

https://dspace.org/

The treatment of the body in the fiction of JM Coetzee

Hughes, Conrad Lawrence Marquard

2008-10-17T11:57:02Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/5764

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor David Attwell for his generosity and tireless efforts to bring the wild horses round Chapman's Peak. The road has been a long one and, in all, six relocations between myself and my supervisor between four continents with the birth of two children on my side and the publication of two books on his has not prevented him from communicating with me consistently and constructively. This is because of passion, commitment and professionalism on his part, attributes from which I feel privileged to have benefited. I would also like to acknowledge Dr Sarah Nuttall who accorded me an interview; Professor Elleke Boehmer who shared material with me; Dr Samuel Durrant, who encouraged me; Dr Stephan Helgersson who gave me detailed and inspirational feedback on my work and Professor David Medalie, whose detailed comments on my work allowed it to be greatly improved. I would like to thank Malcolm Hacksley, who hosted me very kindly at NELM, Professor Peter Knox-Shaw, who gave me good advice on the project, Dr Martin Leer from the University of Geneva who encouraged me and the writer Rohinton Mistry, who answered questions I had on narrative in a memorable and poignant manner. Thanks also go to the Chair of English, Professor Merle Williams and Hildegard Chapman for the extra work furnished to manage such an internationally located affair. I would also like to acknowledge the University of the Witwatersrand for granting me a bursary so that I could use resources in Cape Town and Grahamstown.

Abstract

My overarching argument, that Coetzee's treatment of the body is a defamiliarisation of it, is supported by more focussed textual commentary and substantiated argument, divided into nine chapters.

Chapter 1, by means of an introduction, first explains the thesis' argument and then discusses the treatment of the body in past and current Coetzee criticism with emphasis on findings that help to elucidate my own position. From here on, each chapter shows how the body is central as a source of meaning and agency, but in different ways and through different forms.

Chapter 2 focusses on how Coetzee distorts the reader's perspective of the body and plunges him/her into what I call a kinetic poetics. The central argument in this chapter is that Coetzee uses a viewpoint in such a way that the body is reinvented poetically.

Chapter 3 looks at the historical embeddedness of the body and the body as a response to the discourse of history. Coetzee's philosophical positioning on the relationship between literature and history dramatises itself, I will argue, in his depiction of the body.

Chapter 4 argues for the centrality of the body as generator of plot in the fiction – hence creating storylines that are unusual - whilst chapter 5 shows how Coetzee's treatment of

the body in its relationship to space has a significant effect on the atmosphere in the fiction.

These first five chapters, therefore, have as purpose the study of the body in Coetzee in relation to pertinent body criticism and to then show how Coetzee's stylistic attributes and philosophical positioning (chapters 2 and 3) create a writing that has a unique morphology of plot (chapter 4) and creates an entirely new atmosphere (chapter 5).

A recurrent finding throughout these chapters is that Coetzee challenges conventions whilst creating a type of strangeness or defamiliarisation through the description of the body: this is my overarching thesis statement to which subsidiary points will lead.

Once these bases have been established, the remaining four chapters will continue to focus on the body in four different modes: the sexual (chapter 6), in relation to animals (chapter 7), through eating (chapter 8) and through death (chapter 9).

Preface

Our meddling intellect
Misshapes the beauteous forms of things
We murder to dissect

(from Wordsworth's "The Tables Turned" [1798])

This thesis' argument, that the body is used as a defamiliarising agent in Coetzee's fiction, will be elaborated in the first chapter. The purpose of this preface is to give an explanation for the style of the thesis.

The fiction of JM Coetzee, as my second chapter argues, is unusual in that it draws on faculties in the reader that include, but more importantly go beyond, the cerebral quality of language. Coetzee's writing strikes a deeply corporeal note in the reader that must be accounted for if we are to articulate and investigate the writer's style comprehensively.

As a literary study, I am not attempting to investigate the body as a simple metaphor that stands for something else with the broad historical, cultural, political and theoretical perspectives and apparatus such a traditional term connotes, since one of the strongest underlying reasons that Coetzee's treatment of the body is so unique, lies in the author's ability to dramatise and almost vocalise (directly more than metaphorically) the most ineffable and obscure parts of the body.

