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COETZEE'S STYLE IN *DISGRACE*

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Résumé : Cet article défend la thèse selon laquelle la lecture et l'analyse du style de grands auteurs est l'enfance de l'écriture et de l'être-au-monde. L'écriture et le style sont intimement liés dans le style du roman *Disgrace* de Coetzee. Grâce au recours d'un style impersonnel qui, selon Deleuze, « pousse le langage à sa limite », l'auteur beckettien et kafkaïen opère une adaptation stylistique (involontaire) du concept de « Neutre » chez Barthes. Le *style neutre* de Coetzee s'attaque à de nombreuses questions qui intéressent tout autant les spécialistes (et les amateurs) de littérature, du langage et du style, que ceux qui s'interrogent sur les rapports entre écriture, conceptualisation et être-au-monde dans un monde terrifiant, sans cesse en cours de remaniement.

Mots-clés : affect, Barthes (Roland), Beckett (Samuel), bégaiement, Coetzee (John Maxwell), Deleuze (Gilles), *Disgrace*, répétition grammaticale, répétition lexicale, rythme, minoration de l'anglais, nature, neutralité lexicale, voix passive, prosodie, qualification, répétition, reformulation, rythme, style, style beckettien, style deleuzien, style Neutre, style plat, tempérament.

*Sous chaque mot chacun de nous met son sens ou
du moins son image qui est souvent un contresens.
Mais dans les beaux livres, tous les contresens
qu'on fait sont beaux.*

(Marcel Proust, Contre Sainte-Beuve, 361)

Introduction

Nobel-prize winner John Maxwell Coetzee is well known for his strong liking of Beckett, so much so that he is referred to as being a Beckettian author, together with Scot James Kelman and Spaniard Enrique Vila-Matas. Just because most of his main characters are reminiscent of the protagonist of *The*

Unnameable (L'Innommable) does not necessarily make him a Beckettian author. Is he so because of his linguistic or his thematic style? Or because of his specific use of language—brief, concise, laconic, tight—yet accurate and sharp—compact and condensed—yet repetitive? Or is it due to the existential themes he deals with—the pain of being, the pain of *unbelonging*, the pain of incommunicability?

Another issue must be addressed. Does being a Beckettian author mean that the written style should necessarily be Beckettian from a linguistic and stylistic point of view? Were it to be the case, is style to be defined as a literary and philosophical atmosphere, or as a language-driven criterion?

The answer is that it should be defined as both, of course. I contend that in strongly *committed*¹ texts, style from its linguistic, formal viewpoint, cannot be dissociated from content.

In the preface to his partly biographical, partly critical work *Doubling the Point*, Editor David Attwell (1992) reveals that Coetzee's doctoral dissertation was a stylostatistic study of Beckett's work *Lessness (Sans)* in French). His linguistic and stylistic critical approach was language-driven and computer-assisted. It shows that the former Professor of Literature in the University of Cape Town, apart from being the internationally renowned writer of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Foe*, *Disgrace*, *Elisabeth Costello*, etc. is also a linguist specialised in style and mostly in Beckett's style. He is also a prolific and unrelenting critic. His praise of classical literature is illustrated in the essay "What is a classic? A Lecture" (Coetzee, 2001, 2002, 1-19)—which I will use to study his style.

Studying the style of an author in a novel could be considered as a betrayal of the craft and skill of the author, of his craftsmanship. But this is precisely what Coetzee did with Beckett and Beckett's style. In *Doubling the Point*, he acknowledges that his research did not lead him—or anyone—very far, but studying closely and so to say scientifically the style of an admired author was a determining factor in helping him to become the author he is. Trying to grasp the secrets of a style is learning the tricks of the trade for anyone who writes through a practical experience, by observing, classifying, looking for some hidden or quasi magical patterns. It is the childhood of writing in which the writer behaves like a child, eager to understand the world and copy the model of his elders, masters and "role-models" in order to grow up and to be able to fend for himself.

