Review Article[1]

J. M. Coetzee: Censorship and Its Doubles

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In a domestic context of censorship, banning, and other pressures on writers, the international stage was essential to the continued activity and political significance of South African writers during the years of apartheid. The banning of works of literature in South Africa in the 1960s and 1970s succeeded only in increasing international awareness of South African writing. André Brink noted the ironic failure of censorship to silence written dissent in the case of his own work:

> . . . the threat of being censored in Afrikaans, which would effectively deprive me of my habitual readers, prompted me, as a measure of literary survival, to start writing in English as well. The result is that books previously available in Afrikaans are now published in many different countries. And because they are in English they are now, for the first time, being read by black readers in South Africa too, as well as being translated into indigenous languages. (252)

One might suppose that censorship also bought a certain added symbolic value to particular writers and genres of writing, and was thus instrumental in the construction of reputations in North America and Europe.

These paradoxical effects of censorship on the international standing of South African literature bear out the general logic identified by J. M. Coetzee in his latest collection of essays, *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship.* Coetzee argues that the conflict between the state and writers arises from the fact that both the modern state and the audience for writing posit a similar model of the public: "literate, integrated [and] receptive to direction." The aims of writers are consequently "unsettlingly similar to the ambitions of the state itself" (41-42). The relationship of intimacy and rivalry between states and writers is played out most

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obviously through practices of censorship, which aim to limit and constrain the "disseminative power" of writing. Yet, this very effort often tends to be self-defeating:

> The more draconically the state comes down on writing, the more seriously it is seen to be taking writing; the more seriously it is seen to be taking writing, the more attention is paid to writing; the more attention is paid to writing, the more the disseminative potential of writing grows. (43)

This rather neatly captures the dynamic between domestic censorship and internationalization that characterized South African literature during the period of apartheid. It also draws attention to the ways in which the value of writing may in certain situations be conditional upon the attention paid to it by practices of censorship. *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* traces the peculiar processes by which state censorship undermines its own intentions; it also uncovers the uncomfortable complicities between the most cherished values of writers on the one hand, and the workings of censorship on the other.

Coetzee's most recent novel reinscribes Dostoevsky's *The Devils*, itself a text directly shaped by the workings of Tsarist censorship (see Coetzee, "The Artist at High Tide"). In the novel, the censor-figure, Maximov, admits to the uneasiness to which his snooping may give rise: "The prospect that after our decease a stranger will come sniffing through our possessions, opening drawers, breaking seals, reading intimate letters—such would be a painful prospect to any of us, I am sure" (Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg* 39). Coetzee has his fictionalized Dostoevsky invoke a similar imagery in reflecting on his own inclinations towards being a writer: "As a child he used to spy on visitors to the household and trespass surreptitiously on their privacy. It is a weakness that he has associated till now with a refusal to accept limits to what he is permitted to know, with the reading of forbidden books, and thus with his vocation" (72). Both the censor-figure and the writer are seen to be keen and voracious snoopers, sniffing out what is hidden or forbidden.

It is this sense of what joins the censor and the writer together that Coetzee pursues in *Giving Offense*. The critical purchase of his analyses lies in questioning the received rhetoric whereby

writers posit a manichean conflict between themselves and the censor. There are two well-worn images of the writer working in a context of censorship: "the moral giant under attack from hordes of moral pygmies and the helpless innocent persecuted by a mighty state apparatus" (118). These David-versus-Goliath models maintain an essentially Oedipal account of censorship, in which the defining issue is that of primacy—or victory (119). This in turn underwrites a "destructuring dynamic of escalation in which the rivals, writer and censor, become less and less clearly distinguishable" (118). Guided by the theory of mimetic desire elaborated by René Girard (91-93), Coetzee sets out in this collection to analyse the various contexts in which this dynamic reasserts itself.

