DOI: 10.4025/actascilangcult.v33i1.7251

J. M. Coetzee's unsettling portrayals of Elizabeth Costello

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ABSTRACT. This paper addresses the vexed question of animal and human rights by focusing on Coetzee's 'trilogy' connected with Elizabeth Costello's lecturing and experiencing, from her anti-Cartesian stances and sympathetic imagination advocated in *The lives of animals*, through the eight lessons which she frantically goes over and delivers like a 'circus seal', or even happens to be taught (in *Elizabeth Costello*), up to *Slow man*, where she turns into the waspish, vulpine 'Costello woman' preying on tortoise-like Paul Rayment. As such a debasing hybridization may already suggest, the committed intellectual shall lose track of her formerly heated debates on animals as 'embodied souls' and divinely created beings to be held in great respect, to enter a region of ethical ambivalence where biological and axiological boundaries are deviously blurred. Textual evidence and commentaries on Coetzee's fictional world and thematic concerns are provided to single out the stages of this unsettling metamorphosis, a process through which Costello wavers between Franciscan self-effacement and dictatorial omniscience. In the upshot, the striving after a recognition of animal dignity is seemingly supplanted by a debasement of the human person into a pet or a beast, as though she had lost herself in a labyrinth of fumbling speculation.

Keywords: animal welfare, sympathy, ethical ambivalence, anthropocentrism, human debasement, irony.

RESUMO. Os retratos vexatórios de J. M. Coetzee sobre Elizabeth Costello. O problema vexatório sobre os direitos dos animais e das pessoas é analisado pela trilogia de Coetzee, ou seja, a partir das conferências e das experiências de Elizabeth Costello, nas quais propõe sua posição anticartesiana e sua imaginação simpatética defendida em *The lives of animals*, versando sobre as oito aulas que ela ministra como 'uma foca circense' ou até quando é tutelada (em *Elizabeth Costello*), até *Slow man*, onde se transforma na 'fêmea Costello', uma loba que age como predadora junto ao lento Paul Rayment. Como a hibridização acima mencionada pode sugerir, o intelectual pode se esquecer dos debates animados sobre os animais como 'almas com corpo' e seres divinamente criadas, mantidas em grande estima, e enveredar por uma região de ambivalência ética onde as fronteiras biológicas e axiológicas são eliminadas com grande finura. As evidências textuais e comentários sobre o mundo ficcional e temático de Coetzee são investigados para indicar as fases desta metamorfose vexatória. Neste processo, Costello oscila entre a auto-aniquilação franciscana e a onisciência ditatorial. Parece que os esforços para o reconhecimento da dignidade dos animais sejam suplantados por um rebaixamento da pessoa em animal de estimação ou em fera como se Costella tivesse se perdido num labirinto de especulações confusas.

Palavras-chave: bem-estar animal, simpatia, ambivalência ética, antropocentrismo, rebaixamento humano, ironia.

Introdution

Only too aware of the risk one may run when dealing with three of J. M. Coetzee's novels in just a few pages[1], I shall try here to follow a thread which is not totally new to the author's ethics and critique of representation (both of selfhood and otherness). There are indeed a myriad ways in which Coetzee has tackled the vexed questions of oppression, tyrannous silencing and censoring, victimization and blindly self-centred, imperialistic drives. The portrayal of his main characters, as well as of his fictional 'I', is however inescapably related to a cultural politics where the subject feels torn between the imperatives of a hyperconscious, obdurate "cogito" and the morally-laden, often guilt-ridden flights of the sympathetic imagination.

Either demonizing or perversely clinging to Western myths and categories of thought, with their overemphasized 'masculine' and hierarchical

[1] This paper draws attention to "The lives of animals", "Elizabeth Costello: eight lessons" and "Slow man".

imprint, Coetzee's 'creatures' undergo parallel processes of disconcerting initiation, shattering confrontation and spiritual growth, while also experiencing moments of dramatic disillusion or even falling into "disgrace", to use what has become a poignant term in the writer's recent production. The spatialized idea of reciprocity, conceived as a 'boundary zone' eliciting contact with alterity (including children and animals), symbolizes for most of them a crucial standpoint towards envisaging positive changes and possibly 'creative' negotiations out of a historically-engendered "impasse". This is at least so for Magda, the Magistrate, Susan Barton and Elizabeth Curren – a closest ancestor of Elizabeth Costello, as suggested by their names, entangled humanitarian concerns and connections with the literary world – all of them embodying the dissenting 'third voice' and a nascent, if shaky, bridge between polarities and conflicting groups.

