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978-1-107-04625-2 - J. M. Coetzee and the Politics of Style

Jarad Zimble

Excerpt

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Introduction

Emergence of a Prose Style

Upon its publication in 1986, *Foe* elicited a number of surprisingly hostile responses. While it was by no means universally decried, a general air of discontent clung to the novel, streaked through with the fug of not a little confusion. Many early readers, both in South Africa and abroad, found it bewildering, plodding and too encumbered by its literary debts.

In *The Times* of London, Nicholas Shakespeare wrote that *Foe* was Coetzee's 'most disappointing fiction to date'; Neill Darke, reviewer for a Cape newspaper, described it as 'pointless, incomprehensible and tiresome'; and, in the *New York Review of Books*, D. J. Enright compared *Foe* unfavourably with the novels of Daniel Defoe, alongside which, he suggested, 'Coetzee's revision' could only 'seem a static and anemic affair'. Yet the harshest of these judgements was tempered with appreciative remarks on the writing itself. Whilst Shakespeare conceded that the prose of Coetzee's novel remained 'that of a true craftsman, detached and granite grey, and chipping away to reveal a cold polished work', Darke reminded his readers that 'Coetzee has previously shown that he has a towering talent. His superbly structured prose is sparse, razor-sharp'. Even Enright acknowledged 'the elegance of the writing'.¹

At least in one respect, then, those reviewers who patently disliked *Foe* found cause for agreement with readers for whom the quality of the writing was of a piece with the work as a whole. One such was Isabel Hofmeyr: 'The book itself', she observed, 'is very easy to read. Written in the lean, taut prose that won Coetzee the Booker Prize for his last novel, *Life & Times of Michael K*, the sentences are immaculately constructed. The words could not be simpler. Yet this limpid prose tells an endlessly complex story.' Heather Mackie, writing several months later, felt that *Foe* was 'another superbly crafted novel' composed 'with masterly skill in lean, taut prose of metronomic simplicity'; and Alexander Johnston

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believed that, though *Foe* could be read on ‘individual, social, parochial and universal levels’, it yet retained ‘its clean lines, and fluent straightforward narrative’.²

That reviewers who felt so differently about the novel nevertheless agreed that *Foe* was well written is certainly of interest, but not nearly as intriguing as the fact that they agreed also on what the novel was like, or at least chose descriptive words that often overlapped and coincided. For, whatever their differences, we find much in these reviews that is shared: an insistence on the simplicity of the writing; an experience of something imperturbable; an encounter with a prose that has nothing loose, baggy, soft or superfluous about it, but which is instead sparse, lean and taut. It is this semantic congruence that suggests something like a common experience of and response to *Foe*.

In examining the reviews of Coetzee’s earlier novels – *Dusklands* (1974), *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) – it soon becomes apparent that the responses to *Foe* drew upon and consolidated a sense of Coetzee’s prose style that had been more than a decade in the making. Certainly, the clarity and simplicity of Coetzee’s writing had been remarked from the outset, in reviews which often juxtaposed these qualities with a force or intensity that likewise came to be regarded as characteristic.

In an early review, Peter Wilhelm described *Dusklands* as a ‘stark and obsessional’ work with a ‘cerebral’ style and a ‘language’ that ‘seethes’. If this combination of cool detachment and brute force led Ursula Barnett to comment that the style of the novel was occasionally ‘uneven’, other reviewers were as impressed as Wilhelm with the manner in which the writing kept in tension such apparently contradictory qualities.³ Frances Bowers, for one, praised the novel as a ‘brilliantly told, dryly savage yet very moral tale’ that was at once ‘disturbing and beautifully written’, and Peter Temple celebrated the ‘lucid, compelling, intensely graphic prose’ which produced scenes that had about them a ‘frozen, cinematic quality’.⁴ Later readers of *Dusklands* responded in like fashion. Nicholas Shakespeare, in his review of the 1982 British edition, compared Coetzee to a glasscutter whose ‘pieces’ were ‘clear and sharp in exposition’, but also, in certain moments, ‘jagged and refracting’. For Victoria Glendinning, the two parts of *Dusklands* were likewise ‘tight, hard adventure stories’ and also ‘dramatically alive, told in a quick, urgent voice’, a voice that was ‘harsh’ and ‘compelling’.⁵

