

The Ethics of Female Silence in the Works of Witold Gombrowicz and J.M. Coetzee

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Abstract

This article attempts to interrogate the ways in which silence, as demonstrated in the works of Witold Gombrowicz and J.M. Coetzee, is staged to undo the instrumentalising narrative tactics that are oppressive to female characters. The first part of the article discusses the fictional representations of female silence in the fictional works of both authors in general, while the second part offers a close comparative reading of the play *Princess Ivona* (1958) by Witold Gombrowicz and the novel *Disgrace* (1999) by J.M. Coetzee with an eye to tracing the extent to which the ethics of feminine silence serves to offset the oppressive effects of male-dominated narratives. The paper ends with a reading of the works under discussion via the lens of the philosophical and ethical concepts of the Dutch philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard.

Keywords: woman, silence, the other, narrative, ethics

Abstrakt

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przyjrzenie się sposobom konstruowania kobiecego milczenia, które stanowi kontrpunkt do opresyjnych zabiegów narracyjnych prowadzących do instrumentalizacji roli kobiety w tekstach literackich, na podstawie twórczości Witolda Gombrowicza i J.M. Coetzee'ego. Podczas gdy pierwsza część stanowi przekrojowe omówienie zagadnienia kobiecego milczenia w twórczości obu autorów, część druga skupia się na komparatywnej analizie sztuki Gombrowicza *Iwona, księżniczka Burgunda* (1958) i powieści *Hańba* (1999) autorstwa J.M. Coetzee'ego w celu zbadania, w jaki sposób etyczne aspekty kobiecej ciszy przyczyniają się do obnażania opresyjnych zabiegów narracyjnych. Artykuł zamykają rozważania na temat etyki kobiecego milczenia w świetle filozofii etycznej duńskiego myśliciela Sørensa Kierkegaarda.

Słowa kluczowe: kobieta, cisza, inna, narracja, etyka

Introducing Women in Gombrowicz's and Coetzee's fiction

Scholars and critics have been quick to notice that Gombrowicz was never overly generous to his female characters. The Polish writer's fictional accounts of women often border on misogyny and sexism: peripheral or secondary at best, sexualised when young, appallingly demonised when middle-aged or old, mocked if unprepossessing, timid, lacking in agency, narrative voice or outstanding personality, Gombrowicz's female characters are often reduced to mere narrative functions around which the narrators-protagonists – inexorably white, male, middle-aged, and usually modelled on Gombrowicz himself – structure their narrative accounts. Put as such, it seems unsurprising that Gombrowicz has often been criticised by feminist critics.¹

But to dismiss Gombrowicz as misogynistic towards his female characters is to miss much about their narrative agency. In Gombrowicz's major novels and plays there is a systematic pattern of structuring female characters. They are mostly teenage, unassuming, timid and often serve to disrupt narrative events. Their subdued voices convey

¹ Some critics, however, consider his complicated accounts of women as nuanced. For more information on the feminist aspects of Gombrowicz's works, see Softysik (1998, 254).

the lack of agency, on the one hand, and strengthen the rhetoric of otherness, on the other. Women, who often embody the failure of communication, are often poised to play the role of the objects of male obsession. Gombrowicz's female characters – victims to the protagonists' or narrators' scheming – become the metaphors of the writer's failed attempt to control his work. Structurally and in terms of gendered metaphysics of writing, women in Gombrowicz occupy the space of written texts, ones subjugated to the demiurgic powers of their authors as well as narrative principles of male-dominated discourses and cultural assumptions.