I

In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee explains how his interest in the theme of censorship was aroused by his involvement in the controversy over the withdrawal in early 1989 of an invitation to Salman Rushdie by the Congress of South African Writers. The resulting furore confirmed a conviction that most discussions of censorship tended to fall back upon a set of pre-established positions that did not allow for a rigorous "thinking" of the issues involved: "Why was it so hard to think of anything interesting to say about censorship? Did the discussion of censorship simply belong to politics?" (298). He goes on to suggest that debates over censorship fail "to rise above the level of the political in the worst sense" (299), and so remain at a level of "stupidity." The essays in *Giving Offense* attempt to examine "the dynamic of that stupidity," which condemns discussions of censorship to repeat the same themes and arguments in ever more predictable fashion. The paranoid mode of polemics around censorship touches both censor and writer, and gives rise to the "automatism" characteristic of censorship debates (200).[2] Coetzee is intent on avoiding the routine gestures and formulas accompanying discussions of censorship in order to think through the nature of the intimate relationship between censorship and writing.

The conflict between writers and censors is routinely represented through a set of figures of victory and defeat, courage

and cowardice, which pit the writer as protector of truth against the overbearing power of the censor as the representative of the state (45). This representation enables writers in a situation of censorship to "constitute a myth of the writer as a hero of resistance" (208). Without conceding any authority to practices of censorship, Coetzee challenges received understandings of literary writing's worldly importance that arise from presenting the writer-censor relationship in these terms. The almost scandalous question he raises is "whether writers under censorship are wholly disinterested in presenting themselves as embattled and outnumbered, confronting a gigantic foe" (44). He suggests that the staging of writers as battling for truth against tyrannical forces ultimately serves to sustain the notion that writers occupy "a position that simultaneously stands outside politics, rivals politics, and dominates politics" (47). The standard rhetoric of censorship debates thus has the effect of so inflating the significance of writing that "the risk run by the writer-as-hero is the risk of megalomania" (47). Coetzee aims to put literary writing in a rather more modest perspective, and in his insistence on thinking through ethical questions he does not presume to present ethics as a higher form of discourse than that of politics.

Coetzee locates his approach to censorship in the tradition of Erasmus: it is "an uncertain critique—not wavering, but not certain of itself either" (ix). The essay on Erasmus is therefore pivotal to the collection. He reads *Praise of Folly* as a rehearsal for the problem of trying to define a critical position which does not choose between belligerents in political disputes, whose escalating rivalry makes them more and more alike even as they insist upon their fundamental differences (83). Coetzee uses Erasmus to explore "the problematic of finding or creating a position-in-but-not-in the political dynamic, a position not already given, defined, limited and sanctioned by the game itself" (84). There is an irresistible temptation to read this as a version of Coetzee's own dilemma within the field of positions which have dominated South African literature and culture until recently, where oppositional writing has often remained trapped within the epistemological straitjacket of the apartheid discourse it seeks to supplant (see Parry; Pechey; Ndebele). The judgements cast

upon Coetzee's novels have shifted over time, with early charges of political agnosticism or evasion being more recently contested by arguments which locate the political value in the fiction's self-conscious textuality. What remains constant in commentaries on his fiction is the imperative to establish the *political* credentials of the fiction in one way or another. In turn, what is notable about Coetzee's own responses to this line of enquiry is his refusal to concede evaluative primacy to this political imperative. Coetzee's stance as a critic is closely related to the ethical turn in his more recent fiction identified by Atwell (*J. M. Coetzee* 119), in so far as his critical judgements are similarly guided by the affirmation of values of human dignity, compassion, and reciprocity, values that are all too easily marginalized by the urgency of the conventional discourse of politics.

The problem for Erasmus, and one might suppose for Coetzee too, is that of finding a position from which to speak which does not get assimilated by the destructive political dynamic of rivalry and denunciation. Coetzee is careful not to suppose that such a position can be created merely by declaring oneself outside of the field. Rather, any such position "becomes available only to the subject who declares himself outside the discourse commanded by, and commanding, the fray, that is, outside reason, that is, inside a certain kind of folly" (*Giving Offense* 94). It is the fool who, for Erasmus, occupies the sought after position from which to criticize both sides, "since his madness defines him as not fully a political being with political desires and ambitions" (94). The fool is the figure for a form of subjectivity which does not coincide fully with itself, a subjectivity which turns out to be inhabited by a particular form of madness: "a kind of *ek-stasis*, a being outside oneself, being beside oneself, a state in which truth is known (and spoken) from a position that does not know itself to be the position of truth" (95). Coetzee presents the notion of this subject-not-quite-knowing-itself as a way of negotiating the problem of critical positionality in a situation of apparently stark political choices. It is this sort of positionality that Coetzee ascribes to the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, forced under duress to write an Ode to Stalin (115). Those readings of the Stalin Ode which attribute to Mandelstam an ironic intention behind

his laudatory words place him in the position of the subject supposed to know, and thus back in the field of rivalry between two antagonists, whereas Coetzee prefers to read Mandelstam as acknowledging and trying to manage his own fallibility to usurpatory urges (112).