¹ The concept of a *committed* text is part of the French culture. It does not have an equivalent in English. The term *committed* here is to be understood with the connotation of *engagé* in the French expression *littérature engagée*.

This is precisely what Coetzee says when he compares music to literature. In his lecture “What is a classic?”, he compares Bach to Eliot:

1. This is the point where parallels between literature and music, the literary classics and the musical classics, begin to break down, and where the institutions and practice of music emerge as perhaps healthier than the institutions and practice of literature. For the musical profession has ways of keeping what it values alive that are quantitatively different from the ways in which the institutions of literature keep submerged but valued writers.

Because becoming a musician, whether executant or creative, not only in Western tradition but in other major traditions of the world, entails long training and apprenticeship, because the nature of the training entails repeated performance for the ears of others and minute listening and practical criticism, together with memorization, because a range of kinds of performance has become institutionalised, from playing for one's teacher to playing for one's class to varieties of public performance – for all these reasons, it is possible to keep music alive and indeed vital within professional circles while it is not part of public awareness, even among educated people. (*Stranger Shores*, “What is a Classic? – A Lecture 17)

Thanks to this parallel, one can understand how the years spent working on Beckett's style, but also on linguistics, was true stylistic training for the author-to-be. This can be found in the interview and the essays published in the chapter entitled “Syntax” (*Doubling the Point*, Chap; Syntax, 139-194): “The Rhetoric of the passive in English” (*ibid.*, 1980, 147-169), “The Agentless Sentence as Rhetorical Device” (*ibid.* 1980, 170-180) and “Isaac Newton and the Ideal of a Transparent Scientific Language” (*ibid.*, 1980, 181-194). In these studies of other authors and of impersonal rhetorical devices such as the use of the passive, Coetzee was developing his thought on language and style and it led him to link it with the intentions of the author by practising, criticising, studying and writing. This is where his simile between apprenticeship in music and literature came into being.

His position in the cultural and literary field is that of a *polygraph*, a term used by Barthes and developed by Benoît Denis—who notes that the figure of the *polygraph* was personified by Sartre in France (Denis, 2000, 259-299). Coetzee's multiple interests and skills encompass computing, linguistics, stylistics, music, literary criticism and writing. Thanks to his now worldwide fame, he has also become an original, reluctant—but powerful and forceful— orator. Thanks to his versatility, he has become a major voice in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

In this study, I will show that a neutral stuttering style can be more forceful than a florid, flamboyant Rushdie-like style.

Concepts

The Neutral after Barthes

I contend that his style verges on *the Neutral*, a concept developed by Roland Barthes in *The Neutral* (*Le Neutre*, 2002). In that sense, his style is not only Beckettian, but it is Barthesian too in that it conforms to what Barthes has developed. Yet, the categorization shouldn't end here. His style being "neutral" from a Barthesian viewpoint—as I will show—is also Deleuzian in that, first it stutters and makes language stutter, and second, it verges on a *neutral style*. This makes him also a Kafkaian writer.

With an author of his calibre, the depiction/presentation of singular characters and plots sited in singular historical, social, political and cultural contexts opens up the way to the universal. I will show that a *neutral style*, in the case of his novel *Disgrace*, makes it possible to erase the marks of the presence of the author to better control and, of course, convey his universal and existential intentions.

In singular non-neutral plots in which there is tremendous violence and strong affect—Deleuze talks about literature as *capture d'affect*—, writing less amounts to telling more. By the absence of visible style effects, Coetzee's writing not only tells more, but it also tells raw reality through his use of fiction. Fiction serves the presentation of the Real—and not its representation. The Neutral is raw. It presents raw reality and is more telling than any essay or any audio-visual documentary, precisely because it is presented under the guise of fiction. The Neutral in style documents reality in the way the Belgian TV programme *Strip-Tease* has revolutionised the often too wordy and demonstrative genre of the documentary by avoiding any off commentary. This is what Coetzee's fiction does in *Disgrace*. And, in this instance, academic papers are part and parcel of writing. Note that Coetzee himself has written a great number of papers and literary criticisms on the question of style, from a linguistic viewpoint.