A compelling dichotomy with which Coetzee has been wrestling is the one that sets the laws of reason, language and ethno/anthropocentric master-narratives against what may be called the encompassing world of being: a self-sufficient, awe-inspiring biological concordance which humans just cannot ignore, however hard they might try by means of naturalized power relations, acts of naming and ordering, taxonomies and subjugating exploits. The momentous, potentially annihilating leap towards imagining and sensing a sacred corporeal significance unmediated by words is eventually taken by such clumsy 'trespassers' as the elderly and mild protagonist of "Waiting for the barbarians", whose torturers hasten to do away with as a political traitor and therefore a nonentity, an unworthy individual now resembling "a starved beast at the back door, kept alive perhaps only as evidence of the animal that skulks within every barbarian-lover" (COETZEE, 1982, p. 124). The shocking experience of harsh physical suffering generally awakens Coetzee's otherwise sceptical, introverted or paranoiac characters to a different reality, an ontological and affective sphere which makes 'civilized' man feel at a loss: with their eyes finally open, these subjects are brought to taken in the limits of practical reason, legal positions and common sense, but are doomed to indefinitely survive in a state of stupor, unable to translate their epiphanies into concrete modes of action[2].

The condition of stupidity as an 'ethical destination' – an uncanny form of awareness that 'undoes knowledge', recognizes an inviolable alterity and shuns metaphysical or idealistic abstractions in order to focus on the miraculous power of sentience and on the 'question of other lives' besides our own – is what Sam Durrant perceptively speaks about in one of his recent essays[3], underlining the paradoxically somnambulistic quality of this awakening, which overwhelms any dissenter who chooses to reject the imperialistic "ethos" and listen to the inward voice of conscience.

Falling a prey to such a draining of intellectual and psychological energy is also Coetzee's most outspoken mouthpiece for a 'philosophy of the heart' and a process of 'embodied minding'[4] which proceeds to undermine any tenets regarding speciesism or exceptionalism and eventually embraces environmental concerns. The person in question is vegetarian and animalist Elizabeth Costello, whose fervent and sometimes incoherent lecturing and answering back to an ill-disposed audience (her family included) will plunge her into an almost regressive state of dejection and childlike (or senile?) confusion. Exhausted and stupefied, somehow physically bearing within herself the consequences of people's guilt and crimes, this old woman – whose white hair, stooping shoulders and flabby flesh are already underlined in the opening paragraph of "The lives of animals" – shall finally rely on John Bernard, her impassive son, like a sort of father figure.

This reversal of roles sounds less paradoxical when one traces the protagonist back to her creator, John Coetzee, and also considers the fact that Elizabeth's son is an assistant professor of physics and astronomy, hence a metaphorical spokesman for the primacy of the mind and an outright resort to scientific tools and methods. In the epilogue of the 1999 text, Costello reminds thus of a beast bereft of a 'rational soul', in the Aristotelian sense, now paying a high price for her trumpeted abjuration of logocentric modes of thinking. Turned into "another of her own long-suffering animals", as

[2] Such an ongoing, scarcely promising metamorphosis is clearly diagnosed by the autodiegetic narrator in the closing paragraph of "Waiting for the barbarians": "This is not the scene I dreamed of. Like much else nowadays I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere" (COETZEE, 1982, p. 156).

[3] Durrant argues that in Coetzee's fiction "a certain state of ignorance would seem to constitute the ground for a noncoercive relation to the other. While ignorance may simply indicate a profound indifference to other lives, it can also indicate the wisdom of 'knowing not to know', a state of humility or self-doubt that undoes the logic of self-certainty that founds the Cartesian tradition and underwrites the enterprise of colonialism" (DURRANT, 2006, p. 120-121).

[4] See Andriolo (2006, p. 101, author's italics), who further comments: "What is the definition of "imagining" that approximates Coetzee's use of the word? Whereas rational thought stays within the mind, imagining does not; it tentacles into the body [...] Imagining grabs mind and body. What is felt in one's body speaks a mightier authenticity than an abstract idea in one's brain".

Graham Huggan[5] has it, she contemplates extinction and appears to get stuck in the very "transcultural space" (NYMAN, 2003, p. 18) where the animal trope had helped her examine ethical relations along with the construction and negotiation of identities:

> 'It's that I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet every day I see the evidences. The very people I suspect produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to me. Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money'. […] What does she want, he [John] thinks? Does she want me to answer her question for her? They are not yet on the expressway. He pulls the car over, switches off the engine, takes his mother in his arms. He inhales the smell of cold cream, of old flesh. 'There, there', he whispers in her ear. 'There, there. It will soon be over' (COETZEE, 2000b, p. 120-122).

