



Contemplating Slowness: J.M. Coetzee's Reflections On Literature, Philosophy, And Pain

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

The paper titled "Being Slow: Literature, Philosophy, and Pain" delves into the intricate connections between Literature, Philosophy and pain through an analytical lens. It argues that contemporary society's reliance on speed, epitomized by phenomena like fast food and technological advancements, has altered human attitudes toward various aspects of life. Drawing on Paul Virilio's concept of speed as central to technological societies, the paper highlights the diminishing space for deep listening and detailed understanding in a world of summaries. Contrary to the prevailing culture of haste, the paper posits slowness as not only inherent but essential to life, citing Seneca's caution against hurried pursuits. Focusing on J.M. Coetzee and his select works, the paper aims to explore his philosophically slow approach to writing which fosters moral and ethical engagement with existential, political, and social crises. Coetzee's characters, despite their slowness, embody strength in vulnerability, navigating life's complexities with resilience. Through characters like Michael K and Mrs. Curren, Coetzee illustrates the transformative potential of embracing life's slow pace.

Keywords: Slowness, literature, philosophy, pain, J.M. Coetzee, vulnerability, resilience, human condition.

To philosophize is to learn how to die. – Michel de Montaigne

It is not for nothing that one has been a philologist, perhaps one is a philologist still, that is to say, a teacher of slow reading. – Friedrich Nietzsche

I do not know if death, in this country, is a solitary or a mass-produced affair.

– James Baldwin

Life is stronger than death, because life is nourished by death. – Milan Kundera

THE EVERYDAYNESS OF PHILOSOPHY remains a vague consideration as a far-fetched subject because of its disciplinary guards and academic limitations.¹ Socrates never treated philosophy as a difficult or an alienated subject far from everyday discourse. He tried to understand the various issues of life and state in a thoughtful manner in everyday life and examined different contours of existence through life-experiences. His aim was not to write any book or deliver lectures in seminars in logic but “to live the life of the philosopher, to examine myself and others” (Miller 871). Writing monographs, and delivering lectures are not exactly how we get the meaning of life.² What is it to be living the life of a philosopher? Why is it necessary to understand the being of being? “Philosophy is listened to; it speaks to man. Philosophy is, therefore, the dialogue between Being and being” (Kluback 10). It tries to understand various issues related to human condition through “logical revolts”³ in one sense, and in another it “pits thought against injustice, against the defective state of the world and of life” through argument and reasons (Badiou 31). To understand various complexities that a human being faces in various facets of everyday life calls for an understanding through logical reasoning, empathy, and mutual understanding.

¹ The word philosophy is derived from the Greek word *philo-sophia* means quest for or love of wisdom.

² See Terry Eagleton's *The Meaning of Life* (2007).

³ This phrase is taken from Arthur Rimbaud's poem “Democracy.”

The logical structure of philosophy accommodates individual thinking for the betterment of people and their individual world. Knowledge will be a vague production by merely accepting the views without reasoning, without the fulfillment of a common good and good life:

Throughout the philosophical tradition from the ancient world up to Heidegger, by way of Spinoza, Lucretius, Kant and Nietzsche, philosophy was always conceived – at least by the greatest thinkers, without any exception – as the attempt to define the good life, the highest good, the blessed life and the wisdom that leads to it: in short, as an attempt to answer the great question of what the meaning of life can be for mortals. (Ferry 3-4)

The differences in view are not aimed to create confusion, but to provide a sustainable approach towards heterogeneous aspects related to difference in a society or culture. Philosophy seeks to remove the confusion created by ignorance. In such circumstances, philosophy according to Alain Badiou, bears risk (Badiou 32). There are different levels of illogical communication through which a philosophical approach could be misjudged. The miscommunication or illogical communication derives from various coded ideas of reality driven by socio-political conditions. This idea of reality is “fragmentary” because of the “demands of the innumerable ramifications of the technical configurations of things, of the apparatuses of things ... of the diversity of functions and skills” (Badiou 33). We are living in the “dimension of risk,” in the age of technological advancement, and digitalization of our thinking (Badiou 33). If we consider innumerable cases of political disorder and ill-treatment of others, we see that pain becomes a psychological manifestation rather than a biological event, we feel that we have not achieved anything, except technological advancement, where, it causes more pain and suffering than lead to a peaceful condition of living.

