**A Report on J.M. Coetzee’s Reading at York of Work in Progress**

As part of York’s first Festival of Ideas, a three-week celebration of artistic creativity and performance run in conjunction with the international Samuel Beckett conference *Out of the Archive*, J.M. Coetzee gave a public reading from his work of prose fiction in progress. The reading took place on Friday 24 June 2011 in the Central Hall on the University of York campus at Heslington. The University of York’s Vice-Chancellor Brian Cantor opened the event with words of praise for the top research ranking of York’s Department of English and Related Literature, before handing over to Derek Attridge. Attridge avoided giving a formal introduction to Coetzee, speaking instead about the genres of the praise poem of Homeric or African provenance and the genre of the ‘warm-up’ act. He went on to ask – and one could not help thinking of Elizabeth Costello at this point – what a Coetzean introduction might look like: how it would draw attention to assumptions in the unspoken contract between the guest speaker and his audience, how it would unsettle the audience’s normative response and provoke a rethinking of the performance of literary celebrity. He then handed over to Coetzee, who was received with strong applause by the large audience. Dressed modestly in an open-neck button-up shirt and a blazer, Coetzee thanked all involved in organising and attending the event before beginning his reading.

He read the first chapter and a small part of the second chapter of a story that, of his previous works, recalled most of all *Waiting for the Barbarians* in its indeterminate time and place and its focus on the individual human cost of state power. At the centre of the story were a man and a boy, apparent refugees in a strange country seeking food and shelter. In its perfunctory scene-setting and focus on the protagonists’ experience of deprivation of sustenance, information, and sympathy, the story resonated with similar themes in Kafka and Beckett.

Standing at the lectern turning each loose typed page of his story aside as he finished with it, Coetzee read his work in a quiet, understated tone. At first his voice seemed *merely* quiet, but it was in fact deceptively expressive: he read the sections of dialogue, in particular, with subtle intonation. After about three quarters of an hour he brought his reading to an end and gave a slight bow in three directions to acknowledge the audience’s applause.

Derek Attridge wrapped up proceedings by noting some of the story’s features that struck him as familiar and new – the (Beckettian) minimalism of the story’s contextualisation and the characters’ predicament, the centrality of dialogue, the thematic preoccupation with the experience of being a displaced person denied basic rights and disadvantaged by linguistic difference. Attridge ended by thanking Coetzee for his visit to York and his reading, and announced that Coetzee had agreed to remain behind to sign copies of his books, if interested members of the audience would form an orderly queue. A hundred-strong queue of people immediately materialised, as the rest of the audience filed out of the hall talking over the narrative fragment they had just heard.

*Donald Powers*