This embarrassing moment of utter alienation falls like a black curtain over the imaginary stage of a hybrid and 'performative' text as "The lives of animals" proves to be, hovering between different genres (from the novel of ideas to the philosophical/ecological treatise and the academic essay) and authorial stances, since Costello's two public addresses at an Appleton College in Massachusetts were originally given by Coetzee as the 1997-98 Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, where he proceeded to rehearse and endorse, as it were, his fictional and feminine double's statements. We can then easily acknowledge that Costello gains additional verisimilitude when compared to other key-figures in Coetzee's "oeuvre": she is actually a "persona" caught up in a middle ground between sheer fiction and the public domain of intellectuals, academy and writers (bearing witness to this is the relevant place held by the paratextual sections in "The lives of animals", comprising footnotes and scholars' comments)[6].

A portrait of the intellectual as an old woman

Variously defined as a "mimetic exercise in embodiment" (WRIGHT, 2006, p. 195), a "mode of textual transvestism" (GRAHAM, 2006, p. 217) or a "surrogate" for the Erasmian fool, allowed to say things which "could not easily be articulated by a public intellectual in the real world" (ATTWELL, 2006, p. 36), Costello is a stand-in for Coetzee's voice and argumentations, which he characteristically hastens to problematize through the confrontation with a chorus of countervoices, thus exerting a two-way pull between a profession of faith and self-guardedness, stark ecocritical beliefs and relativistic perspectives, authority and provisionality. In this connection, one hardly needs mentioning again her lukewarm son, who punctually treats her with a mixed feeling of censorious pity and physical revulsion, and her embittered daughter-in-law Norma, whose "normative" creed is of a piece with her Ph.D. specialism in the philosophy of mind, and who does not seem to grant any possible outlet to "jejune and sentimental" (COETZEE, 2000b, p. 13) approaches to ontological or epistemological principles (her self-righteous conviction that there is "no position outside of reason where you can stand and lecture about reason" [COETZEE, 2000b, p. 80] shall unwittingly score a point when Elizabeth's perorations come to a dead end).

Differently put, old polarities and the problem of incommunicability keep on emerging in transgeneric works – "The lives of animals" and its development in the possibly more controversial "Elizabeth Costello" – where, I would contend, Coetzee sets out to mimic postmodern playfulness and textual deconstruction with a view to diverting or even poking fun at the critic's hermeneutic predicaments. On the one hand, we are expected to know that the names 'Elizabeth' and 'John' have acquired a self-referential power in the author's imaginary world, that Australia is at present both Coetzee's and his "alter ego's" country and that the Irish-sounding surname 'Costello' surreptitiously casts the protagonist as a Joycian character, especially when we learn that her literary fame is mainly due to a feminist rewriting of "Ulysses" (allegedly entitled "The house on Eccles Street" and centred on Marion Bloom). On the other hand, however, such teasing contaminations of identities and flaunted experiments with frame-breaking appear redundant and somewhat tricky as soon as we realize that Elizabeth Costello's legacy rests much less on, say, drunken Punch Costello (in Chapter Fourteen of "Ulysses"), the fascinating 'E.C.' (in "A portrait of the artist as a young man") or Peter Costello's (1992) novel inspired by the character of Leopold

[5] While acknowledging that in "The lives of animals" Costello's "sentimentalism can still engage us," Huggan also notices that her "discourse, for all its altruistic sentiment, frequently betrays self-interested motives, not least by offering a confused mixture of liberal do-goodism and Christian eschatology in which the mission to save lives becomes a displaced quest for self-redemption" (HUGGAN, 2004, p. 712).

[6] See the 1999 version of the text, published by Princeton University Press and edited by Amy Gutmann with the insertion of some 'reflections' on Coetzee's Tanner Lectures by, among others, primatologist Barbara Smuts and philosopher Peter Singer, the author of "Animal liberation" (1975).

Bloom[7], than on Coetzee's long-standing explorations into the artist's androgynous mind. What still underpins his 'nonfiction novels' (or essays embedded in fiction) is in fact an almost compulsive need to investigate the opacity of the self (together with its attitudes towards alterity) and disentangle its ambiguities.

If we choose to pursue this interpretative path – and certainly "Diary of a bad year" prompts us to do so, with its featuring of another eminent Australian writer (alluringly referred to as 'Señor C', 'Mister C' and 'JC') who is invited to state his opinions in a series of philosophical and politically committed essays and, when feeling lonely, likes talking to the birds in the park[8] – we shall catch a glimpse of a continuous trajectory along which Coetzee seems both to have portrayed himself within an increasingly tangible, even realistic frame and to have stifled sex-consciousness in order to investigate, in Woolfian terms, "woman-manly or man-womanly" inner states (WOOLF, 1977, p. 112)[9].