To give a direction, we can turn to the Formalist Tsvetan Todorov (quoted by JM Coetzee):

> Literature does not proceed like science: [i]t draws upon other means to lead to knowledge. The writer can project himself into the souls of people, historical or fictitious, and bring us revelations, which, even if they remain unproven, can sometimes enlighten more that the long accumulation of facts produced by the historian, the psychologist or the sociologist (Todorov "Giving" 30).

This vision of literature as something that cannot be analysed purely using a scientific method is especially relevant for the purposes of this study. The analysis of the body in the fiction of JM Coetzee will be in the form of a poetics rather than a summing up of facts.

A scholarly, methodologically traditional investigation of the critical field and the vital referencing and substantiation of argument required to sustain the academic tenor so cherished in literary criticism requires an exceptionally large academic culture if we are to do any justice to the specific texture and resonance such writing creates in the reader.

The breadth and volume of scholarship on Coetzee's work requires knowledge of fields as diverse as history, physics, pre-Socratic philosophy, ethics, animal rights, not to mention the considerable background required for sound appreciation of the inter-textual novels Foe (1986) and The Master of Petersburg (1994) which, as Derek Attridge points

out most adroitly, make demands on the reader and even create a sense of "bewilderment" (xi J.M.).

To account for all of these themes simultaneously is an arduous task that would require several different studies. As I am approaching the specific theme of the body, which has been relatively minor in Coetzeean scholarship in an emerging field of literary body studies that is necessarily eclectic, my references may, at first, appear sporadic. This is for two reasons: firstly because relatively little has been written about the body under one anthology focussed on this theme, and secondly (following from the first reason) because I wish to point out a direction for the study of the body that requires my own voice rather than those of others to dictate it.

It should be made clear at the outset that a polyvalent approach is necessary when looking at the body in the fiction. As Attridge states: "[e]ach work has pushed in a different direction" (J.M X), and this means that affiliations and threads can be made with seemingly contradictory schools of thought. In order to remain flexible and plural in my analysis, I have resisted what Teresa Dovey does in The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories (1988) by tying Coetzee to a single school or writer, as she does with Jacques Lacan. This is another argument in favour of a *poetics* as critical approach: to account for the polyvalence of Coetzee's writing in general and how it appears to resist a monologic approach.

I have brought specific ideas from diverse thinkers into the spectrum of this debate within the specific study of the body. To read the body in Coetzee's writings, this thesis moves through more than one methodology: Russian Formalism and Genettian narratology are used as interpretative grids, and perspectives from literary body studies writers such as Elaine Scarry and Gilles Deleuze are contrasted and integrated into the main argument. Furthermore, Derek Attridge, David Attwell and Teresa Dovey, to this date the main Coetzeean theorists, are engaged with and discussed as the body is examined.

If the premise of my thesis is to account for the literary experience as a reader (rather than as a strict researcher) then some context to my own approach might allow the reader an understanding of the eclecticism that arises in (the flurry of) such an endeavour.

A number of years ago a literature professor of mine at Paul Valery (Montpellier III), Paul Vitoux, a narratologist at heart, having guided me through Gérard Genette, introduced me to reader-response theory, especially the Vienna school (primarily Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss). I then attempted to examine Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's work using this large school (mainly the Vienna school but with reference to Stanley Fish also) in my DEA dissertation.[1]

Before that, under Jean Sévry, I had compared the depiction of the city in the poetry of Mongane Serote to TS Eliot, again attempting to account for the living quality of this type of literary production through an interview with Serote. My work then, as it is now, was and is influenced by the schools of Russian Formalism, structuralism, linguistics and

[1] "Diplome d'Etudes Approfondies"

French postmodernist theorists such as Tsvetan Todorov, Gilles Deleuze, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Michel Serres and Michel Foucault.