To demonstrate the metafictional agency of Gombrowicz's female characters, in *Ferdydurke* Joey falls in love with the trendy Zuta, who “put the screws to [his] mug,” which in Gombrowicz's neologistic jargon means that she wields a total psychological control over him. The protagonist admits resignedly: “I sat there for her, for her I sat, ... she enclosed me within herself” (Gombrowicz 2000, 137). Overpowered by his infatuation or obsession, Joey immediately realises the form into which he got himself entangled: falling in love with cool girls is after all much in keeping with social convention and expectations. To extricate himself from her influence over him, the narrator now embarks on exposing the fallacy of all that she represents: that is, the seemingly unshakable integrity of her modern lifestyle and values. To demystify social conventions, the narrator masterminds a number of absurd situations as a way to “pull [Zuta] into the orbit of [his] activity” (148). Having recognised the fallacy of the form he has fallen into, the narrator takes pains to expose the façade and artificiality of modern living as represented by the girl. In so doing, *Ferdydurke* introduces a structural algorithm that would permeate Gombrowicz's further works: a female character occupies an awkward presence of the seemingly unfathomable other, which the protagonist-narrator attempts to expose or humiliate through a tactical subterfuge (in an attempt to re-write, so to speak, or translate the female otherness into the domain of the familiar) or violence (as demonstrated in *Cosmos* and *Princess Ivona*). A woman, or her peculiar metonymic or synecdochic displacement, is often poised to introduce a narrative complication. The attractiveness of Lena and repulsiveness of Katasia in *Cosmos* (2005); the youth of Henia in *Pornografia* (2010); the titular virginity of Alice in “Virginity” (2004), Albertine's dream of nakedness in *Operetta* (1998), all stand for the various ways in which the figure of a woman is instrumentalised to disrupt narrative structure and to help restore fictional equilibrium by being comfortably removed from the narrative.

Considering the above, it could be argued that Gombrowicz does not shy away from instrumentalising women in his works – a position that I will attempt to render more

complex in the close reading to follow. At this point, however, it may be worth considering to what extent Coetzee's depictions of women subvert or else reinforce such instrumentalising narrative tactics. Although it might not be entirely unjustified to apply this Gombrowiczian narrative pattern – woman as the writer's object of art, subject to the writer's perverse scheming as well as pressures of form – to the relation between JC and Anya in *Diary of a Bad Year* (2008), the reader is invited to read the novel in ethical terms the same way as s/he sees it on the page – in layers. There is a strong sense in which Anya is a passive object of JC's projected desires, one that is employed to mediate his text not just as a typist, but to occupy the narrative function of the text on which JC grafts his artistic/erotic fancies. Subversively, even though the graphic split of independent narratives on the page seems to intensify the novel's metafictional import, by characters discussing JC's "Strong Opinions" as the plot progresses, this graphically-layered multiple narration deflates uniformed metafictional readings of Anya's instrumental role in the narrative in that she recuperates her active agency through her first person narrative. The narrative structure makes Anya into a liminal figure: doubly inscribed onto the narrative canvas by JC, as a passive typist of his text or an object of his desire, and as one recuperating her independent voice via the first-person narrative account.

If Gombrowicz's female characters might suffer under the psychological tyranny of male narrators, Coetzee's *Foe* demonstrates an inverted logic of this premise: for it is Susan Barton who, although the novel's narrator, keeps questioning her own authorial agency. Her desperate cry: "Who is speaking me?" by which she imagines herself being possibly Foe's narrative creation, dramatizes a female anxiety of authorship and fear of being reduced to a mere figure of narration inhabiting a male dominated (hi) story: as if a female voice was constitutionally unsuited for carrying the heavy burden of logos, reason, voice, and narration (Coetzee 1987, 133). In a similar vein, Magda, in *In the Heart of the Country*, is a curious case in point of a female narrative voice resisting male-inflected metaphysics of writing (Coetzee 2004a). Her seemingly inconsequential accounts extend beyond mere unreliable narration towards the ethics of otherness via which a female voice, by attempting to defy the gravity of narrative logic and linearity, strikes at the foundations of western logos defined by reason and Judeo-Christian mono-semantic authoritative word.