The impending danger of a dissemination or even loss of identity was, for that matter, spelled out by the author himself in one of the interviews collected in "Doubling the point", a work resembling more a spiritual testament than simply a literary or intellectual autobiography. The passage is worth quoting because it impressively foreshadows Costello's fumbling and panic-stricken reactions to the perception of violence and bodies in pain:

> If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not,' and the proof that it "is" is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt. (One can get away with such crudeness in fiction; one can't in philosophy, I'm sure) […] it is not that one "grants" the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body "takes" this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable. (Let me add, "entirely" parenthetically, that I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering. These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defenses against that being-overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so) (COETZEE, 1992, p. 248, author's italics)[10].

It is just this condition of helplessness and self-obliteration that Elizabeth experiences in the brutal presence of human and nonhuman suffering, for which she is instinctively driven to atone, no matter how little philosophical consistency (and how much intuitive insight) her argumentations may have. In her critical view of economic laws, the animal conveniently featured as a Cartesian "bête-machine", light-heartedly confined to factory farms and waiting to be slaughtered for meat production, stands as an epitome for the tortured body, which "ipso facto" acquires its own authority against the course of history. Livestock industries and abattoirs, but also testing laboratories, zoo cages or the instruments and devices for ethological research dramatically highlight a realm where "bodies are their own signs" (COETZEE, 1987, p. 157)[11]. Yet, facing us here is not so much the placid and watery home of Friday in "Foe", as something akin to the dark 'torture chamber' unashamedly staging victimization, a safely enclosed space where suffering is inflicted with the connivance of institutionalized power[12]. Although Costello's protest primarily concerns animals and their

[7] The parallel between Elizabeth Costello's experiment and real Peter Costello's was drawn by Briggs (2002, p. 11), who got however no positive feedback from Coetzee: "I finally got up my courage sufficiently to ask the chill J. M. Coetzee about "The house on Eccles Street". Did he have some particular reason for using Joyce, I lamely queried. 'No particular reason', he replied".

[8] Interestingly enough, Coetzee's "Diary of a bad year" evokes some dramatically central images from the Costello texts, such as those of the body; animal flesh and slaughtering; frogs fighting for survival; the gate as a metaphor for a final destination beyond death. See Coetzee (2007, p. 59-61, 63-65, 211, 226).

[9] My suggestion squares with Coetzee's winking at Woolf's feminist attack on the patriarchal canon as glorified in and through the British Museum. Compare, for instance, the following passages from "Jacob's room" and "Elizabeth Costello", where the protagonist nostalgically talks about her 'first-born', that is her first book, which she can't help visualizing on the shelves of the prestigious library: "Not so very long ago the workmen had gilt the final 'y' in Lord Macaulay's name, and the names stretched in unbroken file round the dome of the British Museum […] Miss Julia Hedge, the feminist, waited for her books. They did not come. She wetted her pen. She looked about her. Her eye was caught by the final letters in Lord Macaulay's name. And she read them all round the dome – the names of great men which remind us – 'Oh damn', said Julia Hedge, 'why didn't they leave room for an Eliot or a Brontë?'" (WOOLF, 1992, p. 90-91); "I published my first book in 1955, when I was living in London […] I would not rest until I had their [my publishers'] assurance that the deposit copies would be mailed the same afternoon, to Scotland and the Bodleian and so forth, but above all to the British Museum. That was my great ambition: to have my place on the shelves of the British Museum, rubbing shoulders with the other Cs, the great ones: Carlyle and Chaucer and Coleridge and Conrad" (COETZEE, 2004, p. 16). One also reads thus about Costello's strategy with interviewers: "A paragraph about her adolescent reading (voracious, unselective), then a jump to Virginia Woolf, whom she first read as a student, and the impact Woolf had on her" (COETZEE, 2004, p. 9-10).

[10] With hindsight, another comment can be shown to throw light on Costello's sensibility and behaviour, at least as far as "The lives of animals" and "Elizabeth Costello" are concerned: "Violence, as soon as I sense its presence within me, becomes introverted as violence against myself: I cannot project it outward. I am unable to, or refuse to, conceive of a liberating violence […] I cannot but think: if all of us imagined violence as violence against ourselves, perhaps we would have peace" (COETZEE, 1992, p. 337). These considerations have of course a relevant bearing on Durrant's concept of 'descendence' and contention that in "place of the mental process of imaginative *pro*jection, Coetzee's subjects undergo a bodily experience of *ab*jection, in which the subject is violently expelled from the domain of language and society" (DURRANT, 2006, p. 130). Boehmer also notices that Coetzee's characters often turn to physically "carrying guilt" and that the "truth of suffering therefore is acknowledged through the refusal to represent it and instead to bear or act it on the body, in the body" (BOEHMER, 2006, p. 140).