The Neutral in style refuses analysis and commentary. It presents bare facts – no asides, no auctorial "stage directions" or *didascalies* disturb the presentation of raw fictional facts and raw "not-so-fictional" reactions to the Real. Being non-garrulous, it is not directive. It compels the reader to achieve his own *Bildung* together with the protagonist David Lurie, an aging white *Picaro* lost in Post-Apartheid South Africa.

A Deleuzian style: the minorization of English pushed to its limits

Coetzee can also be considered as a Kafkaian author. His novels tell the stories of anti-heroes struggling with life. Their existential problems prevent

them from feeling that they belong. Such is the case of David Lurie/Gregor Samsa. The theme is Kafkaian, but the comparison runs deeper still. The style also bears a strong resemblance to Kafka's use of language. This was studied by Deleuze & Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986) or *Kafka : pour une littérature mineure* (1975). In the same way as Kafka "minorized" German—which was not his mother tongue—, Coetzee, of Dutch descent and whose mother's "mother tongue" was German, "minorizes" English. His specific use of English makes language "stutter". He uses English as if he wrote in a foreign language. Writing in a language which is not theirs is the peculiarity of most postcolonial authors. In the Deleuzian concept, it is not necessary to be a non-native speaker to make language stutter and "write like a foreigner in one's own language". The quotation is taken from Proust's conclusion of his *Contre Sainte-Beuve*:

2. Les beaux livres sont écrits dans une sorte de langue étrangère.

Starting from this idea, Deleuze, together with Guattari, developed this concept of language and style which has been analyzed extensively by Jean-Jacques Lecercle in *Deleuze and Language*. For Deleuze, the aim of the writer is to "push language to its limits":

3. It would seem, then, that in Deleuze, 'writing' is the site of a problem ('the problem of writing' is the object that Deleuze, in his preface to *Critique et Clinique*, undertakes to tackle in that collection of essays), and style is the concept that names the problem. In *L'Abécédaire*, in the 'E comme Enfance' section, the problem is indeed formulated as one of becoming: to write is to become, but not to become a writer (an obvious allusion to Proust); it consists in pushing language to its limits, not in recovering the trivial memories of one's childhood. Again, the very concept of style is a protest against theories of the individuality, and originality, of the author. (Lecercle, *Deleuze and Language*, chap. 6 "Another Philosophy of Language: Style and Stuttering", 2. Style, 221)

In the case of Coetzee, the plot of singular individuals with their own "temperaments" and reactions to the hardships of the Real leads the reader to build his own *Weltanschauung* from a universal point of view. This is due to the way Coetzee pushes English to its limits, using all the devices at hand to come to what Deleuze calls "the fourth person", meaning not the I, the YOU, or the HE or THEY, but the impersonal. Further on, Lecercle notes:

4. Deleuze insists on the impersonality of style, a tenet he shares with Foucault, the exact opposite of the commonsense conception of style. (*ibid.*, 223)

No wonder Coetzee can render this impersonality so well. He has worked extensively on the passive voice, one of the most powerful ways to achieve impersonality and thus a *neutral style*, through what Coetzee calls "the short passive", i.e. the agentless passive. The characteristic of Coetzee's Style in

Disgrace is not the passive in itself. Various other rhetorical and linguistic means are used to get to this kind of impersonality. This is how singular destinies get a universal status.

Some Characteristics of Coetzee's style in *disgrace*

Lexical neutrality

The most striking thing about this novel is the overall lexical simplicity used to serve, not a modernist representation of what *could* be real, but a postmodern presentation of a story triggering an inevitable suspension of disbelief. Here, fiction *is* the real. The neutrality of the words used serves a neutral style, not a neutral text or story.

The apparent lexical neutrality is not to be taken as a form of flatness. The Neutral is not what could be called "the flat". The Neutral requires the use of chiselled stylistic devices which are not meant to be discovered, but rather, if I may say so, must appear as non-existent, that is, disappear from "the visible". The less apparent the stylistic efforts are, the more the stylistic effects affect the reader.

