

In Praise of the Little Phallus: On J. M. Coetzee's Contribution to *Neophilologus*

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'Erasmus' *Praise of Folly: Rivalry and Madness*' by J. M. Coetzee was published in 1992 in the January issue of *Neophilologus*. In hindsight, it can be said that it was an important text, both for Coetzee and for his commentators, who frequently refer to it.¹ Not only does Coetzee present an interesting interpretation of Erasmus' canonical book, in addition he also probes his own authorship in the light of Erasmus' satire. Though it does not specifically address the issue of censorship,² Coetzee selected the article a few years later for his collection of essays on censorship, *Giving Offense* (1996).³ In the preface to this volume, he observes that *Giving Offense* "is dominated by the spirit of Erasmus" (Coetzee 1996a, ix). In my commentary I want to make clear what exactly Coetzee meant with this spirit of Erasmus, and why it was so important to him.

Before proceeding, however, I would first like to make some remarks on the institutional and historical context of the publication. In 1992, Coetzee was 52 years old, and not yet the world-famous author. He was to receive the Nobel prize only 10 years later, and celebrated novels, such as *Disgrace* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), still had to be written. All the same, even at the time his article appeared in *Neophilologus*, Coetzee was an internationally known author with novels such as *Life & Times of Michael K.* (1983), *Foe* (1986) and *Age of Iron* (1990). In 1983 he had already been awarded the Man Booker Prize (later, in 1999, he would receive the prize again). In addition to being a novelist, in those days he held the chair of

¹For instance, Hayes 2009 and Geertsema 2011.

²Coetzee refers only marginally to the fact that in 1559 Erasmus' complete oeuvre was placed on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, see Coetzee 1992a, 14.

³See Coetzee 1996b. For this reprint Coetzee introduced some minor changes, which render the article on the whole a little less academic. He also inverted the words rivalry and madness in the title.

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General Literature at the University of Cape Town. It may safely be assumed that the editors of *Neophilologus* were quite happy to receive a contribution from this writer and scholar.

We can only speculate as to why Coetzee specifically submitted the article to *Neophilologus*. Did he have contacts with one of the editors? At the time, the editor for English and Comparative Literature was Wim Bronzwaer, Professor of Comparative Literature and Literary Theory at the Catholic University of Nijmegen.⁴ It is very well possible that the two of them had met at some international literary congress. In any case, Bronzwaer fostered a broad interest in Coetzee, and was an admirer of his work. As a literary critic, he wrote two favourable reviews of Coetzee's early novels. In 1983, for example, he called *Life and Times of Michael K.* a novel of "uncommon power, both in its sophisticated design and in its human stirring" (Bronzwaer 1983). In 1992, Bronzwaer wrote a review of the Dutch translation of *Age of Iron* (1990), in which he refers in passing to the "highly original" contribution of Coetzee to *Neophilologus* (Bronzwaer 1992).⁵ In other words, Bronzwaer knew Coetzee, but it is less certain whether the reverse was the case, too. Perhaps Coetzee presented his article to *Neophilologus*, because the journal had a firm home base in The Netherlands, and a contribution about Erasmus, one of the greatest Dutch intellectuals, would be an appropriate choice for publication. More importantly, however, *Neophilologus* enjoyed a solid academic reputation and Coetzee's article was the result of solid academic work. At any rate, this is how he presents it. He neatly states that writing the article had been facilitated by a grant of the South African Human Sciences Research Council. "This assistance is hereby acknowledged" (Coetzee [1992a] 2016, 52). The formulation chosen by Coetzee strikes as somewhat parsimoniously: "to acknowledge" is not quite the same as "to be grateful", which would be the more commonplace expression here. In the words that follow one also senses some reserve with respect to the grant-supplier: "Opinions expressed are my own and do not necessarily represent the views of the Institute for Research Development or the H. S. R. C. [Human Sciences Research Council]" (*ibid.*). Did Coetzee make this reservation in order to safeguard his grant-supplier against potential criticism? Or, on the contrary, did he want to stress his independence from these governmental bodies? Does his qualification allude to political sensitivities?⁶

Of course, politics always loomed in the background in South Africa. In the early 1990s, South Africa found itself in a transitional phase. In 1990 Nelson Mandela had been released from prison, and negotiations were taking place between the white government and the African National Congress, but it would not be until 1994 before free elections were held. Like most intellectuals, Coetzee was an outspoken

⁴Bronzwaer was editor of *Neophilologus* from 1988 until his early death in 1999 at the age of 62.

⁵These reviews can be consulted in *Literom Wereldliteratuur*. <http://literom.knipselkranten.nl/wliterom/IndexJs>. Accessed 31 August 2015.