[11] Coetzee's conception of the "ineluctability of the body" has been expanded upon by May, who holds that "the body in Coetzee is also, potentially, a friend to the mind – a force in its own right, and one that may impose its own auspicious and peculiar meaning on that same imperial mind and self" (MAY, 2001, p. 393).

[12] The reference is to the well-known Into the dark chamber: the writer and the South African state (1986), in Coetzee (1992, p. 361-368).

impudent assimilation into a man-centred utilitarian system, what she calls "production facilities" (COETZEE, 2000b, p. 17), there is little doubt that the paradigm of the body and its unquestionable rights represents an axiological touchstone which leads her to see "the similarity between human and animal life as lying in their fullness of their own being" (BELL, 2006, p. 180).

Indeed, this fundamental premise is voiced more than once by Costello, who cannot bring herself to completely deny the Christian belief that human beings were "created in the image of God" (COETZEE, 2000b, p. 21), but at the same time refuses to turn that assumption into a rhetorical device aimed at banishing nonhuman creatures to a thing-like status. The sooner we free ourselves from the anthropocentric prejudice relating to an omnipotent Reason – too often boiling down to the "specialism of a rather narrow self-regenerating intellectual tradition" (COETZEE, 2000b, p. 29) and therefore to a tautological exercise – the deeper we may grasp how, say, bat-being and human-being are both phenomenologically different and equal in intensity, because "being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being" and to exist "as an embodied soul" (COETZEE, 2000b, p. 45). Through her dismantling of René Descartes's notorious formula, Elizabeth then manages to dethrone cogitation in favour of a "Sentio ergo sum" logic rooted in the joyful sensation of being alive "in" and "to" the world.

That is why she can be said to embrace a sweepingly 'organocentric' cause which regards with suspicion any claim for "humanoid rights" (COETZEE, 2000b, p. 31) to be accorded to the great apes on the grounds of their genetic closeness to man, of the ties of kindred placing the *Hominoidea* higher than other families or species. It is not so much a question of drawing up an earthly chain of being in which *Homo sapiens* blessedly stands at the top of the tree, as an ethical urge to imagine a biological, egalitarian community where all share the same seeds of life, irrespective of any given group's different faculties and degrees of consciousness. These considerations usher us again into Coetzee's feminine ventriloquism which I was speaking of: if it is true that contemporary literature often exhumes the animal figure in connection with a collective perception of the "body in crisis", and that animals emerge there "sometimes as fields for reconsidering the boundaries of 'humanity', sometimes as an index of the restorative authenticity and 'moral gravity' of embodied life" (CHU, 2007, p. 83), then Costello's gendered sensibility might be brought back to a redeeming, ancestral conception endowing woman with a "maternal and biological wisdom" that opens the way to an "ecumenicism of love" and sees non-rational creatures' inner nobility as of a piece with their uncorrupted primordial nature (FARNETTI, 2001, p. 273).

Costello's female identity, in other words, assumes a great significance when related not only to Coetzee's usual characterization of women intent on challenging authority and the structures of power, but also to an atavistic, almost sacramental creed and a 'natural ethics' which clash with a masculine demonization of women as inferior creatures, dominated by base and feral instincts. The negatively connoted triad female/body/beast (all converging in the territory of the subhuman) is here being replaced by a sex-transcendent, interspecies kinship resting on the embodied-being's essence. The mechanistic ideology underlying "res extensa" is thus overshadowed by a need to morally retrieve the affective sensation of "being a body with limbs that have extension in space" (COETZEE, 2000b, p. 46).

The 'vulpine' side

For all her passionate advocacy, which has dealt with animal welfare on engaging speculative levels, Costello appears to undergo an uncanny metamorphosis throughout her textual life, as though the visceral energy connoting her speech in "The lives of animals" perversely got the upper hand in "Elizabeth Costello" and "Slow man", where she will keep on pressing the point too far, until the contention for commonality and the fight against will-to-power are bafflingly overturned, giving way to a paradoxical debasement of the human subject into a pet or a beast. Rather than re-drawing the boundaries between human and animal rights and consolidating a space for a due post-humanist recognition, she will enter a tricky, liminal zone allowing again for the humiliation of the weak and the sly exploitation of those who do not 'rate' highly on the ontological axis.

Bluntly put, her former animalist crusade, where she endeavoured to hold anthropomorphic and zoomorphic fallacies at bay, appears to lose its bite and be somewhat brushed off by a tendency to represent a physically or spiritually maimed humanity through a stereotyped repertoire of animal metaphors. In this case, the 'blissfulness' of living as a body-soul is put under erasure by the anguished realization that an ailing or disabled body might thwart the individual and turn into a cage which is both stifling and open to attack. Though still a crucial paradigm, the animal consequently ceases to

be cast as an embodied alterity worthy of our respect and is disconcertingly brought back, to express it in a pun, into the 'circuit of the circus', that is into an allegorical realm foregrounding power relations, taming, mimicry and performing.