Unfortunately, the everydayness of philosophy has been neglected in universities and has remained in the sphere of intellectual discourse. Nietzsche observes, “The sole critique of a philosophy that is possible, and that proves anything, namely to discover whether one can live by it, has never been taught at universities: only the critique of words upon words” (qtd. in Miller 874). Nietzsche emphasizes that the problem is in not having a philosophical life that is in the “negligence” of everyday life, because of: a) the burden of religious life, and b) relationship between truth and scientific knowledge (Miller 875). In one of his notebooks, Nietzsche writes: “so long as philosophers fail to master the courage to seek a wholly changed way of life and to exhibit it by their own example, they are of no consequence” (qtd. in Miller 875).⁴ As Gramsci emphasizes, it is important to change the conventional and given idea that philosophy is a difficult thing and is limited to some intellectual engagement (Gramsci 23). Philosophy is built through language which is determined and build in concepts and notions. Everybody has concepts and notions, and therefore “all men are philosophers” (Gramsci 33). To have a minimum conception of the world is itself a philosophical engagement, and this engagement of “critical and coherent conception of the world” has to be with a “consciousness of its historicity” (Gramsci 323). This conception of the world is not merely an abstract idea, but a particular idea of an issue rooted in existence. Philosophical engagement will not be of any use if it does not evoke and analyze the problem of a particular time posed by reality in the language. “Everybody is a philosopher” justifies that everybody has something to say because of the possession of the language. It also means that there are ideas in every language, and anyone can evoke her or his concept of the world. The particular language might not conform to the demands of any other particular language which is more urbanized or conceptualized. Ideas remain in the closet apartment if they do not get conceptualized within a particular framework of language because “language speaks. Its speaking bids the difference. In this way mortals live in the speaking of language” (Heidegger “Language” 1134).

For Wittgenstein, human understanding is more important than human knowledge. To philosophize is to clear the concepts, not to gain new knowledge but to achieve a particular kind of understanding. Thus Wittgenstein proposes: “Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity. . . . Philosophy does not result in ‘philosophical propositions,’ but rather in the clarification of propositions” (Wittgenstein TLP 4.112). For Wittgenstein philosophy is to shed light on the confusion, an activity to elucidate the contradiction of any particular idea; as he emphasizes repeatedly, “Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts. . . . A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations.” (Wittgenstein TLP 4.112). To present a problem philosophically is to refer to the problem, not only in theoretical or empirical terms, but also, moving deep into the roots of language. In scientific inquiry, a problem is fragmented, and is established in the form of ‘logico-mathematical proposition.’ Wittgenstein proposes that “It is not the business of philosophy to resolve a contradiction by means of a mathematical or logico-mathematical discovery, but to render surveyable [so as to get a clear view] the state of mathematics that troubles us— the state of affairs *before* the contradiction is resolved” (Wittgenstein PI 125).

How do we get a clear view? To get a clear view of anything that troubles us, we need a slower approach, which is contrary to today’s time where speed is essential in every aspect of life. From food (fast-food) to

⁴ For a good discussion on how to become a philosopher, see Nietzsche’ essay “Schopenhauer as Educator.” While working in department of philology at the University of Basel, Nietzsche wanted to move to the department of philosophy, but his request was turned down, and eventually he was forced to resign from his post at Basel. He resigned in 1872, and started to write on philosophy and philosophers, and decided a working title “The Last Philosopher” which he finally did not write. However, throughout, he was carefully looking at the Greek thinkers.

several other aspects of everyday life, one mostly depends on the idea of speed. The idea of speed comes from machines or from the knowledge of the functioning of the machine where a particular amount of work is done in a minimum period of time. The recent boom in the technology and advent of globalisation have changed the attitude of human beings towards different aspects of everyday life. Paul Virilio suggests that speed is the pillar of technological society (Virilio 2006, 2012). Seldom, the human being has time to listen to the other. Everything comes in the form of summary, and the detailness of life has been reduced to summary. The birth of life is itself a slow process. It is not a negative aspect but rather the foundation of life. Being hasty always bear the risk of misjudgment. Seneca emphasized that nothing can be attained in a hurry. If we carefully follow the dialogues of Socrates, we see that it is through a slow approach he engages his opponents in philosophical questions. In the *Symposium*, Socrates becomes so absorbed in his thought that, though they started off together to reach a party, his friend Aristodemus reaches alone at the banquet hosted by Agathon (*Symposium* 174a-e). His slowness comes from his acute observation without any haste. Alcibiades recounts another such instance:

One time at dawn he began to think something over and stood in the same spot considering it, and when he found no solution, he didn't leave but stood there inquiring. It got to be midday, and people became aware of it, wondering at it among themselves, saying Socrates had stood there since dawn thinking about something. Finally some of the Ionians, when evening came, after they'd eaten—it was then summer—carried their bedding out to sleep in the cool air and to watch to see if he'd also stand there all night. He stood until dawn came and the sun rose; then he offered a prayer to the sun, and left. (*Symposium* 2202c-d, trans. R.E. Allen)