For Coetzee, Erasmus's text is "a complex reflection upon the notion of the political as a totalizing category and an outline of the possibility of a stance outside politics" (101), a reflection all the more forceful for its own inscription of the inevitable failure of this effort to escape consumption by the polemics characteristic of any political field. On this reading, Erasmus's text emerges as "extraordinarily resistant" to assimilation into the terms of political discourse, and yet also peculiarly inviting of repeated efforts in this direction. If speaking from the paradoxical position of the fool is the means of negotiating a space beyond rivalrous polemics, then nonetheless the success of this effort finally depends on setting itself up as rivalling the discourse of politics itself.[3] In his affirmation of the resistance of Erasmus's text to inflection towards the field of political polemics, we can read Coetzee's own reading as one which holds open the hope and promise of a reflection on ethics and human value which surpasses the calculations of any narrow definition of political value.

There is a persistent tendency to read writing produced in the context of censorship as mobilizing various tropes and rhetorical strategies as a means of slipping the "proper" meaning past the prying eyes of the censor. This sort of allegorical reading rests on an instrumental account of the use of rhetorical figures by a knowing subject who directs writing. The implication of this assumption is that, outside of the context of censorship, language and writing could directly and authentically express its own meaning without the detour through tropes and figures. This amounts, in Coetzee's view, to an attempt to strip language of its human qualities, to reduce the materiality of writing to some ideal meaning which inhabits it or to which it points. Both the censoring reader and the reader who seeks to interpret writing written under a regime of censorship allegorically share the epistemological assumption that writing gives onto a second

order of meaning. For Coetzee, the poetry of Zbigniew Herbert resists the authority of such interpretation by retaining a fidelity to "the first-order language, the language of the flesh" (161). Coetzee targets not just censorship taken in isolation, but an entire metaphysics of meaning and the models of reading as interpretation that it sustains. He understands interpretation as "the road absolutists take to the truth being poetry. The censor is a figure of the absolutist reader: he reads the poem in order to know what it really means, to know its truth" (161). The censor is not an the aberrant reader, but rather the "emblematic tyrannical second-order reader" (161) who reads writing in the certainty that it will reveal an ideal, abstract significance. Both censorship and the practices which oppose it are part of "a regime of overreading" (151), always searching for more meaning than at first appears evident on the surface of the text.

Coetzee suggests that fields governed by censorship tend to be ruled by the contagious power of paranoia, giving rise to a dynamic of escalating belligerence and rivalry which blurs what may at first appear to be the clearly demarcated positions of censor and writer. The censor hopes ultimately that "the law and its constraints will be so deeply engraved on the citizenry that individuals will police themselves" (10). Coetzee notes the frequency with which writers who have lived with censorship have testified to the unintended incorporation of the censor-figure. By this process, the paranoia characteristic of the censor is reproduced in the writing-subject. The operations of censorship are often felt to be a contamination of the writer by an unwanted figure, and this in turn encourages an impulse which works to expel or purge the unwanted figure entirely. Thus, the incorporative or expulsive pattern of judgement characteristic of censorship is shared by the discourses of criticism which ostensibly stands opposed to it (201-02).

In the work of Breyten Breytenbach, Coetzee identifies an alternative means of managing the impositions of censorship. Breytenbach provides a "split account of censorship" (232). In his critical commentaries and programmatic writings, the relationship between writer and poet is presented as one of unambiguous conflict. This presentation is characterized by a rhetoric

