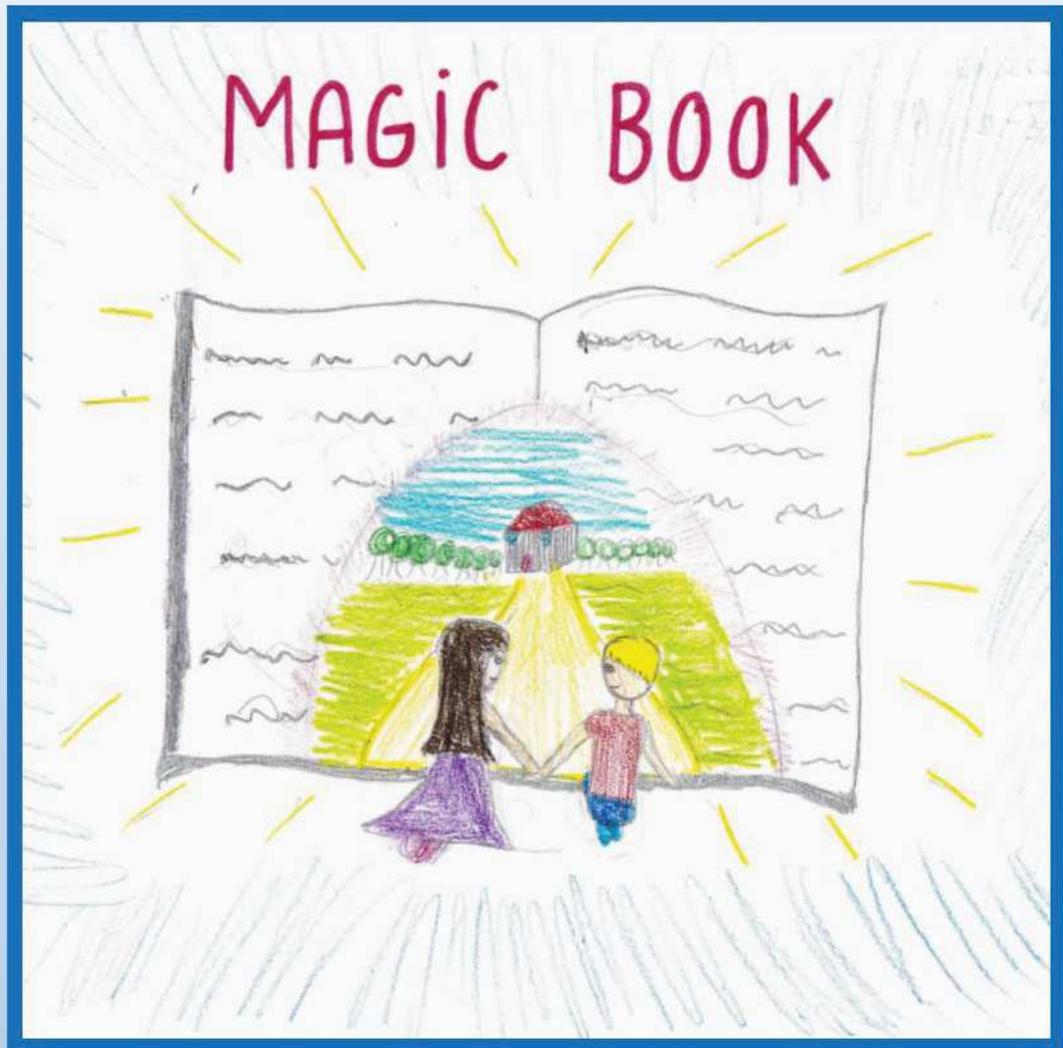


# The ESSE Messenger



Vol. 25-1 Summer 2016  
ISSN 2518-3567

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# The ESSE Messenger

A Publication of ESSE  
(The European Society for  
the Study of English)





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Mike Marais. *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee*. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2009.  
249 pages. ISBN 978-90-420-2713-8.

