



Derek Attridge. *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. xv + 225 pp. \$47.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-03116-3.

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Derek Attridge's new analysis of J. M. Coetzee's writing is guaranteed to provide new insights to any reader of the South African novelist's work. At the same time, Attridge's thesis about Coetzee's novels is thought-provoking for postcolonial literary theory more generally, particularly for the way postcolonial studies grapples with the limits of knowledge about and literary portrayal of the Other.

Attridge begins with the premise that Coetzee's novels are challenging, and at times off-putting, for the reader, because Coetzee's skills as a realist are so engaging that his regular disruptions of his realist narrative are jarring and not always easy to rationalize. The push and pull of the reader in and out of the story can be confusing, and Attridge admits that he himself has struggled over the years to come to grips with what these interruptions might mean. In *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*, Attridge suggests a new, more holistic way of reading Coetzee's work as modernist, singularly experiential, and "ethically charged" (p. xi). Attridge rejects past criticism that has examined Coetzee's

writing as purely allegorical, or as solely a response to historical-political issues, and instead insists on broadening his critical approach to recognize that Coetzee's work simultaneously explores a variety of important, "practical" questions, such as "the relation between ethical demands and political decisions, the human cost of artistic creation, the exactingness and uncertainty of confessional autobiography, and the difficulty of doing justice to others in a violent society" (p. x).

Crucial to Attridge's argument is his notion, developed in his previous book, *The Singularity of Literature* (2004), that a work of literature is an "event": a shared experience between the work and the reader. The unpredictable, experiential quality of reading—a performative act that always produces a unique result—is what gives a text its "ethical force" (p. xii). Attridge then leads us into an argument for Coetzee as a modernist writer who disrupts his realist narratives to foreground the impossibility of that realist, novel-based discourse to apprehend the Other. Attridge argues that a literary text by necessity transforms the

Other into the familiar, in order to be comprehensible. Works like Coetzee's early novels (*Foe*, 1986, *Life and Times of Michael K*, 1984, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 1982) use modernist techniques "to convey the resistance [of the Other] to the discourses of the ruling culture ... and at the same time to find a means of representing the claims they make upon those who inhabit this culture ... [These] are also demands made upon all these familiar discourses which thereby come under pressure to abandon their universalizing pretensions and to recognize their historical origins and contingent existence" (p. 13).

The stronger the representational writing, the more acutely we as readers feel the breakdown of the relationship, when "that alterity ... makes demands on us not by entering into dialogue with us ... but by the very intensity of its unignorable being-there" (p. 13), which forces us to experience and acknowledge the inability of the dominant discourse to apprehend the Other in any meaningful way. Attridge convincingly posits that Coetzee's novels are particularly successful in this regard, and that part of their strength is the denial for the reader of "ethical guidance--we are left to judge for ourselves the actions and decisions of the characters" (p. 7).

Attridge spends much of his book working his way through Coetzee's novels and memoirs, doing a kind of revised and thematically organized close reading that will provide some insight for anyone looking for analysis of particular Coetzee texts. However, for me, the strongest contribution Attridge makes is his larger argument about the value of revisiting modernism in the postcolonial context, based on the understanding of reading as an experiential event. Although he does not really delve into issues of using the "master's discourse" at all to explore issues of the Other (in the form of the novel, modernist or not), I have always felt that the value of Coetzee's work is that it speaks so frankly and directly to the reader from the

dominant culture about that culture's breakdown, failures, and potential responsibilities.

J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event is, ultimately, an accessible, readable analysis of Coetzee's *oeuvre*. While Attridge's close readings of individual texts do not push the boundaries in a significant way, his overall theoretical argument, that modernism holds some insights worth revisiting in the contemporary global context, is powerful. He provides a strong example of how we might move toward a deeper consideration of the ethical force that literature can have for both the reader and critic, and inspires new analysis of other authors who use similar literary techniques to grapple with the realities of the postcolonial world.

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