⁶The acknowledgement was omitted from the reprint of the article in *Giving Offence. Essays on Censorship*.

opponent of Apartheid. For instance, in his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech (1986), he declared:

The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life.

Moreover, he was deeply aware of the detrimental consequences Apartheid had for literature:

South African literature is a literature in bondage [...] It is exactly the kind of literature you would expect to write from a prison (Coetzee 1992b, 98).

Coetzee did not, however, contend whether he was of the opinion that this observation also applied to his own novels. In any case, opponents of Apartheid did not always favour his sophisticated metafictional novels as a proper literary response to the demands of the political reality. His work has therefore been characterized as “politically impotent, or even irresponsibly escapist” (Vermeulen 2010, 270). As Coetzee-expert David Attwell observes, statements by Coetzee, such as “making sense of life inside a book is different from making sense of real life,” were ill taken at the time:

Many writers, and many more readers, would see the assertion of that ‘difference’ as a form of political and ethical evasion: in South Africa, life under apartheid seems to demand a realistic documentation of oppression. [...] The predominance of realism in South African literary culture has led Coetzee, when pressed, to adopt positions that waver between embattled defensiveness and incisive critique (Attwell 1993, 11).

It is clear, therefore, that Coetzee entertained a rather strained relation with those who fought against Apartheid. Moreover, his reputation in these circles did not really improve as a result of the fact that the censor did not take the trouble to ban his books: they were considered too literary and therefore not dangerous in any way.⁷

Obviously, for Coetzee the relation between writer and politics—or phrased slightly more abstractly, between literature and history—posed a rather awkward problem. It is precisely this problem that Coetzee addresses in his *Neophilologus* article. Using Erasmus as his foil, Coetzee marks his own position as a writer in times of turbulent historical events. Or rather: his own non-position. The argument revolves around this “literary” non-position he takes towards history. This stance is certainly not to be confused with a simple non-commitment, the kind of non-commitment of which the postmodern ironist is often being accused. But what then is this position? It is a problem with which Coetzee has been struggling fiercely. The article marks a shift in his opinions concerning the issue that is simultaneously subtle and important. As recently as 1987, he had described the relation between literature and history in a speech:

In times of intense ideological pressure like the present, when the space in which the novel and history normally coexist like two cows on the same pasture, each minding its own

⁷See the interesting essay by McDonald 2006.

business, is squeezed to almost nothing, the novel, it seems to me, has only two options: supplementarity or rivalry (Coetzee 1988, 3, here quoted after Attwell 1993, 15).

It is significant that Coetzee uses the word ‘rivalry’ here, a notion that is at the centre of his *Neophilologus* article. What does he mean with ‘supplementarity’ and ‘rivalry,’ respectively? He readily provides the answer himself: a novel that is a supplement to the discourse of history provides the reader “with vicarious firsthand experience of living, in a certain historical time, embodying contending forces in contending characters and filling our experience with a certain density of observation” (Coetzee 1988, 3; Attwell 1993, 15).

On the other hand, a novel that is not supplementary but finds itself in a relation of rivalry, of conflict, to history, is

a novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of procedures of history and eventuates in conclusion that are checkable by history (as a child’s schoolwork is checked by a schoolmistress). In particular I mean a novel that evolves its own paradigms and myth, in the process (and here is the point at which true rivalry, even enmity, perhaps enters the picture) perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history – in other words, demythologizing history (Coetzee 1988, 3; Attwell 1993, 15).

It appears from these quotations that Coetzee situates his own novels on the rivalry-side, rather than on the side of supplementarity. Coetzee does not have in mind an ‘autonomous position’ of literature, at least not in the sense of the writer turning away from history and retreating into an ivory tower. On the contrary, he is aiming at undermining the false pretenses of the agents in history. Translated into political terms, one could say that parties that strive to lead history into a certain political direction (ie opposition against Apartheid) are frustrated in their attempts, as doubt is cast on the aims they try to achieve by writing this fiction of rivalry. It is not so much not to have taken sides, as questioning taking sides in itself. One can imagine that in the politically charged context of South Africa this kind of literature was not given a warm hand.

In ‘Erasmus: Madness and Rivalry’ Coetzee abandons this idea of rivalry. Having buried himself in René Girard’s theory of mimesis and rivalry, and the never ending spiral of violence that this rivalry produces, Coetzee had apparently realized that his approach was not productive. If the writer interferes in the conflict by demythologizing history as described above, he will be sucked into the struggle. What is more, most probably he will find himself at the losing end. In the position of the Erasman fool, however, Coetzee sees an opportunity to overcome rivalry. It is a very subtle modification, because the fool no less demythologizes than does the rivaling writer. Ultimately, the shift consists in the fool positioning himself outside the discourse of truth, particularly by also putting himself in an ironic perspective.