Indeed, voice and language seem for Coetzee's women unwieldy instruments of human interaction. They are unsure as to how or indeed whether to speak at all. As if implicitly aware that to speak is to enter the political space of dialectical power relations. In defiance of the political register of language, some of Coetzee's female characters

resist communication by resorting to silence, which is often intertwined with the metaphysics of the body. The barbarian girl from *Waiting for the Barbarians* occupies an interstitial space on the symbolic plane of the novel: she speaks, but she fails to provide answers; her “alien” body evokes desire and revulsion alternately; she can see, but not completely. Her “secret body”, full of scars and disfigurements, is a most forceful, if tacit, reminder of colonial and patriarchal violence (Coetzee 2004b, 46). It seems that for all this contradictory semiotics of the female presence, it is what escapes language that speaks most vehemently. Is this not a sufficient reason why Mrs Curren entrusts the unreliable Vercueil with posting a letter to her daughter after her death even though “he will not promise. And even if he promises, he will do, finally, what he likes”? (Coetzee 1998, 32). If promise, as an illocutionary speech act, belongs to language, and language is the instrument of oppression of the other, including woman as the other, the ethics of alterity may help “resist the meaning-making impulse” by occluding the logic of logos (Drichel 2011, 166). It is because she cannot trust Vercueil’s words that she *must* trust him (echoing Kierkegaard’s famous line). And in so doing, Mrs Curren seems to do justice to the other: even if such ethics, defined by the logic of silence, indeterminacy and liminality, is notoriously difficult to grasp.

With all of the above in mind, I will attempt to argue that female characters in Gombrowicz’s *Princess Ivona* and Coetzee’s *Disgrace* resist this *meaning-making impulse*, suggesting alternative ways in which the text of female silence operates beyond the dialectic framework of understanding; thus eliciting alternative liminal responses: ones that simultaneously eschew and embrace gendered metaphysics of writing.

Ivona and Lucy

Ivona, the eponymous character of Gombrowicz’s pre-war play, *Princess Ivona*, and Lucy from Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, occupy different planes of textual presence. Their narrative roles – marked by a refusal to speak or justify their actions – open up textual spaces that fail to yield to other characters’/readers’ rational interpretations. Ivona is seen as a quiet, unattractive girl, whose awkward silence and looks, cruelly mocked by other characters in the play, provoke Prince Philip to propose to her. Philip’s unexpected, and deliberately subversive, resolution to propose to Ivona, to the amazement of his trendy friends and against his high-born parents’ will, may be read as a whim of the unruly prince, but in fact Philip’s decision is motivated by his urge to undo Ivona’s otherness:

Simon: (*disapproving*) Why are you doing this, Philip?

Philip: Why? Why? Don't you see she's my own dragon to be slain, my Gordian knot to be cut. I am a hunter in the night, going single-handed after a lion. I am Theseus taking the bull by the horns. Simon... Or it may just be irresistible curiosity. Rather as if one were prodding a worm with a stick to see if it will turn. (Gombrowicz 1998, 28)

Rather than responding to her otherness by respecting her refusal to speak, Philip is now adamant that he penetrate the imponderable silence of Ivona. Considering Philip's diatribe above, replete with the rhetoric of violence and subjugation, Ivona's fate is to occupy the space assigned to the emblematic others in the western culture: one to be conquered, subdued in the name of the metaphysical principles of domination ("dragon to be slain"), reason and knowledge ("curiosity"). If she is obdurately silent, she must now be reconverted to the comfortable domain of the word, which she continues to resist. Lucy, on her part, operates on a different plane of textual silence. She is not silent in the way Ivona is. She does speak, and she is very articulate at that, but she refuses to account for her decisions, by which she chooses to enter the rational and political discourse that breeds systemic violence to which she fell victim.

Gombrowicz and Coetzee offer somehow incongruent versions of women as silent others, which may be partly put down to the authors' disparate narrative styles. If Coetzee's characters, including their ethical decisions, usually submit to the pressures of realism, Gombrowicz's representations of characters, and their existential-ethical dimensions, are coloured by absurd and caricature (as such Gombrowicz's novels and plays can be read along the lines of Beckett's). Given Gombrowicz's penchant for the absurd, the silence of Ivona operates on the principle of cultural asymmetry, which engenders a sense of estrangement. This is a climate in which Gombrowicz's characters must confront Ivona's alterity, but also come to terms with the painful awareness that her otherness infects the world around them. Ivona's refusal to speak in public is a catalyst for other characters' radical responses.