of blame and counter-blame as the writer demonizes and endeavours to expel the censor's presence from his own practice. On the other hand, in Breytenbach's poetry there is a more nuanced understanding of the relationship of the writer to the censor-figure: "the writer writes *against* and cannot write *without* a manifold of internalized resistances that are in essence no different from an internalized censor-twin, both cherished and hated" (232). The task that Coetzee finds Breytenbach struggling with in his poetry lies not in seeking to cast out the demonized figure of the censor, but is "that of living with his daimon and his demons" (232). Coetzee reinscribes the binary understanding of censorship and writing into a new economy of significance, whereby the censor is now read as a specific figure for a more general principle of the parasitical dependence of writing on norms, boundaries, and limits. He provides a similarly redemptive reading of Solzhenitsyn's polemics with the Soviet Union's censorship apparatus; in his outspoken and uncompromising opposition to censorship Solzhenitsyn often "betrays leanings as rivalrous as they are authoritarian" (132). Coetzee nonetheless finds the traces of a struggle to replace the dialectic of mimetic violence and polemical escalation with one of "healing" (120), an effort that, he argues, is betrayed by those commentaries which continue to champion Solzhenitsyn as the final "victor" in his battle with the Soviet state.

Nixon observes that, in the postwar period, anti-apartheid writers and Eastern European dissident writers "became bracketed in the West as emissaries of extremity whose presence was at once disquieting and reassuring" (5). The antagonistic staging of the relationship between censorship and writing that generates the paradoxical value of literary writing produced in a context of censorship was the condition of the shared status of writers such as Breytenbach and Solzhenitsyn as icons of "*écriture engagé*." In reading such writing against the grain of received understandings of censorship, Coetzee is therefore also effectively calling into question one of the discursive frames which constructed the international reputation of white South African writers in particular, including himself.

Coetzee's ambivalence towards censorship needs to be read not as political vacillation, but as a determination to think

through the inherent normativity of all language-use, the way in which writing plays on and around limits. While opposed to the operations of state censorship, he also considers it ill-advised to deny the productivity of norms in generating writing. The standard criticism of censorship tends to elide the actuality of writing, by suggesting that writing properly takes place in the absence of boundaries and limits. Coetzee's concern with pornography arises because in this arena not only have the limits to representation been pushed back, but also because it is here that the very "idea that representation must have limits" has been called into question (*Giving Offence* 30). This theme is developed in the discussion of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, a reworked version of Coetzee's first substantive essay on the theme of censorship.

In a characteristic move, Coetzee sets Lawrence's own reflections on the subject of the pornographic imagination against the force of this novel. Lawrence defended *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in the name of making visible sexual taboos, which he claimed contributed to the destruction of taboo in general and the return of sexuality to a healthy state. This argument rests on a misconception of the reiterative dynamic of taboo and transgression. It is mistaken to consider the transgression of a taboo as destroying its force; it is more likely to reproduce the force of the taboo, upon which the value of the gesture of transgression itself depends. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is about the transgression of sexualized social boundaries, and as such it cannot be understood as merely revealing and nullifying certain sexual taboos: "Its local tensions and dramatic force therefore depend on the continuing viability of the taboos. Taboo is a necessary condition of its existence. The sexual economy of the lovers, the dramatic economy of the tale, even the profit and loss of the published book, depend on the vitality of the taboos" (59). Contrary to Lawrence's own subsequent argument that the novel broke taboos and thus rendered them obsolete, Coetzee affirms that the force of the novel lies in its being "embroiled in complex ways with, and perhaps even caught in the toils of, taboo" (60). On this reading, Lawrence's writings on pornography amount to a retrospective defence of the novel which ultimately betrays the complex and ambiguous force of the fictional text.

Coetzee notes that the guiding trope of his analysis of Lawrence is that of "reading as sniffing out: one detects in the text, conceived of as a spectrum of odors, what the nose desires to discriminate. The sniffer-out-in-chief in society is, of course, the censor; and my own reading of Lawrence is very much a matter of sniffing out" (*Doubling* 297). Lawrence claimed that only the tainted mind could be touched by taint, and that it followed that an untainted mind (that is, his own) could undertake an exploration of sexuality and the body without succumbing to madness (*Giving Offense* 55). For Coetzee, Lawrence fails to recognize how his own reading and writing is "made possible by a sharp nose for taint":

> Indeed, is any reading at all possible to a person without a nose? Where would such a reader begin reading? . . . Is there not a direct connection between reading, curiosity, and a nose for dirt? In a society without interdictions, without the law—if such a society is imaginable—who would want to read or write? (56)

This suggests a notion of reading which does not stand at a distance from the text, but is in some way already contaminated with what it finds therein, a theme which recurs throughout these essays. Coetzee considers both reading and writing to bear a productively parasitical relation to boundaries, interdictions, and limits, and suggests that it is disingenuous to deny this complex entwinement. And he therefore constructs the writer's confrontation with censorship as an exemplary scene of confrontation with elements of the writer's own identity and vocation that he or she would prefer to disavow.