So Coetzee identified himself with Erasmus. Erasmus, who himself tried to take an independent position between two rivaling parties (the Pope and Luther).⁸ However, Erasmus’ attempt turned out to be of no avail, something that Coetzee

⁸Contemporaries of Erasmus disqualified his impartiality as a character flaw, a reproach also made against Coetzee.

must have recognized. Both the Pope and Luther alike fought Erasmus, and the latter was sidelined. In a time of great religious turmoil, Erasmus became “the king of *but*.”⁹ This epithet certainly also applies to Coetzee himself. In fact, somewhat differently phrased, he has been blamed the same way. But, according to Coetzee, in *Praise of Folly* this king of but has demonstrated an interesting possibility for an “independent” position, a position “off the stage of rivalry altogether, a non-position” (Coetzee [1992a] 2016, 36). Coetzee clarified this conclusion by reading *Praise of Folly* through the theoretical lenses of Foucault, Lacan and Girard, respectively. And, it has to be said, also here Coetzee lives up to his reputation of king of but.

The work of these three Master Thinkers of Theory has led to fruitful insights into the position of literature, so Coetzee, but in the end it turns out to be inadequate. In fact, Coetzee's critique boils down to the fact that theory *qualitate qua* cannot elucidate the literary. Worse still: theory is just an obstacle for such an elucidation. What this theoretical failure implies may be demonstrated by Coetzee's comment on Foucault. Coetzee appreciates Foucault, who in *History and Madness* had shown how modern reason has constituted itself by excluding madness (as being unreason). Reason had done so by literarily locking up mad people, but also by excluding from reason all kinds of experiences. In fact, the simple opposition of reason/madness represents a whole conglomerate of related oppositions that structure modern thinking. Inside the scope of reason we will find notions, such as subject, consciousness, mind, self-insight, order, speaking, and knowing. Madness, then, stands for all the opposite notions: subjectlessness, unconsciousness, body, self-deception, chaos, silence, ignorance, etcetera. This latter series can be summarized as ‘the other’ of reason. Put differently: it is the negative of reason, the position outside the inside. Consequently, reason claims for itself the position of the inside, and thus of positivity, while the outside has to content itself with the status of the negative or negation of the inside. Now, the point is that in doing so, reason, with all its pretensions of truth and transparency, presents us with an amputated picture of reality. A great deal is going on off the screen of reason, but without a proper articulation of its own. This spectral outside haunts the inside, as poststructuralists never tire to stress. Coetzee aptly phrases this haunting as “an ever present shadow on the edge of consciousness, a penumbra” (Coetzee [1992a] 2016, 39). ‘Penumbra’ in addition to ‘half-shadow’ (in which a source of light, the repressed, is not completely blocked out) also means something like ‘peripheral area.’

To be aware of this blindness of reason is one thing, but actually undoing it is quite something different. It is almost impossible to discuss these excluded aspects without simultaneously regressing into the position of reason, and thus reaffirming the exclusion. According to Foucault, madness is like silence, since the raving of the mad is incoherent speech, it does not make sense. But letting this silence speak—trying to comprehend this raving—is already an act of betrayal. At this point the project of Foucault runs into trouble. It was Foucault's intention to write a history

⁹This qualification of Erasmus (made by Georges Duhamel) does not appear in the *Neophilologus* article, but was added by Coetzee in the reprint in *Giving Offense* (Coetzee 1996b, 83).

of madness from the perspective of madness itself, and not (as in psychiatry) from the perspective of knowing. However, the mere attempt at writing a history is problematic here, because history is one of the ordering metaphysical notions of reason, *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen*, as Theodor Lessing (Lessing [1919] 1983) succinctly put it a century ago. Coetzee bases his analyses on the famous criticism of Derrida on Foucault (Derrida 1978).

