

## *Tenderness is Peril*

An interview with **Maja Kleczewska** by Dorota Semenowicz

**Adriana Nascimento, a character from Coetzee's *Summertime*, says that if Coetzee was a man capable of taking action, "she could have allowed herself to be weak, an ordinary, weak woman." In contrast to male characters, female characters in Coetzee's books are firmly rooted in the world. I felt that they were, finally, not described from the perspective of a man, reduced to erotic relationships, but that it was they who arranged and organised the worlds of men.**

I get the impression that this male perspective is still present here, only in a slightly different way. Lust, passion and women's physiology in Coetzee's books create an attractive, but also a scary scenery.

**Do you not think that these power relations are a bit unusual? Women overwhelm the main character who defends himself against them by withdrawing.**

Above all, Coetzee introduces us to a field of private experience. It seems that through his female characters, the writer discovers himself. They are creatures – beings that emerge more from Coetzee's imagination than from reality.

**Even in the autobiographical *Youth*?**

Everywhere. Dealing with them is always accompanied by great anxiety, fear that if you really meet them, they will devour you; they will either destroy your world, or absorb it completely. After all, in *Slow Man* Elisabeth Costello brings total destabilisation into Paul's world. In Coetzee's writings, women are carriers of danger, or possibly of guilty conscience, if they are not treated as they should be. Even Paul's planned meeting with the blind Marijana shares this nature. It also appears to be harmful, abusive, a violation of intimacy. You get the impression that contact with women is not liberating and fascinating, but creates dread and terror. A very valuable book for me in this context is *In the Heart of the Country*. The book prompts and brings closure to a secret, which we cannot access in *Slow Man* - the secret of a blind person and her desire. Marijana wants

to make love. Even if it is with legless Paul, it does not really matter. Due to her low self-esteem, she is looking for someone with equally low self-regard. That immensity of desire suddenly materialised itself for me in the voluptuous figure of the character of *In the Heart of the Country*, a psychotic character who carries a secret.

**In the novel *In the Heart of the Country* the desire is really evocative. Coetzee's other books are more reserved.**

But it is precisely in this novel where the core of the experience of a human body in Coetzee's writings lies. A hairy armpit, which is a hole gaping with blackness, an abyss; a physiological smell feeding the imagination with horror. Psychosis and deformation of carnality are primary here. The reality of an incestuous relationship between a father and daughter is a secret. Narration resembles the imagination of a child who is going back to the traumatic experience, goes back to the experience's growing and frightening details.

**And what about desire in his other books?**

Characters that appear throughout his novels are fuelled by desire. The desire is satisfied by love. It is not desire in the sense of passion, but in the sense of compulsion; a vector towards depth – like the author writes in *Youth*. He goes there. Women are a gate leading to that depth. Entering the depth happens through desire, through a body.

**What is that depth?**

It is a confrontation with old age, death, desire and the lack of it. Just like in *Slow Man*, which, for me, is a study of losing access to life – life pulsing, real and intense. Getting involved with a woman, however dangerous it might be, is the only chance for such a confrontation. Women are a pretext. The essence is meeting oneself, meeting especially the littleness, fineness, anxiety, weakness, emptiness, schema.

**Is there no space for affection in these relationships with women?**

The fear is so immense that affection comes across as being a threat. The threat of being. The fear is existential, basic, overwhelming. The other person can eat you. If you expose yourself, you will be left with nothing. There is fear on the one hand, and consent to a strong woman on the other – a mother-figure, who makes all decisions, who knows what to do; a mother to whom you will not object, because she simply knows better.

**Elisabeth Costello...**

Yes. She also plays the role of an übermother. It is not a partnership. You can object, stamp and even scream, nothing will help. She proceeds like a battering ram in a rhythm which is only known to her, from which you cannot throw her out, you can only make her laugh, at the most. There is a disproportion in this relationship. Relationships that attempt to be more like partnerships become catastrophic and hurtful. Abortion in *Youth*, losing virginity, bordering experiences cause the ensconcing of the main character in

the world to be clumsy, crippled, forced, uncertain and timid. In *Slow Man* we also have a character whose life is described as insignificant, uninteresting, lonely. It is a creation weakly rooted in the world. Even his desires are few. I think that the boy, who studies math in *Youth* and the man without a leg in *Slow Man* are very much alike in relation to themselves – they strongly depreciate their own value. As if they were accidentally glued to the world, not rooted in it, too shallow, not intensive enough. It is a series of accusations against oneself.

