

J.M. Coetzee in Poland

Introduction

This edition of *Werkwinkel* departs from an established structure which has been part of our publication for some time. There are special reasons for this decision. On the 9th of July 2012 the renowned writer J.M. Coetzee was awarded an honorary doctorate by our own Adam Mickiewicz University (AMU) in Poznań. The editorial board considered it fitting to devote the entire autumn edition of 2012 to him, and to present a broad range of insightful new material on his work.

For *Werkwinkel – Journal of Low Countries and South African Studies* this honorary doctorate was the perfect opportunity for a special edition, considering Coetzee's South African roots and his particular relationship to the literature and literary public of the Low Countries. In this regard it is interesting to note that important parts of Coetzee's seminal text *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988) were published earlier, in 1985, in Cologne's *T.N.A. Tijdschrift voor Nederlands en Afrikaans*. This journal was specifically focussed on these two languages and cultural spheres. We are grateful that J.M. Coetzee agreed to publish his *Lectio* (the formal address he delivered on accepting the honorary doctorate) in *Werkwinkel*. The text is not extensive, but gives an important perspective on the self-reflective art of the author and his autobiographical approach. Wielkopolska (Greater Poland), of which Poznań is the historical centre, is shown to be the region from which Coetzee's ancestors stem. In his text he elaborates on this fact in typical Coetzee fashion: stylistically elegant, analytical yet accessible to a broader public, and very personal, revealing and profound.

As is customary at such academic events, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań prepared a special publication: *Johannes Maxwell Coetzee: Doctoris Honoris Causa Universitatis Studiorum Mickiewiczianae Posnaniensis, 9 VII 2012* (2012). This publication includes the inaugural oratio by the Rector Magnificus, professor Bronisław Marciniak, a speech by the Dean of the Faculty of Modern Languages, professor Teresa Tomaszekiewicz, and the laudatio by Coetzee's formal promotor, professor Liliana Sikorska, as well as reports by the official reviewers involved in this procedure, who also presented their censurae: pro-

fessor Mirosława Buchholtz, professor Wiesław Krajka and professor Krystyna Kujawińska-Courtney. This was the first publication of the *Lectio*. However, *Werkwinkel* serves a different purpose and has a different probable readership. Hence the agreement with J.M. Coetzee to include the text in *Werkwinkel* – one of many academic journals published by Adam Mickiewicz University, but the only one with South African and Dutch studies as its focus.

Besides the awarding of the honorary doctorate, another important event took place. On the 5th of July 2012, a few days before the ceremony, Poznań saw the world première of the opera *Slow Man*. This was a showcase of Malta Festival Poznań, an important artistic event in the local and international cultural landscape, in co-operation with the Stanisław Moniuszko Grand Theatre in Poznań. J.M. Coetzee wrote the libretto himself, based on the book of the same name. Contemporary Flemish composer Nicholas Lens wrote the music and the main roles were portrayed by famous singers from various countries: the American soprano Claron McFadden is based in Amsterdam; bass-baritone Mark S. Doss lives in the United States and Canada and the American mezzo-soprano Lani Poulson performs mostly in Europe. The director was the renowned and controversial Maja Kleczewska (Polish), while Bassem Akiki, from Lebanon, conducted the orchestra. This multicultural combination of artists corresponds to the multimedia style of the production. In this edition we also focus on this second important event of J.M. Coetzee's stay in Poznań. Rather than writing directly or analytically about the opera, it is made accessible to those who did not see it by means of a series of photographs. These photographic impressions accompany interviews with the artists involved, offering new angles and perspectives on the work of the author of *Slow Man*. The texts come from the Polish book *Wyostrzyć wzrok. J.M. Coetzee: sztuka, świat i polityka* [Sharpen the Gaze. J.M. Coetzee: Art, The World and Politics], which was prepared by Poznań Malta Festival for the world première, with sponsorship by the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. Interviews were conducted by festival staff and external contributors. Interviewees include the renowned literary scholar, Coetzee expert, and co-editor of a recently published literary history of South Africa, Derek Attridge, composer Nicholas Lens, director Maja Kleczewska, and also Krzysztof Warlikowski, another Polish theatre maker who engages with Coetzee's work in a challenging manner. This book was published by Fundacja Malta and Wydawnictwo Homini under the editorship of Anna R. Burzyńska and Waldemar Rapior. I served as reviewer on the publication *Wyostrzyć wzrok* myself, fully and formally supported the project, and also recommended it for funding. In my opinion it deserves wider recognition, by means of translation. *Werkwinkel* takes the first step towards achieving this aim.

On the weekend of 7-8 July, after the première and before the awarding of the honorary doctorate, J.M. Coetzee visited Czarnylas (Black Forest). This town

in the Wielkopolska area was the home of his great-grandfather, Balcer Dubyl, who germanised his name to Balthasar du Biel before leaving for South Africa. The photos of the cemetery in Czarnylas printed here, taken at an earlier stage in preparation for the writer's visit and this edition of *Werkwinkel*, are of a different cemetery than the one he visited. This was discovered later in the course of correspondence, at which point we also discovered that there are in fact three cemeteries in this small town – one Catholic and two Protestant. What might seem ironic at first glance, symbolises exactly what happens when biographical information enters the text, and also the ways in which the author investigates the autobiographical dimension in works like *Summertime*. Facts and rumours, suspicions and suppositions, documents and memories, narrator's voice(s) and fictionalised personages overlap and merge. In many of his books, J.M. Coetzee is not only part autobiographer, but also to some extent his own biographer. This is also the case in other texts, such as his *Lectio* in Poznań. However, despite the distance the writer J.M. Coetzee creates from the personage John Coetzee in his works, at some point in his autobiographical cycle, he also needed his own external biographer. From a range of sources, conversations, information and assumptions, the Afrikaans literary scholar J.C. Kannemeyer built up his own narrative of and about J.M. Coetzee, with the co-operation of the author himself. The story is strikingly sub-titled *'n Geskryfde Lewe*, which does not fully come to its own in the English translation *A Life in Writing*. Thus it is no accident that the writer's (auto)biographical *Lectio* in this edition of *Werkwinkel* refers directly and spatially to his biographer, John Kannemeyer. His last literary biography was published in September 2012 and is already attracting a great deal of attention. Kannemeyer finished the text shortly before his death on Christmas Day 2011, in the middle of the South African summer. Tragic coincidence? A fair death for a literary scholar? Or *Summertime*, au rebours? Here it is not the biographer who, after the author's death, writes about his life. Now it is the author who must continue his work and his life, while the story of this life lies ahead – contained between two cover pages with the deceased biographer.

As mentioned before, this edition is exceptional and special in many respects. We are pleased that we can also present younger Polish researchers' input, in addition to the material above. It delights us that their research on Coetzee's work combines innovative thought with erudition and mature judgment. The editorial board hopes that this edition of *Werkwinkel*, which brings tribute to J.M. Coetzee and his work as well as the biographer J.C. Kannemeyer, will be an engaging and inspiring reading experience.

Jerzy Koch