Now, the problem confronting Coetzee is how to escape from this devilish dilemma that the redemption of the repressed involves its betrayal. To this end, Coetzee introduces Erasmian folly, and, in its wake, unfolds his own views on literature. According to Coetzee, the writer is like the Erasmian fool: both have found a way to have that which is excluded from reason speak for itself without, at the same moment, allowing it to be re-appropriated by reason. Folly and literature represent a kind of speaking that is not transparent in itself, which is not knowing nor does it want to be transparent. Literature is a hesitating, groping speaking rather than a self-assured or assertive speaking. These qualities of literature do not mean that the connection with truth has been dissolved: that would lead to complete impotency or castration, which is not exactly the position Coetzee, as a writer, wants to maneuver himself into. Actually, the fool is speaking truth. Not *the* truth, for that would make him fall into the metaphysical trap again, but he is speaking from “a position that does not know itself.” It is speaking from the unconscious: “whatever pops into my head”, confesses the fool of Erasmus (Coetzee [1992a] 2016, 46). Nowhere does the fool keep up appearances; instead he is “unsocialized, *rudis*, rude” (*ibid.*). With his rudeness, the fool shows something that the socialized try to veil, but which is obvious nonetheless. Coetzee offers an acute and amusing Lacanian interpretation of this passage in Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*. He distinguishes between a big phallus and a little one. Fools only show a little phallus, which is the phallus they actually have, their reproductive organ (penis). This is not the intimidating phallus of the Law. The phallus of the fool is “naked, ridiculous, without robes and crown and orb and scepter, without grandeur. [...] not the transcendental signifier but a thing of sport, of free play, of carefree dissemination rather than patrilinearity” (*ibid.*). It is, according to Erasmus, this ridiculously real phallus, this queer thing, the comic *slap-stick*,¹⁰ which keeps life going, which takes care of procreation. Coetzee points out that this phallic principle of procreation, on the face of its being masculine, is quite remarkably attributed by Erasmus with a feminine gender (*propagatrix*). This change of gender underlines that the ‘masculine’ big phallus is not the issue here. All these big phalluses, all these “haughty philosophers ... and kings ..., priests ..., popes; also finally the assembly of the gods” (Erasmus cited by Coetzee [1992a] 2016, 47) take their origin in/come forth from this little phallus. The little phallus, according to Coetzee, does not have to be taken seriously by these big phalluses, because it adopts the position of woman.

A woman, in the words of Girard, can never become a model or rival. He/she is *hors combat*. Getting angry at something that is so pathetic and unreasonable would only bring out one’s own unreasonableness (madness). Just to be perfectly clear:

¹⁰The pun was made by Attwell 2006, 35.

what is *not* at stake here is the unmasking of the pitiful theater of the world (*theatrum mundi*). After all, by knowing what is behind the mask, you will put yourself in the position of the Phallus (ie metaphysics) again. Erasmus managed to avoid this pitfall: “prudently disarming itself in advance, keeping its phallus the size of the women’s, steering clear of the play of power, clear of politics,” as Coetzee put it (49).

Well before Foucault, Huizinga had observed that, for Erasmus in *In Praise of Folly*, madness was not such a clear-cut notion as it was later to become in modernity, and that, for instance, the borderline between stupidity and madness is still quite diffuse. “Erasmus speaks without clear transition, now of foolish persons and now of real lunatics” (Huizinga [1924] 2002, 76). Huizinga sees this indeterminacy as an indication of how far removed we are from the Renaissance mind-set. Also, Huizinga was very well aware of the complex play in *Praise of Folly* which Coetzee interpreted in terms of the little and big phallus. Huizinga discerned two tightly interwoven themes in *Praise of Folly*: “that of salutary folly, which is the true wisdom, and that of deluded wisdom, which is pure folly” (74). In his comments on Huizinga, Coetzee does not address these striking analogies between his own reading and that of Huizinga. Instead, he focuses on Huizinga’s critical judgment of Erasmus’ position in the religious struggle of his time, and compares it with Stephan Zweig’s more favourable opinion of Erasmus.

Finally, what exactly did Coetzee learn from Erasmus? I think it can safely be argued that, with great inventiveness and in numerous ways, Coetzee has put into practice in his own novels the notion of non-position, which he also argued in his *Neophilologus* article. A pertinent example is the fictional character of Elisabeth Costello. On her behalf, Coetzee regularly delivered speeches on controversial societal issues, such as animal rights. The talks on animal rights by Costello/Coetzee were published in a small volume *The Lives of Animals* (1999) with comments of different (real!) scholars.¹¹ In spite of the close connections between Costello and Coetzee, it is not easy to attribute the opinions of Elisabeth Costello to Coetzee, because the implied author ironizes the character of Costello too much for that. Moreover, when Coetzee is called to account for the opinions of Costello, his answer is: “I think what Costello would say is ...” (see Attridge 2004, 193).¹²

Nevertheless, when Coetzee more clearly stages himself as a person in his fiction, he is able to generate quite some uncertainty. For example, *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) is without any doubt at least partly autobiographical. The main character J. C. (Coetzee) lavishly throws about his “strong opinions.” On the other hand, the comments which the other two characters in the novel make on C., printed on the same page, like musical variations on a theme, deprive C.’s opinions of much of their jaunty decisiveness. We may safely conclude therefore that the spirit of Erasmus indeed has thoroughly inspired Coetzee’s oeuvre.

¹¹ Later they found their place in the novel *Elisabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003).

¹² Attridge 2004, 192–205; on Elisabeth Costello, see also Attwell 2006.

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