
My starting point is the seemingly innocuous introductory comment that the author is ‘an ideal reviewer’ (xiii) of the twenty-one writers covered in this 304-page book. But this introduction reveals a subjective, non-historical reviewer more idealist than ideal.

To write is to adopt a philosophical attitude toward something. Moreover, a writer employs social power and therein faces moral and ethical decisions. Yet, many philosophers, writers, critics, and theorists are ‘eager to separate history from fiction’. Thus, the discursive bodies of postmodernism, feminism, and post-colonialism theorists resist the mainstream tradition of literary criticism. From such discourses, a method of unethical writers, effacement, reveals the presence of absent voices.

Before I turn to Coetzee’s effacement, let me say that by idealist I do not mean a person guided more by ideals than by practical considerations, although that is the definition privileged in the introduction. Rather I mean someone who turns away from the practical world. In a literary case, this results in a focus on text as text. Material history, biography, processes of production, et cetera and of course the encompassing world fail to impinge on the analysis. My example of idealism is Coetzee’s review of Samuel Beckett’s short fiction.

In a total four pages, disguised by style, opinion skulks as literary criticism postures. For instance, Coetzee says that Beckett’s fiction is a world of confined spaces or else bleak wastes, inhabited by asocial and indeed misanthropic monologuers helpless to terminate their monologue, tramps with failing bodies and never-sleeping minds condemned to a purgatorial treadmill on which they rehearse again and again the great themes of Western philosophy…’ (169)

However, this analysis does not contribute to our modern ‘literary discourses in a productive and non-hierarchical manner’. For exclusion comes into play when, fifty words later, the next paragraph begins a discussion of Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing*. Coetzee segues out of the painted corner, away from the need to relate his opinion to the discursive worlds around the text. Effacing dialogue, he asserts his fact and moves to new thoughts. Tributary Coetzee joins the mainstream of bourgeois traditions and here we meet his greatest effacement.

The link between the rise of the middle-class and the mainstream tradition of literary criticism in which he immerses himself escapes the analytical reach of our Nobel Laureate. Our analyst seems to embody that drive ‘to consciously educate a socially heterogeneous public into the universal forms of reason, taste, and morality’. And beyond the text he participates ‘in a kind of tacit confederation of clubs to compare notes and form the whole public opinion of

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5 Eagleton, *Function* 22.
His analysis amounts to ‘spiritual dissociation…[not]…an energetic collusion with everyday life’.7

To effect the effacement of material history he hacks a shortcut through Beckett’s biography. ‘The next three decades will see Beckett unable to move on—stalled, in fact, on the very question on what it means to move on, why should one move one, who is it that should do the moving on’ (170). Apart from the issues of speaking of the past as a potential future, a verbose style, and the social conditions that impinged on Beckett’s work, Coetzee minces the claim that he provides ‘little sense of a moonlighting novelist…and no sign of that rather grumpy internal voice [for now, miraculously] he is a generous reader’ (xiii).

What is more, his claim that Beckett spent thirty years in a creative cul-de-sac is a suspect metaphor. Beckett found in that blind alley a dark and comic energy that sustained his work for a decade. How grounded in history, then, is a reviewer who says that ‘by the late 1960s that comic energy, with its power to surprise, had reduced itself to a relentless, arid self-laceration’ (171). How generous in spirit, indeed, to say that Beckett’s 1970 publication *The lost ones* ‘is hell to read and was perhaps hell to write too’ (171). Here I see rampaging idealism, for with no mention of Beckett losing something Coetzee writes as if no human hand moved the objects of history.

The argument that Coetzee struggled to read the text, thus, Beckett struggled to write the text reveals an imagined correspondence between their crafts. What we have, is a self-styled philosopher unable to recognise the basic implication of the metaphysical character of his analytical object. He expects his reader will collude in his conflation of metaphysical category and ontological entity. And moreover, ‘he expects his own fiction [and his reviews, we hope.] to be judged by the same exacting standards he applies here to others’ (xiii, italics added).

Herein, he occludes all political power embodied in the social relations attached to the political economy of the ‘labour-intensive industry of literary enquiry—[the] schools, University faculties, publishing houses, literary bodies’8 in which he and his texts work. He wants to stand apart from society and history, for his world cannot ‘withstand the inruption into it of the social and political interests in palpable conflict with his own “universal” rational norms’.9

Connivance, between publisher, critic, and author the review reflects that ‘peculiarly close interaction between the cultural, political, and economic’.10 With *inner workings*, Coetzee’s literary criticism reveals a sordid and repressive tradition and any ‘substantial and significant contribution [his reviews offer are not to] the continuing discussion of literature’s place in the lives of individuals and cultures’ (x). For, in the words of his promoter, we have someone who ‘seems to have read everything relevant to his subject’ (xiii). He claims Beckett as ‘one of the great prose stylists of the twentieth century’ (173) yet provides no insights into the artist, his work, craft, habits, or the society that sustained him.

And so, with this review, I hope only to have exposed an idealist.

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7 Eagleton, *Function* 23.
8 Eagleton, *Criticism* 12.
9 Eagleton, *Function* 35.
10 Eagleton, *Function* 23.

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