Reviewers of Coetzee’s subsequent novels were similarly impressed. One wrote that the prose of *In the Heart of the Country* was ‘controlled but

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always expressive', creating a 'brooding, oppressive atmosphere' in a work that was 'relentless and chilling', and another praised the work's 'scenes of extraordinary intensity and delicacy' in which the 'vivid energy of the language' balanced 'the severity of the theme'.⁶ In Lionel Abrahams's evocative description, Coetzee's second novel emerged 'as a thing of metallic presence which, however streaked with dust, blood, faeces and semen, gleams with the silvery brilliance of his style' and with a 'hard vividness', whilst Jaap Boekkooi suggested of *Waiting for the Barbarians* that its 'narrative may be cool and evocative as medieval stained glass, but the message is the wail, plea and cajole of a prophet like Jeremiah', giving rise to a 'bitter grapes-of-wrath quality' in a novel 'told with power, depth and compassion'.⁷ Reviewers of *Life & Times of Michael K* again found evidence for the 'very simple, bleak' style of Coetzee's novels, their use of 'plain words' and 'simple language' to give voice to 'a deep compassion that boils up'.⁸

If there was thus continuity, there was also development, for reviewers now began to perceive, over and above the effects of simplicity, clarity and intensity, a mode of composition characterized by economy and precision and a basic style marked by 'originality of voice and a spare prose'.⁹ Irving Howe, for example, who had found *In the Heart of the Country* somewhat 'overwrought', described *Waiting for the Barbarians* as a 'realistic fable, at once stark, exciting and economical', at the centre of which lay 'a setpiece of austere prose', whilst Dave Wightman observed of the novel that 'Each word' seemed to have been 'carefully and crisply chosen'.¹⁰ Later reviewers came to much the same conclusions: *Life & Times of Michael K* was 'written throughout in a beautiful, spare, observant prose'; a prose that was 'clean, economical, often almost matter-of-fact'; the 'clean lines' and 'leanness' of the novel suggesting 'a restraint and rigour about the style'; suggesting, in fact, 'a gift for sparse, spare story-telling, in which there is not a wasted word or image'.¹¹

In a few of the later reviews, the link between compositional economy and the effects of clarity and intensity was in fact made explicit. Anne Pogrund felt that one was 'immediately and uncomfortably involved' in the novel by its 'bare and intense' style of writing, the 'compact economy of prose, so simple, yet telling so much'; and Cynthia Ozick found 'the grain' of the novel's sentences so 'flat and austere, but also so purifying to the senses that one comes away feeling that one's eye has been sharpened, one's hearing vivified'. All of which Beryl Roberts captured most neatly: 'In lyrical but economic language, with each word shaped and honed to extract the maximum significance from every image, Coetzee

depicts a terrifying world' and offers 'a stark depressing message' which is all 'beautifully delivered in polished prose'.¹²

The reviewers of *Foe* therefore had behind them a decade's worth of judgements, and an established consensus concerning the basic characteristics of Coetzee's style. The experiences of their predecessors were not identical, but they were very seldom, if ever, contradictory, at least where the writing itself was concerned.

It is true that reviewers of *Dusklands* and even *In the Heart of the Country* were less precise, but this is hardly surprising, since repetition is required to produce pattern and they lacked the benefit of retrospective distance afforded to later critics. Only over time did the simplicity of the writing come to be understood as the consequence of compositional economy, a process of paring down. On the other hand, the affective force of the novels was evident from the outset. Words such as *gripping*, *compelling*, *forbidding*, *disturbing* and *terrifying*, as well as *vivifying*, *exciting* and even *purifying*, register an often visceral experience, one which led to the use of both sensual and psychological descriptive terms: *hard*, *bitter* and *sharp* on the one hand, *intense*, *brooding* and *oppressive* on the other.

None of the minor variations should in any case obscure the remarkably uniform characterization of the *prose*, *writing*, *language*, *form*, *narrative*, *presentation* and *style* of Coetzee's novels. This uniformity suggests the existence of something like a stylistic substance common to each of these works, a substance that could be imaginatively related to glass and ice and metal and stone, and whose range of qualities found condensed expression in particularly evocative and oft-repeated words: *vivid*, to suggest both clarity and intensity; *taut* to intimate control, tension and concision; and *stark*, which seems to capture most powerfully, and all at once, the force, severity and economy that came to be associated with Coetzee's fictions.