After her threshold experience in "At the gate", the allusively entitled last chapter of "Elizabeth Costello" – a lesson about judgement and belief, living and passing away towards infinity, which this time she does not give, like the 'Gates Lectures' in "The lives of animals", but is actually being taught in a Kafkaesque way – the protagonist shall come back in "Slow man" as a sort of ghost from the underworld, a fiendish spirit groping its way out of a hellish exile. Hence, it would seem, her curious experimenting with the unassuming 'slow man' type: elderly, tortoise-like Paul Rayment, a parodied version of St. Paul who, instead of being struck by theophanic vision, must come to terms with a terrible life change when run over by a car and consequently having one leg amputated from knee to foot. He thus starts feeling himself as a faulty, second-rate human being – and is somewhat treated like one – until things get worse when the waspish, vulpine and vulturous novelist bumps into him out of the blue and settles down in his flat, encroaching upon his freedom as well as teasing him into action.

It is indeed difficult to ignore the clues testifying to a pervasive, ongoing process of hybridization between animals and humans which, far from setting the framework for an unprejudiced interspecies dialogue, seems now to draw upon the clichés of a bogus bestiary where nonhuman creatures are basically referred to as a reservoir of ready-made, catch-all generalizations. The wasp's stinging and the fox's cunning in "Slow man", or, in "Elizabeth Costello", the circus seal's compliant going through with the show, the cat's slyness, the dying whale's resistance to hungry flecks of goldfish and even the imperialistic imagination's dismissive portrayals of the postcolonial writer as an aping Disneyian character (Daisy Duck or Mickey Mouse) are all attributes epitomized by the 'Costello woman', to use Paul's disparaging epithet. Further traces of a bitter and stale playfulness are to be found in Elizabeth's unworldly vision of an old dog, lying stretched out at the foot of the gate which separates her from "a desert of sand and stone" (COETZEE, 2004, p. 224): a dog whose 'lion-coloured hide' might recall a lost feral authority rooted in mystery cults, but whose symbolism is soon trivialized on account of the predictable "anagram GOD-DOG. "Too literary", she thinks again. A curse on literature!" (COETZEE, 2004, p. 224-225). Moreover, Paul's introversion crudely plays havoc with the identity fastened on him by his initials, 'P. R.', which mockingly relate him to a 'Public Relations' man, while his surname rings a Prufrockian bell when we consider the connotations of 'frock' and 'raiment' as masks and carapaces for the self.

In perplexing ways, a devious practice of turning people into commodities or experimental subjects appears to supplant Costello's former sympathizing with a Derridean concept of the 'seeing animal' and a theoretical parable of 'becoming animal' which argues for a sort of escape, a temporary dissolution of the individual within a fluid, magnetic region of non-signification. As recently pointed out by Tom Herron, in "The lives of animals" she actually "restates Derrida's distinction between the inert animal of philosophy and the multiple lives of animals in poetry" (HERRON, 2005, p. 469-470)[13] and, I would add, takes pains to imagine a converging of man's creative empathy and animal sentience: witness her second lecture, precisely devoted to 'The Poets and the Animals', where she singles out Ted Hughes's poems on the jaguar as telling examples of the artist's engagement with and recovered ancestral attentiveness to animals.

If her stress on the currents of life that move within the feline body and on the poet's "feeling his way toward a different kind of being-in-the-world" (COETZEE, 2000b, p. 85) resonates with the above-mentioned concept of a transmuting flux, the assumption that humans can on these grounds embody animals seems to let anthropocentrism slip in by the back door, shedding a sinister light on some of her former propositions. In her first lecture, Costello had in fact contended that "there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination" (COETZEE, 2000b, p. 49): when flashing forward to "Slow man", one is soon confronted with the Janus-faced nature of this projection, which has apparently come down to a desire for dictatorial omniscience, as exemplified by her bossy intrusiveness in Paul Rayment's life. This inbred ambiguity also affects her comments on Red Peter, the educated and wounded 'ex-ape' in Franz Kafka's 'Report to an academy' (1917), and its supposed historical twin: Sultan, one of the apes that the psychologist Wolfgang Köhler set about training and 'humanizing' on the island of Tenerife in the second decade of the twentieth century, capitalizing on the idea that the chimpanzee could seal a link between man and beast in the scale of being. While

[13] Herron's hypotexts and sources are J. Derrida, The animal that therefore I am (more to follow) (DERRIDA, 2002); "A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia" (DELEUZE; GUATARRI, 1980) and "Kafka: toward a minor literature" (DELEUZE; GUATARRI, 1986).

condemning this kind of experiments – which only manage to bracket and distort the ape's identity through a tautological attempt at translating otherness into a mentally defective (and therefore harmless) sameness, in other words to have primates "ape" us (JOLLY, 2006) – Elizabeth cannot help providing Sultan with an allegedly 'human, all too human' bent for intellectual speculation, as opposed to the instruments of practical reason that the scientist would inculcate in him[14].