From the very beginning, an interpolated clause suggests the novel is not going to be a mere story, but an intellectual, conceptual work encompassing a universal view of humanity through the depiction of a few singular characters. It is stated clearly with a very simple expression taken from everyday vocabulary. The clause *to his mind* finishes the first line of the incipit but not the sentence. Here is the clause in its context:

5. For a man of his age, fifty-two, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well. (*Dis*, chap. 1, 1, incipit)

I suspect the succession of four commas in the first two-line sentence would probably not be advised in a course of creative writing. And what a shame! If the sentence did not have these apparent truncations due to the separation achieved by the commas, the style would be flat. Let us try to remove the four commas and see what happens:

5a. For a man of his age, he has solved the problem of sex rather well.

In this first transformation, the two interpolated clauses have disappeared. Let us now keep one of them which can hardly be dispensed with:

5b. For a man of his age, fifty-two, he has solved the problem of sex rather well.

This transformation takes us from *the neutral* to *the flat*. Far from the flourish of many an opening sentence, the inaugural neutral sentence written by

Coetzee exhibits an unseen transparency. The effect of this transparency is paradoxical. Meant to be unperceived, it is present, however, and bears a meaning. It is a truth universally unacknowledged that, as I have contended elsewhere, “*Silence is language too*”² and that *the neutral* in style, together with what Coetzee calls “the short passive” (i.e. the agentless passive), says more, that is, much more than is usually thought. It allows the unknown presence of the author-utterer (or enunciator) under the guise of a linguistic presence-absence. Being linguistically unmarked, in the same way as agentless passives—i.e. unconstrained by language, but resulting from an enunciative mental operation—*the neutral* goes unheeded and can operate in the obscurity provided by transparency.

This hidden meaning conveyed by the neutral is intentional. As in a photographic negative, it reveals the presence of the author and, thence, his intention. Indeed, the question of auctorial intention is important for Coetzee who, in *Doubling the Point*, studied how the use of some intriguing passives by authors such as De Foe, Swift and Beckett brings to light the deep thought of the author and his intentions. The novel is not about the protagonist's sexual habits with a prostitute, not about his (half-consented, half accepted) “rape” of a student, but about the workings of his mind. The clue *to his mind* is brought out, embedded between the two commas cutting the main clause into two parts. It leaves the somewhat shocking revelation in a rhematic position, at the end of the sentence—where the new piece of information is all the more enhanced as it has undergone a delaying process.

What is more, the syntactic device with its interpolated clauses enables the sentence to begin the novel with a rhythm recalling metrical feet. The question of rhythm is relevant, as David Lurie toys with the idea of writing an opera. To show the rhythm of the sentence, strong syllables are enhanced in bold:

5c. For a **‘man** of his **‘age**, **‘fifty-‘two**, he **‘has**, to his **‘mind**, **‘solved** the **‘problem** of **‘sex** **‘rather** **‘well**.

The whole sentence is composed of:

- a) two anapaests: *For a man / of his age*,
- b) one trochee: *fifty-two*,
- c) one iamb (which may be considered as a trochee or a spondee³): *he has*,

² The concept “Silence is language too” is adapted from the work of plastician Letizia VOLPI, 1990 “Silence is Music too #2” (RINZLER, 2007).

³ The choice between iamb, trochee or spondee for c), an incomplete clause, depends on the interpretation of the text by the reader and hence on her representation of the appropriate intonation. For a silent reader has a mental representation of the appropriate intonation of what is read with the eyes only. The neutral first reading of an incipit should be considered. Rather than stressing the pronoun *he*—which would be an

- d) one anapaest: *to his mind*,
- e) two trochees followed by two iambs: *solved the problem of sex rather well*.

The versified first sentence, with its changes in metrical feet and its violations of simple syntax, imposes a singular hypnotic rhythm on the whole novel, somewhat reminiscent of the unbalanced step of the gnome with his crooked legs in *Pictures at the exhibition* by Modest Mussorgsky. Coetzee's style reveals the balance of the unbalanced, the rhythm of the Badiouian "Event" in an ever growing horror.