Silence, by operating beyond, or perhaps beneath, language frustrates the logocentric comfort zone of logic and reason: it annuls social conventions that heavily depend on language for their existence. Incapable of coming to terms with the indeterminacy of silence – that is, incapable of reading *from* it – male characters begin to read *into* the silence of women to make sense of it. At this point, Ivona morphs into a semantic vessel onto which Philip must project his meanings as a desperate, and rather predictable, response to her alterity. Jerzy Franczak claims that Ivona acts as a sort of psychoanalytical

Rorschach test onto which other characters pour their fears and desires (2015, 463). Configured as such on the narrative axis, Ivona assumes the role of a text: one shaped by the subversive gaze of its reader or writer. Philip, by taking pains to make Ivona speak for herself, turns into a peremptory writer of Ivona as text. If Ivona's silence threatens to assert itself as absolute, autonomous, and self-sufficient, she must now succumb to the gaze of her farcical fiancé and his family. According to Tamara Trojanowska, Philip fails in the end, because he "disavows Ivona's autonomy" by confusing "interpretation with domination" and "explanation with domestication" (2010, 254; translation mine).

The relationship between Ivona and Philip can be considered vis-à-vis one of Lucy and David in Coetzee's *Disgrace*. When Rosalind asks David about the decision behind his refusal to speak for himself to the university committee: "What was the principle you were standing up for?", David retorts: "Freedom of speech. Freedom to remain silent" (Coetzee 2000, 188). If both *Princess Ivona* and *Disgrace* dramatize, albeit in different ways, the characters' anxiety to have others acknowledge their autonomy, it is the freedom from language that they seek in the first place. If, as variously argued by Lévi-Strauss (1976) and Foucault (2010), language is the oppressive instrument of western logos employed to subjugate the other, silence, the polar-opposite of language, promises a safe refuge for those who find themselves on the receiving end of social or political pressures (like David, Lucy or Ivona). But that David should be the author of this memorable passage may strike one as acutely ironic. For it is David who most glaringly fails to afford Lucy the comfort of silence when pressing his daughter to justify her resolutions to stay in Cape in the aftermath of her rape, marry Petrus and refuse to undergo abortion. Curiously, not only does David consistently act from the position of an oppressor, but does it, tellingly, with the implement of language. When his verbal persuasions fail, he unexpectedly resorts to writing a letter to Lucy (although at this point in the novel they continue to live under the same roof) in which he warns her of the error of her ways. Lévi-Strauss' diagnosis that "the primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery" helps the reader understand why David turns to writing in a last-resort attempt to bend Lucy to his will (1976, 299). Lucy is aware of her failure to ever succeed in communicating her complex ethical decision to the outside world: "I know I am not being clear. I wish I could explain. But I can't" (Coetzee 2000, 155). Elsewhere, Lucy is reluctant to employ reason and language to defend herself, as if in a desperate act of defiance against the implement of male violence. In her curious tirade against David, which echoes his committee speech, she exclaims: "and if there is one right I have, it is the right not to [...] have to justify myself" (133).