II

While *Giving Offense* illustrates the cosmopolitan range of Coetzee's intellectual concerns, it also addresses the South African context in a number of places. While acknowledging that apartheid served the material self-interests of certain social groups, Coeztee insists that apartheid needs to be understood as arising "also out of desire, and the denial of desire" (164). Considerations of the maddening effects of desire and its denial are not easily integrated into accounts which insist upon privileging the economic or political "rationality" that lay behind the

construction of apartheid. Geoffrey Cronjé's social theories of racial difference are articulated around a set of tropes of blood, taint, degeneration, and contagion that Coetzee has previously analysed in the novels of Gertrude Millin (*White Writing* 136-62). As in this earlier essay, Coetzee's analysis of Cronjé's work is not content with uncovering this set of tropes in order to re-enact an easy gesture of condemnation. He reads the discourse of racial mixing and disavowed desire in Cronjé's writing in order to propose an alternative way of analysing the historical genealogy of apartheid. A *metaphorical* reading would consider the thematics of desire and degeneration in apartheid discourse as simply standing in for some more fundamental, rational cause. Coetzee prefers to read Cronjé's rhetoric of contagion and taint *metonymically*: the logic of the rhetoric of racial mixture and degeneration is one of the *displacement* of desires. Displacement is consequently Coetzee's favoured lens through which to analyse the functioning of apartheid:

> The text of apartheid deserves to have restored to it the chapter that has been all too smoothly glossed over, censored out, removed, namely, a denial and displacement and reprojection of desire reenacted in further huge displaced projects of displacement: the redrawing of the maps of cities, the redivision of the countryside, the removal and resettling of populations. (178)

Coetzee's innovation lies not so much in this substantive understanding of apartheid as a project of displacement, but rather in the twofold insistence that this dynamic of displacement is at least partly motivated by the workings of desire, and secondly, that when understood as a project of multiple displacements, apartheid might be best addressed by an analytic of *reading*—a "sniffing out"—rather than one of *explanation*, with its promise of uncovering a final rationality (182-84). The implication is that the path of explanation works to place a distance between the object of moral approbation and the position of the critic. In contrast, throughout Coetzee's fictional and critical writing, it is the working through of uncomfortable complicities that is the guiding impulse. The disturbing implication of Coetzee's analyses in *Giving Offense* lies in his drawing of reason and its Other, in the shape of paranoia or desire, into the same space, revealing

both to be characterized by a logic of displacement without end (203).

Coetzee's account of Cronjé's writing is, then, an intervention into contemporary historiographical and political and social science work on the emergence of apartheid. He constructs apartheid as figurative in the strongest sense, as a set of practices working on the model of metonymic displacement of desires, and therefore being open to reading as a mode of analysis. This is not a mere "textualization" of historical processes, but rather a provocation which carries a particular political charge: in accord with an emerging emphasis on rethinking the certainties of established discourses of political resistance in the wake of the non-revolutionary transition to a post-apartheid society, Coetzee is endeavouring to think through the possibilities of acknowledging complicity, contingency, and plurality as the necessary condition for creating less rigid and less certain positions for a politics of reading (see Jolly).

The future of censorship is currently a live political issue in South Africa, and thus Coetzee's reflections on the system of state censorship in this collection need also to be read in this context. He provides a detailed analysis of the theory of reading which underlies the apparently more liberal regime of censorship that was instituted in South Africa from the early 1980s, under the stewardship of Professor J. C. Van Rooyen. Van Rooyen invoked the "likely-reader," rather than the "reasonable-reader," as the imaginary construct through which the censor judged particular works. In effect, this involved the censorship apparatus putting to work in its own interests the social fact of socially differentiated readerships within South Africa. The new policy allowed a greater degree of dissent in literature than was the case in the 1960s and 1970s, on the basis that works intended for a "sophisticated likely readership" should be allowed to be published in order to serve as a safety-valve for the dissent of intellectuals (195-96). For Gordimer (250-60), the new practices were a sinister attempt to divide the interests of black and white writers by explicitly recognizing that they wrote for different audiences and allowing the latter greater freedom than the former. The new directives promised to liberate "a literature for the few"