Reading and Analysing

It is certainly possible that Coetzee's reviewers were responding to one another, rather than to the novels themselves, and that the similarities of their judgements were therefore produced by mutual influence. This suspicion cannot be dismissed out of hand: it would be naïve to imagine that reviewers are unaffected by their predecessors and by the marketing efforts of publishers. Particular adjectives may well proliferate because they are sanctioned by the blurb and, seemingly, the author himself.

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For all that, reviewers remain free to disagree with one another, which they often do, both in their interpretations and estimations, and it is therefore of interest if they should use the very same words to describe an author's style. It is of greater interest still if these words vary while remaining semantically congruent, for in this we see evidence of a compulsion to display both critical acuity and verbal dexterity, two markers of the reviewer's own craft: trying to find exactly the right way of articulating what is most distinctive about a particular work, everything depends on the reviewer's insight and feeling for language, his or her capacity to produce the *mot juste*.

Applied to writing, words such as *vivid*, *taut* and *stark* are obviously difficult to substantiate. Plainly metaphorical, they indicate a struggle on the part of readers to give expression to apparently spontaneous intuitions, to experiences that are sensuous and yet surprisingly durable, the tone and texture of a novel often remaining with us long after we have forgotten the details of its plot. But if these words are therefore subjective and descriptive, they are also to some extent evaluative, and, moreover, imply a presumption of common if not universal assent. They are claims, in other words, about the work itself, and not simply the experience of the work.

That they are seldom treated as such by literary critics makes only more compelling the fact that Coetzee himself drew on similarly impressionistic characterizations in his PhD dissertation on Samuel Beckett. There, he observed: 'Writers on *Watt* have resorted to a number of curious metaphors to describe its style: the compulsive evacuation of the reason, the graph of a half-absent mind, counting, the turning out of the coins of logic from a die.' To Coetzee, the fact that 'four critics, stretched to using their metaphoric faculties, should have produced figures superficially so dissimilar yet fundamentally so alike' was an indication that there might well be 'some incessant, half-sleeping, computational quality to *Watt* accessible only to metaphor'. Indeed, this semantic overlap bolstered the intuition that 'behind the verbal habits of *Watt* ... lies a single principle, a central nervous flexion which causes the tics we see on the verbal surface'.¹³

The proposition that stylistic qualities are accessible only to metaphor is of course one that Coetzee's study attempted to disprove: far from lying beyond the reach of analysis, it hoped to show, those verbal tics and habits to which readers respond intuitively could be identified and explained, at least provisionally. As to whether this analysis would shed light on the meaning of the work, that is a question with which any study of style is necessarily concerned. Certainly, it will be the focus here, where the

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principal aim is not only to clarify how the bareness of Coetzee's prose is produced but also to explore its consequences for interpretation.

In pursuit of this aim, a certain privilege has been granted to the experience of readers, in respect of which the procedures of the present study may seem to converge with what has come to be known as reader-response theory. Yet, while the insights of such critics as Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish and Michael Riffaterre are clearly relevant, there are reasons to approach them with caution.¹⁴

To begin with, it is difficult to agree that the reading of a literary work is ever so cool, rational and attentive as that proposed by Iser, or so rooted in the step-by-step unfolding described in Fish's early work on affective stylistics. Furthermore, though it is clear that particular codes and assumptions will always delimit attempts at interpretation, Fish's later writings on interpretive communities seem to fall into an extreme relativism and to ignore both the inertia that limits the variability of social structures and the possibility that hermeneutic frameworks can be analysed, articulated and used reflexively. As for Riffaterre, his approach is especially problematic because it disregards the actual 'content' of readers' responses; presuming relevant only those moments at which readers are consciously arrested, he dismisses altogether the kind of judgements catalogued here, which tend to concern features that are pervasive.

As such, whatever its debts to reader-response theories, this study is in several respects more closely aligned with the expanding fields of sociolinguistics, pragmatics and narrative rhetoric, where it is taken for granted that one might imperceptibly sway one's auditors and readers by one's manner of speaking, and that the slightest nuances of verbal expression are capable of generating meaning at speeds that defy immediate explication of their functioning. If this is hardly more than classical rhetoricians presumed, the work of twentieth-century linguists and narratologists has more fruitfully enabled analysis of those aspects of a work that ground and incite readers' intuitions, those subterranean operations of syntax, lexis, prosody and narrative structure that intimately and often invisibly determine their particular impressions.