The dissertations I wrote then, like this thesis, were efforts that perhaps erred on the side of creativity rather than being literal, monological readings, since I was trying then, as I am now, to bring the reading experience in its complexity to the surface. These efforts were rewarded with degrees, but I felt frustrated by the shadow that seemed to fall between the reader's work as it penetrated the mind – my mind - and the formal/academic study that is so formal in register, bound to follow a stricter methodology. I found myself toying with a complex irony, that of trying to write about writing using reader-response theory (how, after all, could I account for my own reading patterns?). I felt a little like the eye that gazes on the Velasquez "Las Meninas" (1656) and sees the reflection of itself on the opposite side of the painting, evoked so beautifully by Michel Foucault in the opening pages of The Order of Things (1970).

The first Coetzee novel I read was Life & Times of Michael K (1983). When I closed the last page I felt as if I had gone out of my body during the reading experience. I think it is fair to say that it was the single most unusual reading experience I have had through the vivid expression it managed to make of something that I had never read before but knew all along. And it was clear that this was not simply of the order of spiritual response, I could feel it in my bones. No synthesis of psychoanalytic, new historicist or post-modern theory could touch the place this book had touched, or so it seemed to me. Hence as I

read other novels I responded to that same seemingly ineffable colour and mood with the same immediacy and personal response.[2]

When I continued reading JM Coetzee's work, an entirely new sensation overcame me and I knew immediately that this type of literature could not be tackled through simple logical argument alone, for beyond the breadth of field that the fiction offers us, the poignant atmosphere and specific psychological intensity achieved are often so seamless, so beautifully crafted, that to untie the knot would be to miss something essential that links the form with the content, the ineffable spirit that marks a writer's work but can never be pigeon-holed completely. Here were novels that were at once academic and utterly oblique in their poetic formations; here was a language that, when treating the body, seemed better justified through a physical response ("it sends shivers down my spine") than any conjecture in the direction of established schools ("this looks like Scarry; that reminds me of Merleau-Ponty and this is why"). Indeed, the estranged tension in the work seemed to be rooted in this conflictual relationship between what we could call, crudely, the mind and the body. This is the second argument for a poetic approach: to account for literature that is particularly corporeal in its imagery.

Gerard Genette's seminal Figures III (1972) has long been an interesting model for me not only because of its scientific approach to narratology, but also the lexical field employed. This is not a study of narratology per se, but the reader should anticipate some predilection in my writing for an innovatory language that, I argue, is needed to express

[2] Derek Attridge's recent J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading (2005) reads the novels as acts of confession that account for impulses that "cannot be adequately represented in the discourses of philosophy, politics or theology, but are in their natural element in literature" (Attridge J.M. xi)

innovative ideas and innovative literary strategies. In Genette's book, the poet Paul Valéry is quoted in a powerful manner that expresses my position very well:

> De scission en scission, de réduction en réduction, les études littéraires semblaient vouées sans cesse d'avantage, a retourner sur elles-mêmes, l'appareil stérile et finalement autodestructeur, réalisant a échéance le pronostic énoncé en 1928 par Valery : « Ou va la critique ? A sa perte, j'espère>> (Genette 9) [3]

I ask the reader to join me as we investigate the body not scientifically but poetically. It is my belief that a poetics is not only preferable, but even required for this precise theme since we are not talking about bones and flesh but the way the body acts on the reader through the writing. Indeed, my use of the word corpus in this study is not without a sense of punning, as there are two corpuses at work.

If the thinkers mentioned in this preface have influenced some of the angles of my analysis in this thesis, it is mainly through their common structuralist approach to the text as something that can be broken down into a set of artistic devices. To be slightly more specific, the formalist insistence on detailed linguistic features of text as key to underlying structures is something that I work off and can be considered the general structural pattern of this thesis' reading of the body in the fiction. However, this does not take over from my own interpretation of the literature, driven by a desire to approach literature in a literary way, to meet fire with fire.

[3] "From division to division, reduction to reduction, literary study seemed condemned to endlessly go back on itself, the sterile and ultimately auto-destructive tool, accounted for by the prognosis of Valéry in 1928: "Where is criticism headed? To its end, I hope" [my own translation].

This strategy should not be seen as something at the expense of a serious responsibility to proper argument, but an effort to account for and appreciate the writing and in doing so, to lay bare the devices that are used to defamiliarise the body. A poetic appreciation necessarily involves a more complex concern with connotation rather than strict denotation.

Geneva, 2007