If Lucy laments her inability or refusal to express herself in language, Ivona goes a step further by refusing to use language whatsoever (for reasons unexplained in the play). Out of odd forty lines assigned to Ivona in the play, she speaks in only nine, with the remaining lines being filled with stage directions such as: “Ivona: (silent)” or “Ivona: (nothing)”. Whenever she does speak, however, she rarely speaks in sentences: she usually utters inconsequential, idiosyncratic words or hasty exclamations. Given the conventionalised setting (the royal court and characters identified by their official or social functions, such as Beggar, Queen, Marshall, Chamberlain), Ivona’s antisocial behaviour is an issue. Indeed, Ivona’s silence may be read as an implicit protest against social conventions, empty language or patriarchal stereotypes. By refusing to speak, she fails to adopt a fixed gender role bestowed on her by society. She is a living threat to language which links the subject to the social world. Since Ivona’s silence has a subversive agency (as it threatens to expose the sins and private fears of other characters) and one that eludes rationality, logos must now resort to its customary instrument of a domestication of the other: violence. Incapable of annulling Ivona’s silence in language and social conventions (like marriage, love, etc.) the characters must overcome or annihilate Ivona. By doing so Gombrowicz parodies the Renaissance revenge tragedy convention.

Curiously, much like David’s recourse to language as a means to subjugate women, King in Gombrowicz’s play literally murders Ivona *with* language. In the closing scene where the royal family conspires to make Ivona choke on a fishbone, one reads: “King: (*gets up, points menacingly to Ivona*) She has choked. A bone in her throat... a bone, I say.” (Gombrowicz 1998, 76). Since this rather pithy line remains the only account of Ivona’s death, it is far from evident whether Ivona does choke on the fishbone. What is more likely is that the King *tells* her to choke on it through the imperative “I say” (in the original Polish version this phrase is followed by an exclamation mark which further strengthens the imperative mood). Ivona’s death (if the reader is prepared to accept this unhappy ending) allegorises a ritual killing through language. Symptomatically, in Gombrowicz’s works language is an active narrative vehicle. Specific words (usually neologisms or diminutives) influence plot development. Ironically, logos (a figurative implementation of oppression of western reason) is in Gombrowicz’s play a literal agent of the annihilation of the oppressed other. Along those lines, Franczak goes on to argue that Ivona is murdered in order for the characters to recuperate the lost language, but, ironically, her murder results in nothing but silence. As such, her silence is brought to fruition and the social world, which is infected with silence, cannot restore itself to the symbolic (2015, 464).

Inwardness and subjectivity

If both *Disgrace* and *Ivona* dramatize a refusal to assert oneself in language then, by extension, the singular silences of the female protagonists act as useful conduits for articulating a wider epistemological crisis of logocentric subjectivity. In his reading of Kierkegaard in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee observes:

All versions of the *I* are fictions of the *I*. The primal *I* is not recoverable. Neither of the words *I* and *You* can exist pure in the medium of language. Indeed, after the experience of the Word in relation to one's existence, life cannot go on as before. "Self-annihilation [that is, annihilation of the self] is the essential form for the God-relationship," writes Kierkegaard. (Coetzee and Attwell 1992, 75; square brackets and italicised words in the original)

Lucy and Ivona share, if in different ways, a peculiar anxiety about subjectivity. They both refuse to speak for the *I*, that is, for themselves, or more precisely, to justify their actions in language. If, in Foucault's terms, individuals can occupy subject positions only in language, which delineates and legitimises the political power of the speaking subject (2010), Lucy's and Ivona's silence extends beyond the symbolic order of language. Their refusal to articulate the *I* is also a refusal to acknowledge themselves as subjects on the terms enforced by society. If the only subject is the *speaking* subject, their silence is an agent of the Kierkegaardian annihilation of the self. Further on in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee puts forward the notion of the

poetics of failure [which is] a program for constructing artifacts out of an endlessly regressive, etiolated self-consciousness lost in the labyrinth of language and endlessly failing to erect itself into autonomy. The poetics of failure is ambivalent through and through and part of its ambivalence is that it must parade its ambivalence. (Coetzee and Attwell 1992, 87; square brackets mine)

Put in these terms, Ivona and Lucy might be read as the figures of the poetics of failure. That is, as narrative artefacts whose rhetoric of silence, which marks a gesture of denial of the self, acts as an implicit auto-commentary of the impossibility of the work of art to exhaust itself in meaning or narrative structure. They seem to fit into strictly narrative roles that, in their inability to speak for the *I*, and to profess their subjectivity in

language, become metaphors of mute texts: ones that never exist except in the mediating gaze of the reader/writer.

