

Voluntary Opacity: On Action and Gaining Voice (II)

An interview with **Derek Attridge** by Paweł Mościcki

1. In your book *The Singularity of Literature* you stress the fact that both writing and reading literary text has much to do with the encounter with the other. In deconstruction there is always a distinction made between two kinds of otherness: otherness of national, social, gender (relative) difference and an original alterity of the other. What is happening with this distinction in the process of reading Coetzee's fiction?

All fiction, all literature, when it is read as literature, operates on the basis of a singular encounter with a singular other. Of course, both singularities – that of the reader and that of the text (and the world which the text embodies) – are constituted within national, social, gender and many other frameworks, so an engagement with a novel, say, is an event in which my idioculture is exposed to a singular, and possibly inassimilable, arrangement of these forces. The “original alterity” of which you speak is not an absolutely independent entity, as if it arrived from Mars; it is a fabrication from the familiar materials of the culture and its psychic deposits. Coetzee, I believe, is among those writers who most fully integrate the two types of alterity, or, putting it differently, enable the reader most fully to participate in an event in which the singular other – the unique world of this text – is at the same time a nexus within a larger array of forces, political, social, economic, and so on.

2. Could we call Coetzee a realist writer? In recent years the question of realism – defined widely and not classically – has returned to the debates around literature and arts in general (e.g. traumatic realism of Mark Rothberg, the return of the real by Hal Foster). How can we place Coetzee's work in this context? What are effects of the real he produces in his books?

A huge question, of course. I am reminded of Coetzee's comment in an interview about the vast Atlas-like labour required to invest a fiction with all the trappings of a “real-world” environment. And of course in the chapter on realism in *Elizabeth Costello* he shows how easy it is to puncture the realist illusion and still convey compellingly