Conclusion

To conclude, I shall touch on some momentous passages that substantiate this moral and epistemological detouring within "Elizabeth Costello" and "Slow man". The 2003 text – which chronologically follows, and actually incorporates, "The lives of animals", although most of its sections were published separately since 1997 – objectifies a pivotal phase within Costello's development. The motifs of role playing, age and exhaustion are here so permeating that any official encounter with academics, intellectuals and journalists turns out to be an unwelcome ordeal, a wearying diatribe with unyielding foes. That is why she now badly needs her son's moral support and is deeply hurt by her pious sister's cold resistance, as if her own sharp wit and long artistic practice began to undergo a wholesale devaluation and Costello were by this time under the sway of doubt, falling victim to Coetzee-like 'double thoughts' about the authority of authorship and its being a "mouthpiece for the divine" (COETZEE, 2004, p. 31). What is worse, she is said to no longer believe "very strongly in belief" (COETZEE, 2004, p. 39), nor in storytelling, writing and even in herself. Just a short step from here to an agnostic surrender which dooms Elizabeth to state her case before a mysterious bench of judges, perhaps a dig at the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and an openly Kafkian, grotesquely dystopian revisiting of the soul's afterlife pilgrimage towards the 'gates of heaven'. I am referring to the already mentioned Lesson 8 ("At the gate"), where she will be asked to make a 'statement of belief' and predictably find herself unable to do so, floating between sincere puzzlement and heated self-defence, until she finally establishes the well-known point about relying on the heart, as opposed to the conceptualized axiology in which the unearthly tribunal seems to identify the 'moral backbone' of humanity.

Elizabeth's stand proves relatively firm as long as she lets the animal world take the podium in her argumentations: the ram sacrificed by Odysseus on the border of the kingdom of the dead, and especially the thousands of little frogs which, in the scorching Australian season, paradoxically survive by burying themselves underground, waiting for the torrential rains and hence "resurrection", are said to epitomize the "thing itself" (COETZEE, 2004, p. 217), that is the natural miracle of life cycles. If the reader is now quite familiar with such biocentric stances of hers, the narrative ultimately branches off into directions that weaken her position: ready to concede that she might "believe in what does not bother to believe" in her (COETZEE, 2004, p. 218), and also that her task as a writer and "secretary of the invisible" (COETZEE, 2004, p. 199) entails listening to many voices and therefore endorsing "provisional" beliefs, we admittedly feel at a loss when, after her final experiencing an identity crisis, we understand that she "lives by belief, she works by belief, she is a creature of belief" (COETZEE, 2004, p. 222).

A cure for this schizoid estrangement imbued with Borgesian irony is somehow recommended in the Postscript, where we are solicited to get a keener sense out of Costello's standing before unknown judges, trying to explain herself in a language that does not seem to be English any more: "is it a condition of existence in this place that all speak a common tongue, Esperanto for example, and are the sounds that issue from her own lips not, as she deludedly believes, English words but Esperanto words […]?" (COETZEE, 2004, p. 212). Coetzee is

[14] Such are Costello's remarks: "At every turn Sultan is driven to think the less interesting thought. From the purity of speculation (Why do men behave like this?) he is relentlessly propelled toward lower, practical, instrumental reason (How does one use this to get that?) […] a carefully plotted psychological regimen conducts him *away* from ethics and metaphysics toward the humbler reaches of practical reason" (COETZEE, 2000b, p. 37). With regard to Kafka's character, she similarly treads on thin ice when opening her first lecture by means of a comparison between her own uneasiness and Westernized, brainwashed Red Peter facing the inquisitiveness of the learned society, to whom the evolution of primates is bound to remain a mystery. Another rash analogy, this time resentfully rejected by her audience, is the one Elizabeth makes between the Jews' extermination at Treblinka and the animals which are systematically killed to supply our food demand: the keyword is in this case 'holocaust', which in ancient history significantly indicated both an animal and a human sacrifice. Leaving aside the crudeness of the parallel with the Shoàh, one may conjecture that Costello's response has been subconsciously elicited by a holocaust televised during the 1980s and 1990s: the images of mass slaughtering and burning of cattle affected by BSE, or 'mad cow' disease. Her calling for new bioethical criteria does not in fact stand at odds with the way in which the threatening advent of BSE has led to the "disruption of cherished 'boundaries' between those categories (civilization and savagery; cannibalism and carnivory; human and animal) upon which our human self-definition depends […] the so-called 'mad cow' outbreak, from the 1980s to the present, posed (and poses) a threat less to our brains (in the disease's lethal spongification of the cerebellar region), than to our identity as 'civilized' humans (rather than 'savages' or 'animals') and to our anthropocentric being-in-the-world" (TIFFIN, 2007, p. 11-12). Tiffin's closing comments are particularly poignant: "The pyres on which dead cows and sheep were burned forced, however uncomfortably, a Holocaust/holocaust comparison and acted as a reminder that the horrific Nazi technologies of death were in part inspired by observation of the production-line killings of the Chicago slaughter yards" (TIFFIN, 2007, p. 24). The issues of genocide and Nazi violence will be further discussed in Lesson 6 of "Elizabeth Costello", from which at least this passage needs quoting: "The death camps would not have been dreamed up without the example of the meat-processing plants before them" (COETZEE, 2004, p. 156).