But to read Ivona and Lucy as negative figures of the poetics of failure, defined by their inability to uphold their autonomy in the epistemological order, or else as impassive instruments of discursive self-reflexivity, is to overlook insightful points about considerations of ethical import. Kierkegaard argues that if a human being holds fast “to the objective uncertainty with all the passion of inwardness [...] faith lies exactly in this contradiction, in this risk” (2009, 176). Lucy’s persistence to remain in Cape against all odds instantiates this Kierkegaardian investment in inwardness against objective certainty. Her failure to justify her personal choice to David, or else her sense of futility thereof, exposes the rhetoric of ambiguity. But it is precisely the defiance of reason over objective certainty in support of her inward choice that marks the moment of the ethical: one that, along the lines of western epistemology, borders on the absurd, leaving David baffled, not to say repulsed. But Kierkegaard persists that “it is precisely through the objective repulsion that the absurd is the gauge of faith’s strength in inwardness” (2009, 177). Ethics makes impossible demands. Part of its impossibility lies in the fact that one might have to respond to the incomprehensibility or repulsiveness of the Other. To remind, in *Princess Ivona*, Philip proposes to Ivona not *in spite* but *because* of her objective repulsiveness (largely attributed to her unresponsiveness):

It is your silence, the way you look offended... You are disdainful, you are soured, arrogance and vinegar. I recognize that for everyone there is, somewhere, somebody capable of firing them to white heat; you do that to me, you must be mine, you shall be mine. (Gombrowicz 1998, 21)

Ivona as the radical other provokes a radical ethical response of the prince precipitated by the effect of social asymmetry. As stated by Levinas: “The relation with Others challenges me, empties me of myself [...] Where others are from the start under my responsibility, ‘something’ has overflowed my freely made decisions [...] alienating my identity” (2006, 29–30, 62). Confronted with Ivona’s disturbing silence, Philip is left with no other alternative but to respond: “I will marry her. I simply have to. She is my own turmoil”, be it at the expense of compromising one’s values or identity (as Philip and Lucy alienate themselves against the outside world) (Gombrowicz 1998, 22). To take a leaf from Levinas’ radical ethics, the encounter with the Other (re)defines the self, empties it of itself. The self does not exist except in its encounter with the Other, and the

encounter necessitates a response to and responsibility for him/her. It is along these lines that Philip feels that he “has to” marry Ivona. She is a figure of negative otherness that demands a radical, if asymmetrical, ethical response.² In like manner, Lucy seems to stay in Cape not in spite of but because of her repulsion of her oppressor’s act and precariousness of the situation – she accepts the price she feels she must pay to stay: “‘I think I am in their territory. They have marked me. They will come back for me.’ / ‘Then you can’t possibly stay.’ / Why not?” (Coetzee 2000, 158). To echo Kierkegaard, her determined but seemingly irrational decision comes from her faith that materialises as “strength in inwardness” (2009, 177). Her decisions are not motivated by abstract or objective premises, but by the radical (repulsive) encounter with the Other, one that cannot be exteriorised through language. Lucy exclaims in self-defence: “You keep misreading me. Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don’t act in abstractions. Until you make an effort to see that, I can’t help you” (Coetzee 2000, 122).

It has been proposed that Coetzee and Gombrowicz demonstrate a crisis of logocentric subjectivity. But this premise needs qualifying. If one presumes a crisis, it is not one that develops on the subjective plane of female characters, but in the tension that advances from the inability of others to come to terms with the singularity of a female voice, her inwardness or silence. In *Ivona*, Queen scolds Ivona for being “forever silent. What should we make of it all? And how does this silence make us look in the eyes of others?” (Gombrowicz 2015, 54).³ Ivona’s silence is a mirror facing the outside world, thus reflecting the flaws of other characters. She plays the role of the unsettling other against whom the self confronts its own otherness: her inferiority reflects the inferiority of the collective self. What is at work here is a sort of an inverted logic of the Hegelian dialectic whereby the master asserts his or her superiority vis-à-vis the inferiority of the slave. In *Ivona*, however, the otherness of the other, rather than reasserting the subjectivity of the self, destabilises it so the self identifies with and internalises the otherness of the other. This marks the uneasy moment of