It is these impressions that precede or at the very least saturate interpretation, and to leave them out of account is to ignore what are often the most tangible and lasting effects of any work; it is to designate style as little more than adornment, superfluous to meaning. The argument pursued here is that, on the contrary, style is fundamentally important to the ways a novel mediates and knows the world, to what Theodor Adorno

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calls its 'truth content', and that it is therefore a mistake to respond – as many of us do – as if style were little more than the writer's calling card, or something to be savoured by connoisseurs.¹⁵ To elucidate stylistic qualities, then, is not simply to appreciate them more fully, but to show what it is about the work that affects us and why this manner of being affected is important; it is to bring to consciousness what are otherwise intuitions without bearing.

This is not to imply, however, that 'non-analytical' reading is necessarily deficient. It would be as much a mistake to forego a surrender to the work as to leave off without some attempt to understand what emerges from that surrender. Were we to launch ourselves immediately into analysis we might find little to analyse, and certainly little more than the dusty remains of a carcass too hastily picked over. The analytical reading will less often be a first than a third, fourth or fifth reading.

As to whether it remains possible to surrender to the work once we have acquired the habits of analysis, it must certainly be acknowledged that the work itself becomes different once its linguistic and narrative details have been closely examined. Indeed, the ability to dissect the operations of language must in itself affect cursory readings of even the most prosaic texts. Yet, if the acquisition of linguistic and rhetorical knowledge inevitably alters our readerly responses, this need not extinguish our capacity to be swept up or even swept away, compelled to adjust ourselves to the rhythms and patterns of a language and thought that is not our own. This, at least, has been my own experience. For no matter how often I have read one of Coetzee's novels, no matter how intently I have scrutinized its linguistic and rhetorical workings, there remain moments in which I find myself subjected to the narrative, suddenly in its grip, bound inexorably to the world it has created. The task, then, is to explain this experience.

Form and Style

Clearly discernible in the reviews of Coetzee's early fictions – and especially in the negative reviews of *Foe* – is a commonplace distinction between what one says and how one says it, that is, between content and form. The host of difficulties to which this distinction gives rise can partly be set aside if we avoid thinking of the literary work as an entity with mutually exclusive component parts and view it instead as an object about which different kinds of questions can be put.

Thus, we might ask what a novel is about and answer by giving a paraphrase, involving a brief account of the central characters and a record of

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those events that are salient, or by speaking of the themes or ideas that seem most pertinent, or by referring to its subject matter. In each case, the work is addressed as a whole, and the sense of what is pertinent or salient is affected by the novel's language or narrative strategies. Such features might themselves be the focus of a different set of questions, those pertaining to form or technique, and here again there is no absolute division, because to ask how a story is told one must already have some provisional sense of what the story is.

One consequence of understanding form and content in this way is that questions of the how need not be limited to the features isolated by linguistics and rhetoric. On the contrary, once form is the focus, there are few aspects of a work that cannot be considered. Thus, while it is usual to associate story with the content of a novel, we might ask whether a given plot might not be framed by another kind of story, where, insofar as we speak less about the forms of a particular novel and more about different novel forms, we begin to broach the topic of genre (understood here simply as a convenient means of dividing the vast ground covered by such categories as *novel*, *short story* and *poem*). Of course, we might step back even further and ask whether a certain subject or theme might not have been otherwise communicated, and so treat the novel itself as a form of address, the features of which set it apart from other media and modes, whether of fiction or fact.

There is nothing unusual about this manner of conceiving form and content. Similar understandings have been elaborated elsewhere and for some time. In his 1948 essay 'Technique as Discovery', Mark Schorer insisted: 'When we speak of technique, then, we speak of nearly everything.'¹⁶ However, since the moment of New Criticism, to which Schorer's essay belongs, the rise of linguistics and structuralism *has* encouraged the emergence of a more sophisticated conception of form than one that begins and ends with imagery and symbolism. Building on the work of the Russian Formalists and Prague School linguists, and further enabled by the Chomskyan and silicon revolutions, critics have become more willing to grapple in earnest with patterns of language use at the level of the clause and phrase, the phoneme and morpheme.