Lexical repetition

Coetzee practices lexical repetition *ad libitum* and in that respect he can be seen as the champion of this stylistic and characterizing device. It starts from the very first page, first with the adverb *technically*:

- 6. Technically he is old enough to be her father; but then, technically, one can be father at twelve (*Dis*, chap. 1, 1)

The adverb, with its denotation, hints at the character being described by an omniscient narrator. Technique is the thing, not emotions, as the reader discovers gradually each new situation after each new situation.

Yet, it does not prevent Coetzee/Lurie from thinking about pleasure. But then again, it is the technical point of view which is chosen, not the sentimental one. Pleasure is not love, and this is precisely the core of the novel and of Lurie's problems with his environment wherever he goes.

- 7. Because he takes pleasure in her, because his pleasure is unending, an affection has grown up in him for her. To some degree, he believes, this affection is reciprocated. Affection may not be love, but it is at least its cousin. (*Dis*, chap. 1, 1)

Fate or *fatum* seems to be the key word in this pessimistic novel as is revealed by the noun *temperament*, repeated seven times in four consecutive paragraphs:

- 8. That is his temperament. His temperament is not going to change, he is too old for that. His temperament is fixed, set. The skull, followed by the temperament: the two hardest parts of the body.

Follow your temperament. It is not a philosophy, he would not dignify it with that name. It is a rule, like the Rule of St Benedict.

emphatic reinterpretation– or the two words *he has*, regarding the following co-text on the right–which is a possibility– it feels normal for the reader to discover the incipit of the text by following the basic rules of intonation. According to these rules, an auxiliary at the end of a clause, sentence, or before an interpolated clause cannot be reduced and is thus stressed.

He is in good health, his mind is clear. By profession he is, or has been, a scholar, and scholarship still engages, intermittently, the core of him. He lives within his income, within his temperament, within his emotional means. Is he happy? By most measurements, yes, he believes he is. However, he has not forgotten the last chorus of *Oedipus*: call no man happy until he is dead.

In the field of sex his temperament, though intense, has never been passionate. (*Dis*, chap. 1, 2)

Only now does the attentive reader perceive the importance of this concept in Lurie's mind. Yet, the term has already been used in the first page:

9. In bed Soraya is not effusive. Her temperament is in fact rather quiet, quiet and docile.

Temperament as a key word prevents Lurie from thinking about behaviour—social behaviour, professional behaviour, familial and political behaviour, but also language behaviour, seem to be completely foreign to him. Everything is shown as if nothing could be changed, as if temperaments ruled everything. This will be emphasized in the second part of the novel, after the catastrophe in this post-Apartheid context opposing representatives of the former Masters, the Whites, and former oppressed black people.

Grammatical repetition

The repetition of the same pattern enables the author to show the reciprocity envisaged by David Lurie between Soraya and Lurie himself *in Lurie's mind*, of course:

10. Given their unpromising beginnings, they have been lucky, the two of them: he to have found her, she to have found him. (*Dis*, chap. 1, 2)

The pattern evokes a chiasmus. It makes it possible to show what's on Lurie's mind, which is quite distinct from the real. Whereas Coetzee could have written:

10a. Given their unpromising beginnings, they have both been lucky to have found each other. (manipulation)

The manipulation shows a true reciprocity, when the chiasmus reveals an intention of the author through the use of language. The manipulation would have been simpler and shorter, but it would not have conveyed the auctorial irony hidden in the choice of that syntactic structure. The utterance, starting with Lurie's expression of his luck posed as the first element of comparison shows the unfolding of Lurie's thoughts. He thinks of himself first and then, thanks to a psychological projection, imagines that what he feels is, term to term, what Soraya should necessarily feel. The syntactic structure iconicises

Lurie's *Weltanschauung*. Everything is filtered through his own apprehension of the world. Apprehension here is to be taken in both senses of the term in English as well as in French: *appréhender* meaning both *understanding*, or *dealing with*, and *fearing*. This recalls the initial interpolated clause “*to his mind*”.