For Socrates, the movement of time is not as it goes with the passing of the day and night, but time halts here. His slowness enables him to think. Thinking is a matter of process, a process of pondering—an evaluation of higher sensitivity. Heidegger complains in his “What is called Thinking?” that we are not thinking—thinking from the nature of things, observing the Being itself. He emphasizes on the aspect of thinking as a way of living—to unravel the truth. Thinking posits man as a being-in-the-world and puts a man in the position of questioning, which are interrelated. At the beginning of the text, Heidegger says: “We come to know what it means to think when we ourselves try to think. If the attempt is to be successful, we must ready to learn thinking” (Heidegger 3). I propose that pain stimulates human beings to think.⁵ Pain is a continuum that allows thinking, not necessarily during the time of pain, but as a memory. The memory of pain restructures our thinking, enabling us to ponder over what has passed; as Heidegger points out that “Memory is the gathering of thought . . . thought of what hold us, in that we give it thought precisely because it remains what must be thought about” (Heidegger 4). He claims that everything that provokes thought leads to thinking, he substantiates it by adding further: “Most thought-provoking is that we are still not thinking” (Heidegger 4).

“What is called Thinking?” first came out as a lecture form he delivered during the winter and summer semesters of 1951 and 1952 at the University of Freiburg. It is interesting to notice that this is the Post-Nazi Germany, and Hitler had already committed suicide on 30 April 1945. Was Heidegger questioning his own methods of thinking, his own memory of supporting of the Nazis? There is no such confession in the lecture. He says to think is to depend on memory, and what withdraws becomes “an event” and “what withdraws may even concern and claim man more essentially than anything that present that strikes and touches him” (Heidegger 9). Again he says:

Memory is the gathering and convergence of thought upon what everywhere demands to be thought about first of all. Memory is the gathering of recollection, thinking back. It safely keeps and keeps concealed within it that to which at each given time thought must be given before all else, in everything that essentially is, everything that appeals to us as what has being and has been in being. (Heidegger 11)

Pain—in both mental (emotional) and physical cases—slows down the system, halts the process of life and opens the door for thinking. To do things in haste trivializes the problem. The general attitude towards pain is to get rid of pain as quickly as possible, and we suddenly jump onto the medicines, without concentrating on the source of pain. Slowness—in philosophy and in pain—thus, is a matter of inquiry without haste, a method of slow reading.⁶ Wittgenstein emphasizes the necessity of slowness in reading philosophy: “Sometimes a sentence can be understood only if it is read at the right *tempo*. My sentences are all supposed to be read slowly” (CV 91e). Wittgenstein’s aphoristic style represents how he thought every proposition very carefully, and so, every paragraph or even a sentence demands careful, slow reading.

J. M. Coetzee confesses “I don’t think or act in sweeps, I tend to be rather slow and painstaking and myopic in my thinking (DP 246). There are a couple of points to observe here:

⁵ Somebody like Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich or Coetzee’s Mrs Curren or Melville’s Bartleby think of their existence when they are in in pain. Both physical and mental suffering can allow the subject to think. But thinking is also conditioned by other external categories rooted in socioeconomic conditions. The basic issue that follows is the will to life which can transgress any condition. Our approach on thinking is mostly based on the prejudice of recognition. Recognition comes after the result that an individual seeks for.

⁶ We remember the story of a race between the tortoise and the hare in “The Tortoise and the Hare” from Aesop’s Fables. Slowness is treated as negative, and speed is a matter of pride, but in the story we see ultimately the tortoise wins the race and the hare realises his false pride and from that day he never made fun of any one.

- i) The use of the words ‘think,’ ‘act,’ ‘sweep,’ ‘slow,’ ‘pain-staking,’ ‘myopic,’ signify an action or certain kind of action which has a personal and ethical engagement.
- ii) They all refer to pace.
- iii) They are all in relation to each other
- iv) A certain kind of involvement of seriousness⁷
- v) A way of self-interrogation

If we consider thinking with slowness, it means somebody is slow in thinking which is considered as negative. Again, if we add “myopic” to thinking it means something un-creative, unproductive, short-sighted which is again considered as negative, and not wished for. Slowness and slow writing are a process of mediation and thinking. As Coetzee says in the beginning of the *Doubling the Point*:

It is naive to think that writing is a simple two-stage process: first you decide what you want to say, then you say it. On the contrary, as all of us know, you write because you do not know what you want to say. Writing reveals to you what you want or wanted to say in the first place. In fact, it sometimes constructs what you want or wanted to say. What it reveals (or asserts) may be quite different from what you thought (or half thought) you wanted to in the first place. That is the sense in which one can say that writing writes us. (DP 18) The meditative aspect of Coetzee’s work enable him to reflect upon the inner conflict that a man goes through in the diverse structures of life. The drafts of his earlier works at the Harry Ransom Center show his tiresome but slow and steady engagement with his stories, his characters, and his own moral conflicts.⁸ The painful meditative endeavor is evident in the narrative itself and draws attention to a slow philosophical approach. His narrative of pain emphasizes that slowness in pain is a process of learning and understanding experiential entities of an existential, political and social crises. His characters are slow but they are strong in their vulnerability. He has created a host of characters—Michael K, Mrs. Curren, the Magistrate, Vercueil, Jacobus Coetzee, Paul Rayment and Eugene Dawn—who are caught in circumstances and embark on life at a slow pace. Every character is set for a journey in their specific condition—the narrative and the life it follows—represents the banality of existence, and the slow journey begins:

The narrative. We set out on July 16 and made a steady twelve [English] miles a day for six days. We stopped short of Lodgings, a cave in the mountains, to allow the oxen to rest. Having crossed the river we made a *slow progress* [my emphasis], traveling a day and resting a day, until we reached [Koekenaap], where there was grazing. (*Dusklands* 63)

Jacobus Coetzee begins his journey slowly. Slowness functions in the narrative structure itself, with various pauses in the narration for one to reflect. Jacobus Coetzee’s slowness comes from the painful journey, his slow method of the hunting expedition shows the white world’s subjugation and torture of the other—the painful domination of the West.⁹ Eugene Dawn’s narrative of the Vietnam War reflects the painful process of writing:

There is no doubt that I am a sick man. Vietnam has cost me too much. I use the metaphor of the dolorous wound. Something is wrong in my kingdom. Inside my body, beneath the skin and muscle and flesh that drape me, I am bleeding. Sometimes I think the wound is in my stomach, that it bleeds slime and despair over the food that should be nourishing me, seeping in little puddles that rot the crooks of my obscure hooked organs. (*Dusklands* 32)

Slowness in pain is not a numbness but a revelation of discomfort that we experience in our displeasure. Pain is something that is not wished for, but is inevitable, and it is dangerous not to have any (sensation of) pain.¹⁰ The degree of pain decides the various moments of pain. It moves between meaning and meaninglessness—as almost unnoticed, unwelcomed in everyday life. The apparent meaninglessness of pain allows one to recognize the different phases of life, and its banality. In *Slowman* (2005), Coetzee shows that pain may be accidental but it never is entirely timeless or solitary. Thus Paul Rayment, an Australian old man, meets with an accident while cycling, and encounters pain in such times when everything with him was going smooth. Pain is not only a biological fact/fate but an experience in search of an interpretation: “Pain is the real thing, it does not have to press at all, merely to send a flash or two . . . (*Slowman* 12). Pain gives one the sense of humiliation: “It is only the pain, and the dragging, sleepless nights, in this hospital, these zones of humiliation with no place to hide from the pitiless gaze of the young, that make him wish for death” (*Slowman* 13). Pain comes suddenly, and slows down everything: “*Be calm . . . A slip in the bathroom, nothing to be alarmed about, it happens to many people, all may yet be well. Plenty of time to think, plenty*

⁷ For Coetzee “seriousness is, for a certain kind of artist, an imperative uniting the aesthetic and the ethical” (*Giving Offense* 73).

⁸ Please see David Attwell’s work *J. M. Coetzee and the Life Writing: Face to Face with Time*. Attwell cites examples from Coetzee’s drafts and provides an excellent critical biography of Coetzee.

⁹ The two parts of *Dusklands* (Part 1: “The Vietnam Project,” is the narration of Eugene Dawn, an American mythographer for the Vietnam War. Part 2: “The Narration of Jacobus Coetzee,” is the narrative of an elephant hunter in the Western Cape of South Africa), and are parallel stories of madness and torture.