² If at this point a negative alterity of the Other provokes an asymmetrical ethical response, one must be reminded that the same sense of otherness that prompts the prince to propose to Ivona will become a motor for his resolution to murder her further in the play, which, although no longer in keeping with Levinasian ethics, seems to sustain the hypothesis that otherness provokes an extreme response, be it positive or negative.

³ Translation mine. Elsewhere in the text the authoritative English translation is cited. Since for the sake of the argument literal translation that keeps the exact wording of the original needed to be preserved, unlike the one offered in the official English translation, I offered an alternative translation.

consciousness: the self has always occupied the space of the other of itself. But the awareness of the inherent otherness of the self has no redeeming features in *Ivona*. It is regarded with suspicion by the characters. Rather than coming to terms with their own otherness, the characters, as stated above, must now annihilate *Ivona* to recant their own otherness and restore the metaphysical and social equilibrium. In Gombrowicz, the self knows its condition as the other, but will persist in self-denial rather than acknowledge its otherness. As such, *Ivona* does not consciously exercise the ethics of alterity, but elicits an ethical response from the outside world centripetally. Lucy, on the other hand, appears to evince a more dynamic ethical agency.

As elaborated above, David proves himself hostile and uncomprehending towards Lucy's singular decision. He seems to embody a failure of reason to come to terms with singular ethics of and towards the other. Derek Attridge argues that "what has precipitated Lurie's public shaming is [...] his refusal to the demands [...] of the committee [...] that he make an acceptable public confession [...], a submission that in his eyes would constitute acceptance of the [...] newly emergent collective mores that he finds deeply repugnant" (2004, 168). In the light of this statement, it should strike one as surprising that David shows so little understanding for Lucy's idiosyncratic moral decisions. Is it not that both Lucy's and David's singular silences have the same provenience? That is, a singular resistance to the rationalisation, politicisation, and instrumentalisation of a collective sense of morality? But perhaps their silences claim a different pedigree? Adriaan van Heerden argues that David and Lucy submit to different "configurations of morality": that is, "legal" and "spiritual morality", respectively (2010, 58). If David's ethical considerations orbit around the notions of law, Lucy operates beyond such abstract principles, thus embracing a more singular ethics. If David heroically refuses to speak, it is because he defies the excessively rationalised socio-political order; Lucy's silence, on the other hand, seeks to recuperate the severed bond with the other. In this case, Lucy goes a step further towards reclaiming ethics: as she not only challenges the rationalising exigencies of the status quo (as David appears to do), but also the socio-political order (which David merely seeks to reform). This is because politics belongs to the same protocol of oppression (something that escapes David's grasp). What she takes pains to achieve is to navigate the ethical vector away from the instrumentalisation of the public and political domain towards ethical human encounters. But both David and Lucy are united in one demand: that their refusal to speak not be interpreted in rationalistic terms.

To sum up, in Gombrowicz and Coetzee silence is staged, albeit in different ways, to undo the instrumentalising narrative tactics meted out to female characters by male

narrators and characters. Both authors seem aware that a woman is doomed to occupy a space of the other which she is consigned to by the prevailing patriarchal cultural assumptions. The only way to remedy this consignment to silence is to have the silence speak in singular ethical encounters between characters. By doing so, Gombrowicz and Coetzee refuse to offer a prescriptive form of ethics. Both ethics and silence are therefore partners in countering the discourse of power that is responsible for the political containment of social others. Like silence, ethics refuses to totalise itself in language, one that is an instrument of subjugation of the other. The liberating force of the unspoken singular ethics thus serves to counter the hostile instrumentalisation of femininity in male dominated narratives.

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