Qualifying through adjectival reformulation

The depiction of the *temperaments* of the characters follows a repetitive pattern which is the pattern of reformulation. The right qualification can be achieved through the repetition of adjectives which are complemented with another qualifier:

11 (9) Her temperament is in fact rather quiet, quiet and docile. (*Dis*, chap. 1, 1)

The first qualification here comes from the adjective *quiet* to which an addendum is appended. When used for the second time, the first qualifier is linked (by *and*) with another one *docile* meant to specify the idea to the point of verbal perfection. This is achieved with the use of punctuation, with a comma, then with the use of *and* coordinating both adjectives to create a whole new qualification. The whole qualification is composed of the whole qualifying group composed of *quiet*, *quiet and docile*. Grammatically speaking, the qualification is proposed through the recourse to the enunciative operator BE which is a marker of identification. The subject of the sentence *her temperament* (that is, Soraya's temperament) is identified with the complex adjectival group built around repetition and complementation. The addendum with *docile* is enhanced by the repetition of the very first adjective. Had the sentence been syntactically simpler:

11a. Her temperament is in fact rather quiet and docile.
the idea conveyed would have been much less striking.

With the repetitive pattern of adjectival repetition and addition, Coetzee makes language stutter, through an affect of language itself – as Deleuze has shown in “*Bégaya-t-il...*” (Deleuze, 1993, 135-143). The stuttering does not come from repetition itself, as would happen with a true stutterer (such as King George played by Colin Firth in *The King's Speech*). It comes from a language use which, despite being apparently simple and neutral, actually reveals a grammatical complexity leaving an impression of simplicity. This is in accordance with how Barthes conceptualized “the Neutral”. The Neutral is not the simple. It is an apparent simplicity operated through a stylistic working of language. From this stylistic research of *the neutral* a conceptual complexity emerges through small strokes leading to the creation of verbal portraits of “temperaments”.

The passive

I will not have time to deal with the special use of the passive here. It would require an entire study. But one thing is very striking. When after the catastrophe, Lurie becomes at last able to talk and communicate with his daughter, he talks of rape, not in the passive voice, but in the active. This is a very astonishing stylistic device. Indeed, usually, like a few other verbs in which a “patient” undergoes a detrimental act on behalf of an indeterminate group, the verb “rape” is used in the passive, due to what I termed long ago “*the maxim of human compassion*” in my doctoral thesis (Rinzler, 2000, 579-581). The use of the active:

12. They do rape.

is a strong linguistic signal that something is definitely changing. The plot changes dramatically. Formerly unable to vent his thoughts and emotions, to talk with the others and to have a rather normal father-daughter relationship with his lesbian daughter, Lurie not only begins to talk. But when he does, he truly “pushes language to its limits” in a *neutral style* according to Deleuze’s theory of style revealed by Lecerclé (2002).

CONCLUSION

I started with a few questions and some have still not completely been answered because they probably cannot.

My feeling is that style cannot be separated from content. I have already made this contention elsewhere in relation to the genre of the manifesto—and that of *committed literature* or *littérature engagée* which acts as a new form of manifesto (Rinzler, 2010).

Style is both the maid and the master of content. In the case of *Disgrace*, a *neutral style* enables the author to depict singular fictional behaviours in a singular situation with, as a result, the grasping of the universal in the Real. The choice of a *neutral style* enhances the post-modernist presentation of the world in all its rawness. It demolishes modernity, not only for the benefit of former post-colonial areas, but for the benefit of humanity.

This is why stylistic studies must be strongly defended in these hard times, particularly those experienced by the humanities. Abandoning our *untrivial* pursuits is not on our agenda. Defending style in literature is defending the universality of mankind. It is our best tool against barbarism⁴. We will not be *waiting for the barbarians*.

⁴ The “barbarism” may be understood as well from its linguistic or its cultural and historical meaning.

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