**Coetzee is usually described as an activist writer. If writing was acting against oneself, what kind of activism would that be?**

Coetzee is committed to life. Everything around him is vibrant, pulsing, and he observes it - in a supreme intensity of vision. It is exactly this that intrigues me so much in his writing. This intensification of details. Going to London recently I thought to myself that I will be following the footsteps of Coetzee there, just like in Paris one follows Cortazar's path. But to Coetzee London consists of four streets – where he lives, works, goes to the cinema and visits an antique shop. His London is not a big city. It is four streets walked by him continuously as if he was walking around in a closed labyrinth. I had the impression that the whole city would overwhelm him. His nervous system absorbs stimulus to such an extent that its excess would mean paralysis for him. He is active on all levels, constantly. He is only looking and feeling. This is why his experience is so amazing and frustrating. Frustrating, because the character does not want to speak well of himself. He is an anti-hero. He reveals the mystery of his inabilities, his restraints, his feeling of guilt, withdrawal from the world, the things he should have done, but could not; he reveals the gap between how he would want to live, how he did and how he does. I felt it particularly in *Youth*, this sensitivity to every encounter with a human. Coetzee creates the drama of events, but as a character of the novel he is inadequate, inappropriate.

**He accentuates flaws, uncomfortable elements, painful; such elements that exclude characters from the world...**

Going with him, you experience the unpleasant aspect of experiencing. You are in touch with that little piece of you that you want to be in touch with as rarely as possible. He brings that piece to light and exhibits it. Still, he does it in a tender way.

**Coetzee says that what he writes about is a defence against suffering in the world.**

A defence, because the level of his empathy is extreme.

**And yet he is usually presented as a writer involved socially and even politically. When Pinter fiercely and violently came out against Blair, at the reception of the Nobel Prize in 2005, Coetzee wrote that there are moments when indignation tells you to act, to speak up. But he is not screaming alone.**

I see him sitting on a desert island with a telescope, observing the world. He is not one of those people who run around with banners. It is rather a kind of intimate scrutinising

of the reality and own self. This writer is in the position of an observer: tense and over-attentive. Being passionate, energetic or sensual would put him in a position of action, setting a rhythm, while he is a recipient and has to stay away. He is, however, sensitive to every fraction of this world.

**In *Disgrace*, Lurie takes care of dead dogs on a farm. He does not want the ones who burn the dogs to crush their bodies with shovels to facilitate further processing of the bodies. He does not help anyone doing so, does not change anything, does not influence anything: "Lurie protects the honour of the dead, because nobody else is stupid enough to make such effort." Everything happens between the main character and the dogs that are dead and do not concern anyone anymore. Perhaps such behaviour is a metaphor for Coetzee's writings?**

Coetzee pays himself a favour, a favour to his sensitivity, but he also rearranges the borders of that sensitivity - dogs are dead, but their bodies! We must ensure that they will not be broken. The writer enters areas about which people do nothing; his imagination goes further. For example in *Youth* he makes love to a virgin. A blood stain is left on a bed. The main character is petrified that somebody will find out.

And you want to help him not to worry so much about it. His tension about that fact is so big that he throws the girl out, he wants her to leave already. Afterwards, he receives a letter from a cousin who rebukes him for his bad behaviour. And you understand him, because you see that he could do nothing else, he was not able to. His emotional cramp is a result of the intensity of the experience - he cannot act anymore, because he is paralysed by his reception of the details of the reality. A reader faces all of this together with Coetzee's characters. For instance, Paul's fall in a shower. His slow crawling out of the shower. To avoid humiliation, one would have to cross one's psychophysical disposition, and you cannot really do that.

**Is humiliation characteristic of a human?**

Coetzee reveals that aspect of humanity that we do not want to see. He extracts it. He could have written that Paul fell and then waited for someone to help him. But he only watches that humiliation. We lie there with Paul, we get cold with him, crawl with him to reach a duvet, cover ourselves with it and survive, counting on someone to come. Coetzee tells us: this is human.

**And disgrace in the title of the book ... The subject of humiliation returns throughout his writings.**

*Disgrace* is something I still have to read. I started reading it, but have not finished yet. I could not quite access the language of the novel. Coetzee's books became understandable to me only thanks to Ewa Dałkowska in Warlikowski's *The End*. She gave me the key to that prose, to that music. Once you have tasted it, you want to be with it constantly. You do not want that creation to end.

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**And it does not end, in a sense that it does not get boring. Every following book astonishes with its form, its story.**

But at the same time they are always his. Coetzee gives you access to personal experience, yet he constantly deforms it, misleads readers. It is a game on the border of confabulation and confession. A fascinating and intense game.

*Translation Anna Jasiak*