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The common opinion that J.M Coetzee is one of the greatest living writers in the English language is partly grounded in the radical - and often disturbing - quality of his problematization of the ideas of responsibility, of alterity, of freedom, of the role of literature, and, ultimately, in his championing of the essential ambivalence of literature. Mike Marais' *Secretary of the Invisible* deals with a specific aspect of this author's abiding concern, "an alterity that is figured as being absolute in its irreducibility" (xiii). This dense, interesting and competent study explores the idea of hospitality as a key concept which intersects some of the most recurrent and important concerns of Coetzee's oeuvre: the irreducibility of the other and the writer's allegiance to it, the public role of the writer, the relationship between the literary text and history, the literary text and love, the writer and his text as a home for the other.

From the opening pages of the book Marais puts forward a premise which addresses the most authoritative figure of Coetzee's criticism, Derek Attridge, whose reading of the concept of the other refuses transcendence in favour of a situated, constituted ontology. While Attridge stresses "that otherness is always perspectival and that it is always produced. In other words, there is no transcendent other" (*Ethics of Reading* 99), Marais treats this concept in Coetzee's writing as metaphorised by the invisible, transcendent, impossible to accommodate. The book is structured in seven chapters, from the early fiction of *In the Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* to the most recent *Slow Man*, with a short introduction and a conclusion. Coetzee's books are discussed without introduction and this makes it difficult for the non-seasoned reader to master the text, so that its reading target is decidedly a postgraduate and a specialist one. On the whole, Marais' book succeeds in contributing a new perspective – or, more precisely, in enriching a conceptual area - in the ever-expanding array of critical utterances on Coetzee, mainly in its subtle, sophisticated investigation of a crucial thematic network that testifies to the deep – and radically problematic - humanism underscoring Coetzee's work, and its main strength lies in the subtlety and sophistication of most of its textual analysis. From the opening pages, in fact, Marais claims the definition of close reading for his approach, while making a point of specifying that his is a formalism imbued "with a sense of the historicity of form and its implications in history" (xv).

Reading as a strategy of engaging with the other is a foremost and recurring theme in Marais' analysis: prominent among other contexts is the investigation of the relation with this encompassing category that is created in literary writing, involving both writer and reader. When the writer fails to speak the unspeakable and represent the invisible, it is the reader's turn to take on this burden. From the early fiction up to *Summertime*, Coetzee writes books whose intentional lack of closure demand to be completed, or at least coped with, by the reader himself,

with a compelling, disquieting force that cannot be equated to modernist and postmodernist antecedents.

As to the most important theoretical frameworks of the book, Marais uses Derrida and Levinas' theories on hospitality to elucidate Coetzee's conception and literary unravelling of this theme. It is especially Derrida's unconditional hospitality, an unlimited form of hospitality as the only possible sense of the term, that constitutes the real touchstone of the critical readings. The author examines Coetzee's preoccupation with this ethic of writing by tracing the evolution of the related metaphors of inspiration, mastery and following: "even as they invite it, Coetzee's novels resist being followed" (xv), reminds Marais, arguing that for Coetzee the writer who is in history must follow the invisible rather than the visible. However, the most prominent metaphor in Coetzee's writing is probably that of the lost child: lost, abandoned, deformed or unborn, the child is always the catalyst of an existential quest for truth and of ethical anxieties. The "child image", Marais argues with regard to *Waiting for the Barbarians*, "signifies what has been reduced by the forms of history. History is the loss of the child." (51).

In *Foe*, there is an analogy between Barton's lost child and the true story she does not know but wants to find out and tell. Marais argues that since her quest is without term, her responsibility is infinite too. Barton's experience of hospitality is complex and multi-dimensional; from the hosting of Crusoe's alterity to the bearing of the island's alterity, through the writing of its story. Marais refers to Levinas to elucidate Barton's inspiration by the otherness of the island. *Foe* displays, in Marais' analysis, what is perhaps one of the most radical and disturbing, affecting traits of Coetzee's fiction, the attempt at exposing the reader to the work's uninvited visitors, thus passing him/her the burden of bringing to life the unknown.

