

Clarkson, Carrol. 2009. *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices*. Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan.

Writing is, according to J.M. Coetzee 'a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them' (quoted in Clarkson 7-8). An investigation of the countervoices in Coetzee's writing and his interest in problems of language is what Carrol Clarkson presents in *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices*. The concept is related, both in Coetzee as well as in Clarkson's reading of it, to Bakhtin's dialogism. However, Coetzee makes, Clarkson stresses, and important observation about a lack in Bakhtin's understanding of dialogism in Dostoevsky: dialogism in Dostoevsky is not reducible to ideological positioning or novelistic technique, but something that grows out of Dostoevsky's own moral character (Clarkson 9). For Clarkson, therefore, Coetzee's concept of countervoices is not intellectual spice added to his fiction in the form of staged dilemmas, but a matter of intellectual involvement (Clarkson 8).

Since Coetzee was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003 there has been a gradual emergence of a field of Coetzee criticism. Coetzee is a writer who eludes easy labels, even if the label 'South-African writer' has been one of the most resilient ones. The great variety in the Coetzee criticism is a good illustration of the difficulties of assigning Coetzee to a tradition: from the first monograph to appear, *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*, by Teresa Dovey (1988), via socio-historical analyses, such as David Attwell's *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1993) and readings informed by post-structuralist theory, such as Derek Attridge's *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (2004) to a more recent trend where Coetzee is read in conjunction with questions in analytic philosophy, such as in Stephen Mulhall's highly original and interesting *The Wounded Animal: J.M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (2009), Coetzee continues to interest critics from different schools and traditions. Clarkson is the first, however, to start from Coetzee's preoccupation with linguistics and follow the repercussions of the exigencies of linguistics in questions of an ethical and aesthetic nature. Clarkson's discussions are compelling and interesting and undoubtedly constitute a novel and important contribution to the growing field of Coetzee criticism.

Clarkson's position within the field is difficult to determine. On the one hand, her interrogation of the authority and ethical aspects of the speaking subject, the ethics of address and the authority to speak on behalf of someone, be it 'the one who is absent'—the implication of the third person (Clarkson 37)—or a 'we', link Clarkson to central concerns in the post-colonial tradition. However, Clarkson has none of the ideological perspectives or the socio-historical approach which often characterises that tradition. On the other hand, even if Clarkson argues—convincingly—against the critics who see Coetzee's works as allegories for post-structuralist ethics (primarily Levinas), Lacan, Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe and other continental thinkers are important reference points in many of the discussions. However, capital-T 'Theory' at no point overpowers the text. What characterises *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices* is strict argumentation, which reminds the reader more of the analytic tradition in philosophy than the continental one. Perhaps the best way to position this book is to say that, like Coetzee in his writing, Clarkson engages intellectually the countervoices that arise.

In 1981 J.M. Coetzee published an article on Kafka's unfinished short story 'The Burrow' ('Der Bau') (reprinted in Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (1992), 210 ff.). Coetzee begins his article by quoting the first sentence of Kafka's story: 'Kafka's story "The Burrow" begins: "I have completed the construction of my burrow and it seems to be successful".' (*Doubling the Point*, 210). This article as well as Kafka's story may serve as illustrations of the aspects of Coetzee's writing that Clarkson investigates and the characteristics of Coetzee's writing which inspires Clarkson's investigations. The first sentence can be read as an allegory for the relation between the artist and his work or the writer and his writing, the possibility of an authorial intention and the elements of unpredictability and chance. Coetzee's approach to this story is not, however, an exploration of its allegorical dimensions even if the question of the relation between the artist and his work clearly is important to Coetzee in many of his texts, *Foe* and *Slow Man* being in their different ways the most obvious examples. Instead, Coetzee investigates—in linguistic and rather technical but nonetheless very interesting ways—'Time, tense and aspect in Kafka's "The Burrow"'. For Clarkson, perspectives such as this in Coetzee's non-fictional as well as his self-reflective pauses around linguistic inflections, etymologies and syntactic phenomena in his fictional writing serve as her impetus for

investigating ‘in what ways [...] seemingly innocent linguistic choices on the part of the writer have ethical consequences for the position of the speaking or writing self in relation to those whom one addresses, or in relation to those on whose behalf one speaks, or in relation to a world one attempts to represent or create in writing’ (Clarkson 1).