while bolstering the state's aim to control the kind of critical writing read by large numbers, which was limited not only by explicit censorship laws but also by a whole barrage of other legal and extra-legal practices which attempted to limit and silence the expression of mass cultural opposition (Driver 162; see also Abel). Van Rooyen's approach pandered to the structural elitism of the white liberal intellectual community, working on and reproducing the apartheid state's structural inequalities of access to education and literacy. The new rules effectively worked in favour of works which accorded with certain traditional aesthetic standards of complexity and difficulty, and against more direct, instrumental writing. The new rules justified the differential treatment by invoking apparently neutral criteria of literary value and by mobilizing the constructed figure of the "likely-reader."

Coetzee's novels were never banned in South Africa because, by his own admission, they "have been too indirect in their approach, too rarefied, to be considered a threat to the order" (*Doubling* 299). They evidently did not contravene the literary values that the censorship apparatus mobilized in its newly "liberal" phase in an attempt to mollify intellectual dissent. This might easily be taken to confirm the lack of political edge to Coetzee's fiction. Alternatively, one might suggest that the singularity of that fiction lies in the lengths to which it goes to resist subordination to the requirements imposed upon literary writing by any of the imaginary readerships whose claims were pressed into service by both the apparatuses of apartheid censorship as well as by the hegemonic imperatives of oppositional cultural politics.

Coetzee's analysis of Van Rooyen only touches on these issues of readership and audience in passing, focusing instead upon the logic of displacement and disavowal that the functioning of the new rules implied. Claiming the status of arbiter between different interests, the censor attempts to exempt himself from the dynamic of accusation and counter-accusation which is a feature of censorship disputes (*Giving Offense* 200). The censor is able to deny that he is himself a subject who takes offence by invoking the "likely-reader" test, and in turn this figure facilitates

the displacement of the censor's inherently political intervention onto an imaginary construct on whose behalf the censor claims to act (194). The taking of offence which so concerns the censor always appears to belong to someone else. The conceit and absurdity of this strategy of displacement is amply illustrated by the admission in 1995 by the head of the Directorate of Publications, Braam Coetzee, that "his office used routinely to lodge complaints against girlie magazines because complaints from the public arrived too late to act before all issues had been sold" ("Seven Days" 15). This also draws attention to an important recent shift of emphasis in discussions of censorship that has been underway within South Africa. In a more or less explicit bid for survival in the postapartheid era, in the early 1990s the apartheid censorship apparatus increasingly loosened its grip upon "political" publications and materials, and instead began to construct a new menace that would justify its continued existence—pornography (Driver 161-62). Pornography has become the site upon which issues of freedom of expression, censorship, and the public good are contested in the new South Africa. One of the peculiar ironies of this situation is that the task group charged to draft the new legislation was headed by Van Rooyen, who has commented that the new regulations would not be much more liberal than previously, and sums up the likely approach to sexually explicit material with the remark that "Nudity is OK but no erections—unless it's art" (Davis 14).[4] Just as the "likely-reader" test invoked high cultural values as a means of maintaining a divided public sphere, so it would appear that structural inequalities in cultural capital will continue to guide the operations of the new regulatory procedures.

Coetzee invokes the South African context at the end of his analysis of Catherine MacKinnon's feminist theorization of pornography, in order to question the relevance of her analysis to situations beyond the United States. In one of the few glimpses of humour in the book, he observes that until very recently censorship in South Africa had "not only rendered a pornography industry impossible but made pornographic materials worthy of the name hard to come by" (81). While not repeating the rhetoric of an immanent flood of pornographic material engulfing

