern exercise for a (male) writer.

Yet women in Coetzee are as frequently objects as they are subjects. As they have tended to be in the western tradition in which Coetzee is at home, they often appear as idealised abstracts, as María López writes. They are perfect forms, goddesses without orifices, muses and messengers to the normatively male artist, vehicles through which he may reach truth or a higher consciousness, and inextricably an expression of the masculine consciousness that governs the work. This idealisation is of a piece with its tone, its assumptions, and its discourse, not least with its overriding tendency to underwrite a literary tradition of great men writers, up to the present-day, to stake out a masculine ‘scholarly and metatextual purview’, as Gillian Dooley observes, or to support a certain ‘reproductive technology’ around certain already influential bodies, as Sara Ahmed’s important work reminds us (Ahmed, 2013). And this is despite the fact that Coetzee’s women—his women characters and in particular his women writers—constantly strive to thwart his attempts to speak for them, or in Laura Wright’s words, ‘refuse compliance with his interpretations’.

It may then be that (especially to women readers) Coetzee’s women participate in a gigantic ruse. Much as we have huge respect for his efforts to write as woman, or to write women being woman, Susan Moebius in Elizabeth Costello may be right. Coetzee is yet

another male author who gives voice to female characters to further a male philosophy. Derek Attridge's essay usefully reminds us of this observation. Yes, Coetzee is aware of how the male articulation of a woman's voice stifles it, yet when he speaks as a critic or a thinker, as in his essays, he does not noticeably project or promote women's thought. When in reviews he develops his thought on a favourite subject, censorship, or confession, or forgiveness, the entire conceptual framework is masculine in provenance and in substance. Nor are any of the classical texts through which he writes by a woman author, as David Attwell's *Coetzee and the Life of Writing* (2015) makes clear. Indeed, Attwell's readings, persuasive as they are, arguably reinforce the male struts of those classical rewritings. It is the more telling therefore that two of Coetzee's favoured ways of 'doing' women—the woman as embodied consciousness and the woman as muse—subscribe to a fault to recognisable types and stereotypes of women, even though they may be significantly more complex as creations also. Their complexity points to what is so beguiling about them, and so problematic about his project of developing ideas of the sympathetic imagination through them. It also underlines the ingenuity and the extent of the ruse.

Throughout *Reading Coetzee's Women*, the emphasis is indicatively on representation, on how fiction designates. This focus remains a norm in contemporary literary studies and it is clearly not the task of this collection to question it. We consider here signifiers of womanhood—female stereotypes, women characters, women narrators, and so on. Yoshiki Tajiri, for example, explores representations of the mother and womb envy in *Life & Times of Michael K* and through this the 'intertextual relation that [the novel] has with Beckett and Rank'. Susanna Zinato looks at allusions to Cassandra in *The Heart of the Country* and other work. For all that Coetzee's approach to the novel is post-structuralist, critics appear largely to approach his women as pointing to and saying something true about

women in the world. Even a collection such as this with its titular emphasis explicitly on reading, reception tends not to be a leading concern when it comes to ‘Coetzee’s women’.

This could be in part because most literary critics are still trained to consider processes of signification first and foremost; to prioritize symbolization over communication. It could also be in part because Coetzee’s own approach to fiction-making is as an encoding of reality, which means underwriting the signifier-signified relationship—though, interestingly, as we will see in a moment, not always. The outcome is that as readers of Coetzee’s women we focus more on how he interprets women, than on how we process those interpretations; more on his understanding than on our responses. Ghosh-Schellhorn, in her far-reaching essay, suggests that Coetzee tests the limits of representation in the characters of Magda and Lucy, and hence that he puts under pressure the interpretative expectations his readers might bring to their reading of those women. Yet by and large the lure of representation, and the mastery of Coetzee at forging these representations, distracts us from considering the process of our interpretation in further depth. Paradoxically, this once again places the focus more on him than on his women.

The next stage in our thinking about Coetzee and the woman question may then be to question the question itself, or, in other words, to go beyond (perhaps well beyond) the gender binary. Indeed, the writer may be moving and exploring in that direction himself. Certainly Coetzee’s later 21st-century work, the Jesus fictions in particular, seem to be trying to proceed according to different rules, to be seeking a new involvement, a more sympathetic intensity, even if intermittently so. Paul Sheehan has spoken of the fantasies and visions of new lives and worlds in the later work (Sheehan, 2017). As this suggests, we shift here from women’s understanding as *represented* in a character like Elizabeth Costello, to understanding *as* identification, *as* readerly involvement, where woman here is more embodied soul than she is mere embodiment. The reader moves in rhythm with the narrative

consciousness regardless of whether it or they are male or female. As I explored in my keynote in Prato, this integrated and even visionary understanding has been signalled in the work for some time, especially through the long line of angelic or part-angelic figures that process through its pages, from Verceuil through to Ana Magdalena.

Intimations of a new, higher form of cognition or awareness beyond gender resonate here and there in these essays. Melinda Harvey and Sue Kossew, in their chapter in this volume, draw our attention to Chris Danta's observations concerning Coetzee's Eurydice characters, like Anna Segeyevna in *The Master of Petersburg* and Anya in *Diary of a Bad Year*, who alleviate an older male character's fear of dying alone 'by conducting him to the threshold of death, but no further' (Danta, 2018: 13). Ghosh-Schellhorn and María López in their work have pointed to the many references in Coetzee to visitation, to 'the appearance of a divine or supernatural being'. *Disgrace* is a key example, but we might also think of *Age of Iron* or *Slow Man*.

The key point I am making is that where Coetzee goes beyond or blurs conventional categories of thought, whether they be the masculine-feminine binary or the body-soul divide, he seeks what *The Good Story* calls 'miraculous dialogue' (58). And the catalyst or vehicle of this shift, this attempt at transcendence, takes the form of visitation, divine guidance, the coming of messengers; in brief, of angels or angelic presences, winged presences that are not so much androgynous as sexless, though for Coetzee they more often take female than male form. These figures accompany and encourage the deeper sympathetic engagement between the writer and the reader that the work invites, drawing the reader deep inside the process of making meaning that the writer has initiated.

In suggesting this I agree with Derek Attridge when he observes that Coetzee's readers are encouraged to pay attention to the way in which they are able to 'live the text that [they] read'; in which they feel rather than think through the reading event. To this I would

add that this process of paying attention is far more internal, intimate, and involved than our understanding of critique or close reading to date might have allowed, and that Coetzee's early work invited. In contrast, the post-2000 works in particular appear to strive towards some new awareness or alterity, some perception of a world now within and now beyond, which the reader must be fully centred in their reading to experience, and at the same time opened to wonder. The questions Coetzee asks of narrative consciousness, including gender consciousness, are part of this striving, opening the way to new narrative and philosophical possibility.

Works Cited:

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