¹⁰ Not feeling pain is a rare genetic condition called congenital insensitivity to pain, or CIP. The person with CIP will not feel any pain if she/he puts her/his hands in boiling water or undergoes operation without anesthesia.

of time to set things right" (*Slowman* 206). Coetzee explains that his aim is to engage with the affective nature of pain. In *Slowman*, we realize that pain is not limited to only losing a body part but also to giving a sense of realization of one's self. In *On the Suffering of the World*, Arthur Schopenhauer notes that:

Every animal, even an *infusorium*, suffers pain, because knowledge, however imperfect, is the true characteristic of animality. At each higher stage of animal life there is a corresponding increase in pain. In the lowest animals it is extremely slight, but even in the highest it nowhere approaches the pain which man is capable of feeling, since even the highest animal lack thought and concepts. (Schopenhauer 10)

With Paul Rayment, Coetzee clearly and clinically shows how accidental pain slows everything, and the human being realizes the final truth, Death: "It is only the pain, and the dragging, sleepless nights in this hospital, this zone of humiliation with no place to hide from the pitiless gaze of the young, that make him wish for death" (*Slowman* 13). Pain reminds one of death—that everything ceases in one blow, a fear of the stopping of everything, a blankness, a nothingness, a truth. Death is the permanent termination of human existence. Death resides in pain. The interrelationship between time, pain and death is interconnected and they cannot be separated from one another. It is natural that as society changes, life and the style of the representation of a work of art will also change, but "the uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition" (Benjamin 223). In both life and art, the knowledge of the past and the articulation of past do not refer to recognition of what it was like before, but "to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (Benjamin 255).¹¹

Death and pain are states of bewilderment. This state of bewilderment remains until the point of confrontation with existence. The bewilderment arrives as a question to the self in the form of existence. To exist is to be bewildered and at the advent of the self or being, and to confront the bewilderment, is to understand the essence of being, possibly to understand the meaning of life.¹² Our existence, if not accidental, is circumstantial. By saying that, one cannot repudiate that existence is not accidental. Individuals are the products of certain circumstantial and accidental situations. The accidental nature of Being confirms its presence through social and cultural methods, which are given and acquired in some cases. For Husserl "Individual Being of every kind is, to speak quite generally, *accidental*," (Husserl 53). If it is accidental, it is also circumstantial. Thus, the presence of being is also circumstantial. This relationship of 'self' and the 'other' is always inter-related, and the nature of this interrelationship is always in a flux, and not static. The other becomes the reason and the cause of the circumstance(s). Within these circumstance(s), human beings try to understand the meaning of Being, which one experiences while existing in the universe.¹³ Coetzee's characters emerge from certain circumstances, and explore the meaning of life and death in its totality. They are not just product of a particular time; their representation comes from Coetzee's ethical intervention and his slow delineation of the subjective situation. It is not death that is important; it is the realization of death that remains at the bottom of the existential understanding of Mrs. Curren, which makes her sensitive to the pain of others. Her pain makes her slow; in slowness, she evaluates life and death: "Life is dust between the toes. Life is dust between the teeth. Life is biting the dust. Or: life is drowning, Falling through water, to the floor" (AI 195).

The metaphysical meditation of Michael K in the burrow is not a hatred of life; it is a slow process of rethinking, ruminating, reevaluating, and even philosophizing life in a painful way. He learns about life through a slow process, and learns from his mistakes, not only for himself but for others:

The mistake I made . . . going back in time, was not to have had plenty of seeds, a different packet of seeds for each pocket: pumpkin seeds, marrow seeds, beans, carrot seeds, beet root seeds, onion seeds, tomato seeds, spinach seeds. Seeds in my shoes too, and in the lining of my coat, in case of robbers along the way. Then my mistake was to plant all my seeds together in one patch. I should have planted them one at a time spread out over miles of veld in patches of soil no larger than my hand, and drawn a map and kept it with me at all times so that every night I could make a tour of the sites to water them. Because if there was one thing I discovered out in the country, it was that there is time enough for everything. (LTMK 182-83)

Time plays a crucial role in both narrative and life, and that has been one of Coetzee's philosophical and literary quests. Coetzee's works manifest a philosophy that has comprehended slowness in the process of making meaning. The slow method also reflects the untold story of a people like Michael K and Vercueil who deal life philosophically. These characters shun the notion that philosophy is only a subject of sophisticated language wrapped in academic rhetoric, but rather philosophy is an action emerging from the daily lives of people like Michael K and Vercueil. In everyday life, we fail to recognize these people, but Coetzee's narrative evokes the importance in reflecting upon these beings.

¹¹ See Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production" for a good discussion.

¹² For a further discussion see Terry Eagleton's *The Meaning of Life*.

¹³ For phenomenologists, to achieve self-certitude in existence and to have absolute consciousness one has to be in *Perusia*, that is to say live in presence (Hegel), where essence comes before existence. For Sartre existence precedes essence. To exist is to be there, to be there is to confirm its presence. To confirm its presence is to confirm the sheer givens of the object (*Existentialism is Humanism* 20).

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