One example of how Clarkson establishes the relation between linguistic choices and ethics is her discussion of the speaking or writing ‘I’. According to Clarkson, Coetzee’s questioning of the speaking or writing ‘I’ does not start from an ideological position, but from a realisation of linguistic limitations: ‘linguistic exigency dictates that writing cannot *but* imply an ‘I’ who writes’, Clarkson argues. Having realised this limitation, which exists on the linguistic level, Coetzee therefore ‘engages linguistic and literary strategies to question the authority of that ‘I’ (Clarkson 21). The ethical dimension of choices at the linguistic level can be seen, therefore, in Coetzee’s responses to what is linguistically and grammatically given. Discussions of the position of the writer and the nature of authority is not new in Coetzee criticism. What Clarkson brings to this discussion, however, and this is a feature of the entire book, is a sustained and meticulous investigation of Coetzee’s own non-fictional writing, the relatively small set of interviews and Coetzee’s own theoretical references as the framework for the discussion. Clarkson’s research of what we perhaps can call Coetzee’s formative years as a writer—the period from his time in London (his master thesis and the time portrayed in *Youth*), via his doctoral dissertation, to which Clarkson makes several references, during Coetzee’s time in Texas and up to his time as an academic and professor at the University of Cape Town (the articles and interviews reprinted in *Doubling the Point* are central here), situates Coetzee’s fiction (and non-fiction) within a much wider theoretical and philosophical context than has hitherto been done.

J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices does not offer a book-by-book analysis of Coetzee’s writing as most extant monographs on Coetzee do. Instead the chapters are organised according to different topics which are linked to grammatical phenomena of central concern to Coetzee. Chapters 1 (‘Not I’) and 2 (‘You’) deal with ‘Coetzee’s careful exploration of the grammar of person in Roman Jakobson and Emile Benveniste carries through to the fields of aesthetics and ethics to become what Coetzee calls the “deep semantics of person”’ (Clarkson 18). Chapter 3 (‘Voice’)

220Reviews

‘constitutes a hinge between [the] discussion of the implications of Coetzee’s experiments with structuralist conceptions of the “death of the author” in the first half of my book and a reinstating of some notion of authorial consciousness in the second half’ (*ibid.*), whereas ‘[c]hapters 4,5 and 6, ‘Voiceless’, ‘Names’ and ‘Etymologies’, carry the idea of authorial consciousness through, but in relation to its situatedness within ethical, cultural and historical contingencies’ (*ibid.*). The final chapter, ‘Conclusion: We’, draws together the discussions from all chapters, readdresses the grammar of person and speaks about what is at stake ethically when we say ‘we’.

Clarkson’s arguments are carefully organised and coherently presented. One chapter links to the next, and Clarkson frequently makes interesting and illuminating references to discussions in other places in the book. Combined with the thorough investigation of Coetzee’s own theoretical references *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices* emerges as a solid, interesting and apposite contribution to Coetzee criticism. The way Clarkson constantly refers back to Coetzee’s own theoretical framework and her strategies of linking her own discussions throughout the book, however, lend this monograph a sense of completeness, which leaves at least this reader wondering to which degree he should read the discussions as an exposition of the theoretical underpinnings of Coetzee’s writing and to what extent Clarkson takes the discussions beyond what was Coetzee’s inspiration. This problem of determining the limits of the author’s and the text’s references, or even the impossibility of it, which is the problem every reading must admit, is an interesting illustration of one of the aesthetic problems which Coetzee explores. The final ‘lesson’ of *Elizabeth Costello*, ‘At the Gate’, is probably the best example of this problem, since that is perhaps the most elaborate exploration of the question of what remains of artistic creativity and artistic integrity within the structures which determine the meaning of the text. In ‘At the Gate’ Coetzee employs Kafka and the force from his short story ‘Vor dem Gesetz’ (which also appears in *The Trial*) as an example. In similar fashion we may ask, when reading Clarkson’s book, at which point the framework which theoretical references constitute become determining for the path down which the discussion moves. I am reminded of the beast’s cunning in Kafka’s story mentioned above: the conspicuous hole in the ground is not the real entrance to the burrow. The real entrance is as well concealed as a thing in this world can ever

be. But still, anyone can stumble upon it. Thus Clarkson moves in the region in which the question about the text's determining structures is continuously be raised, and in that sense the discussions presented all return to this central aesthetic challenge for Coetzee, but also in profound ways to Clarkson's book title: countervoices.

J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices to my mind leaves the reader wanting more on two counts. First, even if frequent and very interesting references are made to Coetzee's fictional works, Clarkson uses these references to highlight and develop the theoretical discussions inspired by Coetzee's formative influences. In other words, no sustained interrogation of a single fictional work is presented. This aspect of *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices* is clearly the result of a conscious choice on the author's part: this is not *that* book. The book cannot be faulted for that. Instead, readers will be looking forward to the critical discussions that undoubtedly will arise in its wake. Second, the final chapter 'Conclusion: We' reads both as a conclusion, but perhaps more as yet another interesting topic, a topic which deserves more attention that it gets in this chapter. In short, however, *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices* presents a novel approach to Coetzee's writing and opens up new and important perspectives on one of the world's most critically challenging authors.

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