In the central chapter of the book, devoted to *Age of Iron*, Marais focuses on Coetzee's fictional treatment of the anti-Apartheid period referring to Adorno's conception of philosophy in *Minima Moralia* as necessarily bound to view life from a messianic perspective, as "part of the damaged life that must be revealed from the redemptive standpoint (104). Mrs Curren's treatment of Vercueil, as a visitor who arrives uninvited, is read in the terms of the ethics of hospitality, (though not of the unconditional type championed by Derrida) in a context of self-entrapment symbolized by the house. On the contrary, the novel is considered on the basis of a "very close analogy between self and text" (105) as testifying to how South African literature can involuntarily perpetuate the power relations and the distortions of Apartheid state by reproducing them. This literature thus "actively participates in its own deformation" (108), even while the South Africa that comes across lacks precisely "an ethics of generous hospitality" (102). In Marais' view, however, *Age of Iron* manages to distance itself by that very damaged life from which it originates and remains situated precisely through an aesthetic ability to relate to alterity.

Marais' evaluation of *Slow Man* as interrupting the story dictated by the invisible which features in the preceding novels and thereby turning it into a different story, mostly in the terms of a self-parody of the writer's responsibility, proves worthy of consideration in the lights of Coetzee's latest fiction, *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) and *Summertime* (2009). This output has been variously received, but generally praised in its challenging complexity especially from the

point of view of narrative and rhetorical sophistication, which nonetheless Marais unexpectedly labels “perfunctory” (193), briefly touching upon these titles at the beginning of the last chapter, and inexplicably downsizing their complex, even intentionally captious structures, especially in the case of *Diary*. “Narrative minimalism” (193) and “impatience with narrative” (194) are in fact but the formal veneer – I think here too dismissively labelled - of a literary achievement in which Coetzee has continued to address the capital questions that he has always privileged.

*Secretary of the Invisible* is not an easy read, nor could it be, given the elusive complexity and the haunting emotional and intellectual quality of Coetzee’s work, which, as Derek Attridge was probably the first to point out, are at the root of his greatness as a writer and as champion of the value and the meaning of literature today. There are passages, however, occasionally in some chapters, where close reading informed by critical theory becomes redundant, or rather obscure and less persuasive. This is the case when Marais delves deep into the heart of the matter he has been unravelling, or in parts of his chapters on *Foe* and *Age of Iron*, but above all in the last chapter on *Slow Man*, where the analysis becomes encumbered by an excess of sophisticated speculation which no longer accommodates a proper close reading. All of which is, though, a minor diminishment in the overall texture of the book, and one which mainly affects its readability, rather than its critical depth and scholarly standing.

Graham Holderness. *Nine Lives of William Shakespeare*. London: Continuum, 2011.

206 pages. ISBN 978-1-4411-51858 (hb).

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Holderness’s book is a most original contribution to the genre of the Shakespeare biography. In his introduction, Holderness acknowledges the great amount of speculation that goes into almost any work on this topic, arguing that “there is no such thing as a speculation-free biography of Shakespeare” (12). Unless all biographers were to show the restraint of, say, a Samuel Schoenbaum, whose *Documentary Life* could perhaps stand as a monument of sound scholarship in the genre, it could hardly be otherwise. There are few facts to go around, particularly pertaining to Shakespeare’s private life; and even where the data are fairly plentiful, as in the field of his activities as a businessman, Holderness shows that they lend themselves to several incompatible readings (88). On the other hand, a new Shakespeare biography seems to come out every year or so, partly because there is a market for them; but were they all to repeat the same basic facts, the demand would soon dry up. Even Schoenbaum, who was averse to speculation, and wanted just the facts, may have occasionally been blinded by prejudice, Holderness suggests, as when he summarily dismissed traditional accounts of Shakespeare helping to slaughter calves in his youth (65).