

ISSN 2514-0612

Journal homepage: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE>

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Author(s): Marc Farrant

Email: m.farrant@gold.ac.uk

Source: *Brief Encounters* Vol.1, No. 1 (Feb 2017)

URL: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE/article/view/29/>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24134/be.v1i1.29>

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**‘Very Much the Tortoise’:
A Review of *The Slow Philosophy of J. M. Coetzee***

Marc Farrant

Jan Wilm, *The Slow Philosophy of J. M. Coetzee* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 264 pp., £80.00, ISBN: 9781474256452.

‘Harry Ransom Center (hereafter “HRC”), container 1, folder 1, p. 1.’¹ Jan Wilm’s first citation from J. M. Coetzee’s archive indicates the attention, focus and patience evinced by *The Slow Philosophy of J. M. Coetzee*. Although Wilm is not the first to situate Coetzee’s works at the interstice between philosophy and literature, his phenomenological account of their effects is highly compelling. Developing a notion of slowness to articulate the tethering of topical and formal elements, Wilm illustrates how both the compositional practices that constitute the works, and our reading of them, are inflected by a ‘dynamic stillness’ (p. 3).

The term recalls Coetzee’s indebtedness to the subject of his own doctoral thesis, the twentieth-century playwright and writer Samuel Beckett. As with Beckett’s characters, stuck between stasis and kinesis — strapped in a rocking chair, for instance — the people that populate Coetzee’s works are ineluctably embedded in their worlds, no matter how disruptively or agitatedly. Wilm’s portrayal of Coetzee’s reflexive and non-realist fiction explicitly aligns the writer with a strand of anti-instrumental thinking, whose exemplary figure was identified as Beckett himself by the philosopher Theodor Adorno. For Wilm, Coetzee’s dynamic stillness effects a ‘wavering of familiarising and defamiliarising’ that produces a slowness in our reading, simultaneously disrupting and fostering the channels of recognition, making us feel complicit in the action and culpable in the horror (p. 24). Wilm’s analysis of

¹ Jan Wilm, *The Slow Philosophy of J.M. Coetzee* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 2. All further references to this text will be supplied in parentheses.

how Coetzee's narrative techniques accelerate and decelerate our reading is masterfully derived from a close analysis of the manuscript materials, recently deposited at the 'HRC' in Texas. Wilm uncovers the way in which Coetzee's working methods reveal, as a character in the memoir *Summertime* indicates, a writer that is 'very cautious, very much the tortoise'.²

This tarrying motion of 'dynamic stillness', a movement of back and forth, is traced consistently across Coetzee's oeuvre, uniting Wilm's thematic, compositional and readerly descriptions of the texts. A central figure through which Wilm marshals these effects is the philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger is drawn upon to conceptualise the philosophical aspects of Coetzee's works through a taxonomy of non-propositional terms, emphasising a meditative or ruminative thinking over a calculative or instrumental reasoning. The deployment of a Heideggerean rubric is not new in Coetzee studies, yet Wilm's treatment of Heidegger is extensive and goes beyond previous critics. Nevertheless, Wilm refuses to characterise Coetzee's works as explicitly Heideggerean. The works exhibit a writing that is '*open to the mystery*' of life, Wilm argues, rather than prescriptive of any philosopheme about or of life (p. 10). Coetzee's taut and crystalline prose is exemplary, therefore, of a palimpsest of allusive and elusive meanings. It engenders a slow approach to the often imperilled and inherently questioning nature of his characters, whose introspective selves nevertheless eschew a solipsistic authenticity in their engagement with an exterior, material and violent world.

One of the real strengths of the work is the treatment of Coetzee's latest novel, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), which by necessity was omitted from earlier studies.³ Wilm's discussion of the book realigns the trajectory of Coetzee's writing after the publication of *Disgrace* (1999), and offers a detailed and convincing analysis of how the 2013 novel reflects a host of concerns and techniques that have long characterised Coetzee's highly philosophical corpus.⁴

² J. M. Coetzee, *Scenes from Provincial Life* (London: Penguin, 2011), p. 464.

³ J. M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2013).

⁴ J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1999).

By elaborating an approach that is at once both intriguingly conventional (slow reading) and excitingly innovative (slow philosophising), Wilm's work constitutes a nuanced addition to the burgeoning field of Coetzee Studies, making the monograph exemplary of the work of that which Coetzee terms the 'truly creative critic'.⁵

⁵ J. M. Coetzee, 'Interview', in *Doubling the Point, Essays and Interviews*, ed. by David Attwell (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University press, 1992), pp. 243-250 (p. 246).