postapartheid South Africa, nonetheless his final remarks on MacKinnon reveals a certain distaste for mass-media culture which crops up throughout the essays in *Giving Offense*: "What is disturbing about the films that disturb MacKinnon . . . is what is disturbing about modern commerce in general: that, as blank as it has ever been about the moral consequences of the goods it handles, it penetrates markets with unexampled speed and, where it fails to find an immediate appetite for goods, has no trouble in creating one" (82). Coetzee admits that his focus in most of these essays is on a narrow field of writing, that of serious literature and art, and his analysis of these fields is highly sophisticated. But the book is scattered with somewhat clichéd remarks about electronic mass media and the commodification of culture which make manifest his uneasiness about visual mediums of representation. While his critique of MacKinnon is forceful and well argued, his residual defence of the value of the "erotic" over mere pornography reserves for literary writing the right to represent sexuality in challenging ways, keeping its distance from popular cultural forms and mass-media representations. He remarks that to "a reader sensitive to their implications, the twists and turns of erotic debasement in the novels of Dostoevsky are far more disturbing than anything likely to be encountered in commercial pornography, no matter what the latter's excesses" (73). Here, Coetzee invokes entirely unproblematically the sort of imaginary cipher, the sensitive reader, whose functioning he unpicks in his account of Van Rooyen, in order to elevate literary writing above the field of mass culture, and so secure for it and its select readership the right to deal with the excessive and trangressive in the field of sexuality. For him, the problem with visual pornography is that any argument about the image being an unstable constellation of signs permitting no single interpretation is always in danger of being overwhelmed "by the viewer's conviction . . . that what he or she sees is the thing itself" (x). While this collapsing of reality and representation is called into question in the critique of MacKinnon (71), nonetheless Coetzee manages to posit two different sorts of audience in the figures of the sensitive reader and credulous viewer, and implicitly ascribes to them significantly different critical competencies.

He thus manages to distance himself form MacKinnon's position on pornography and representation only by invoking a model of modern mass culture which is barely informed by contemporary theories of popular culture and mass media. He reconciles his evident distaste for "ordinary" pornography with his opposition to censorship by arguing that visual pornography is just one symptom of more general commercial forces "concerned to define, whip up, commodify, package and sell desire itself" (33). Such remarks indicate the limitations of Coetzee's own critical imagination, which is at its most incisive and convincing when at work in the close and disruptive readings of literary texts, but which seems unwilling to grasp the complexities and contradictions of forms of representation other than the somewhat narrow range of material covered by most of these essays, nor to consider how the circulation of representations and their effects might be determined by sedimented social relations. Coetzee's unease when discussing visual representations might be read as a symptom of both his social marginality and his simultaneously relatively privileged position within the cultural field in South Africa. The reflexivity towards the problems of authority that arise from this contradictory positionality for which his novels are often critically acclaimed does not extend fully into his critical writing.

Coetzee's reluctance to consider issues of readership may be due to his own acumen at close textual analysis, but can also be read as a determined resistance to certain models of writing which acquired hegemonic status amongst definitions of cultural resistance to apartheid. Nonetheless, this absence finally points up the limits of his project of reflecting upon the conditions for ethics beyond the constraints of politics. By implicitly reserving for writing, and indeed only for writing of certain genres, the privilege of being the site upon which such reflection can take place, Coetzee manages to reproduce, however inadvertently, quite traditional notions of high culture as the realm for the cultivation of critical self-consciousness. Yet, as Wicomb argues, beyond the narrow sphere of literary writing which has acquired such representative status on an international stage, there exists in South Africa a vibrant oral and visual culture in which the

conventional equation of literacy with certain specified forms of reading and writing is routinely deconstructed in practice. Given the social and political marginality of literary writing of the sort Coetzee focuses upon, in South Africa and elsewhere, the failure to credit other cultural practices with the capacity to serve as sites for critical and ethical reflection marks the point in his own critical writing at which the force and value of an irreducibly *political* line of questioning—on the politics of reading, writing, representation, and literacy in socially divided societies—is displaced in the interests of maintaining the cultural value traditionally ascribed to "serious" literature and the competencies of its readerships.

NOTES

[1] J. M. Coetzee. *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996. Pp. 289. $24.95.

[2] Coetzee considers "automatism" to be "writing unaccompanied by any real thought, any self-reflection" (*Doubling* 64).

[3] It is noteworthy, in this respect, that Coetzee's own attempt in the late 1980s to define an autonomous space for fictional discourse in South Africa which would not be subordinated to the dictates of "politics" was presented in terms of a rivalry between the discourses of the novel and of history (Coetzee "The Novel Today"; Atwell "The Problem of History").

[4] Since this paper was written, the Bill was passed by Parliament in August 1996, and by Senate in October 1996, thereby becoming law. The new legislation outlaws child pornography, representations of bestiality, and representations of sex in a violent context, and includes controversial clauses on "hate speech." For further discussion of the issues raised during the drafting and passage of the new law, see Duncan.

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