It is perhaps the consequence of these developments that, in the 1960s, when Coetzee's career as a literary critic began, talk had turned increasingly from *form* to *style*. For the most distinctive and elusive qualities of an author's writing seem more closely related to the minutiae of language than to a certain imagery or set of tropes. The study of style, in other

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words, is not merely the study of ‘all the strategies of language that are used to shape prose and verse into expressions of thoughts and feeling’, because what is missing from this definition, offered by the first editors of the flagship journal *Style*, is the concern with that which is characteristic of a particular work or author.¹⁷ Style, then, is not simply form by another name, but form understood relationally, as a value within a field of values, and it is by explicitly addressing the relational character of literary practices – the way these practices are shaped and given meaning alongside and against one another – that stylistic and formal analysis might usefully be differentiated.¹⁸

Such an approach to style is in any case indicated by the nature of the judgements cited previously. For there can be no absolute standard on the basis of which to describe a work of fiction as *spare*, *stark*, *economic* or *lyrical*, and there is no particular arrangement of words and clauses – no particular form – that is inherently any of these things. On the contrary, when we use a word like *spare*, we immediately invoke a field of practices in which values are open to modification and redefinition. At the very least, we rely on a familiarity with the history of a particular genre or tradition and its constitutive range of characteristics, as well as with the judgements made about those characteristics, a familiarity, however vague, developed over the course of primary, secondary and tertiary education and through a lifetime’s reading, whether casual or critical, which enables even the non-specialist to appreciate and adjudicate on an author’s style.

This relational dimension is further apparent in the two understandings of style delineated by Coetzee in his PhD dissertation: style as defined by Bernard Bloch in terms of the statistical distribution of lexical and syntactical variables peculiar to a given work, or to the works of a given author; and style as apparently conceived by Beckett, a form related to a content, a set of techniques chosen in view of a particular subject matter. For, whatever their differences, these understandings implicitly share the sense of style as that peculiar combination of factors by which an author comes to be known, indeed, comes to be identifiable.

With regard to Bloch’s definition, it is worth noting that Coetzee’s stated aim was to demonstrate that, though new analytical methods promised a science of literature, statistical information would seldom add much of value to an understanding of literary works, and that, even if the study of style were strictly axiomatic, it could only be incorporated in literary interpretation by some intuitive leap. These insights remain salutary, but what proves most helpful in Coetzee’s preference for the conception of style he

finds in Beckett is that it sheds further light on the term's meaning. For, in speaking of the relation of form to content, one speaks not only of the work's unity and coherence, but also of the extent to which its various elements are so related that they produce an impression of necessity, such that the work appears as if it were an organic whole. Here it is worth noting that though we associate style with terms as vague as *writing*, *prose* and *language*, our judgements of a novel are inevitably related not to particular features treated in isolation, but to the way these features coalesce.

The notion that style is a function of the relation between parts is of further interest because it entails the evaluative dimension of stylistic analysis. It is precisely because a work might sometimes fail to produce the aforementioned impression of necessity that we can speak of the success or failure of a given moment or a given work. And if we might question whether particular techniques – that is, particular narrative, grammatical and rhetorical strategies – are more or less suited to particular subject matters, we might also begin to think of technique, subject matter and the relation between them in terms of selection. In fact, *selection* is not the right word, for the struggle of the author is not simply to choose, but to make, or at least to rework.

But what is it that engenders this struggle? Quite simply, the historical character of literary practice: it is because forms and contents are subject to ageing, because the meanings and values attached to them change over time, because techniques and themes once thought scandalous and avant-garde gradually become modish and then outmoded, that each new generation of authors is compelled to return to the question of style.¹⁹ And if style is not simply form understood in relation to other forms, but also form understood in relation to content and to the history of this relation, then it is clearly a mistake to speak – as past stylisticians have been wont to do – as if the prose of the world could be divided between two or twenty basic styles.²⁰ For the passage of time and the pressures of place themselves ensure that the plain style of Philip Larkin is different from the plain style of Ben Jonson, just as the spare prose of J. M. Coetzee is different from the spare prose of Samuel Beckett, though the meanings attached to the former inevitably depend on those associated with the latter.

Field and Material

It follows that stylistic analysis entails comparison as well as description. In explaining their 'restricted concept of style', Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short therefore observe: 'A style is defined in terms of a *domain*