in fact treading a path already beaten by John Banville, who in "The Newton letter" had cited Hofmannsthal's (1995) "Ein Brief", also known as "The Lord Chandos letter", to epically render Isaac Newton's troubled relinquishing of scientific pursuits and their epistemic paradigms. On his part, Banville had appealed to Lord Chandos's abjuration of literary culture and verbal language – in favour of sensory perception and a merging with the unselected flux of life, a realm of self-absorbed "commonplace things" (the epiphanic image of a dog lying in a patch of sun soon comes to mind, and is not lost on Coetzee either) – in order to put us on our guard against the cold "big game of the intellect" (BANVILLE, 1999, p. 58).

Coetzee introduces instead a seventeenth-century literary double of Elizabeth Costello, namely *E*lizabeth *C*handos (Lord Chandos's alleged wife), and entrusts her with the task of diagnosing the catastrophic effects of the learned man's regression and derangement. In her sorrowful account, Lord Chandos has turned away from human intercourse and set about consorting with fleas, beetles, dogs and rats, inexorably going adrift in a sea of ecstatic openness to alterity. In her desperate cry for help to Francis Bacon, a monumental spokesman for modern scientific revolution – an 'advancement of learning' accorded by empirical observation and the mastery of objective language (as well as of nature) – Costello's ancestor can be shown to warn against the pitfalls of an unbounded sympathetic imagination and call for a re-assessment of intellectual powers which might counter "the promises and perils of imagining" (ANDRIOLO, 2006, p. 100)[15].

How much Costello herself shall be affected by this plea does not come home to us, at least as far as the 2003 text is concerned, but her veering away from empathetic understanding hardly goes unnoticed in "Slow man", where she approaches helpless and hurt Paul Rayment as just one of the innumerable 'voices' (or characters) she has run across during her literary career, and "doggedly" proceeds to demand action and confession from him. The word "dog" powerfully resonates throughout the novel, where Paul compares his condition as a "diminished man" (COETZEE, 2006, p. 32-33) to a dog's life, thus reminding of David Lurie's fate and choices. While however Lurie the 'dog-man' commits himself to mourning the animals' deaths, without expecting to enter their consciousness but rather clutching at the ethical straws of 'being with nothing,' Paul is insistently prompted and read through by Costello's playing God to him, a 'slow' Job whose gaze she fumblingly diverts towards angelic presences and divine beauties.

Boundaries are overtly trespassed when she tries to impose her own schemes of romantic intrigue, breaking off his potential relationship with the caring (if married) nurse Marijana Jokić and perversely arranging a "blind" date with Marianna Popova, a blind girl whose name already features her as a surrogate for the other woman (herself an 'emanation' of the Marion Bloom being offered a new life in "The house on Eccles Street"?). In the face of this, Paul turns his otherwise controlled resistance into an open attack on the novelist's "biologico-literary experiment" (COETZEE, 2006, p. 114):

> You should open a puppet theatre, or a zoo […] Buy one, and put us in cages with our names on them. "Paul Rayment: canis infelix. Marianna Popova: pseudocaeca (migratory)". And so forth. Rows and rows of cages holding the people who have, as you put it, "come to you" in the course of your career as a liar and fabulator (COETZEE, 2006, p. 117, author's italics).

In the end, Elizabeth shall be left to her own devices by a 'miserable dog' who nevertheless proves untameable and, somehow rewriting the epilogue of "Disgrace", is not afraid of giving her up[16]. It is now the crippled dog's turn to carve out a space for himself, shying away from any charitable undertaker's or exacting master's care.

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[15] Continues Andriolo: "Rational thought is a human limitation that estranges us from the natural world, but we need some of it for our social existence, for communicating among each other. In the end, Coetzee has Lady Chandos call on rational thought to destabilize all-out imagining. The dialectical circuit is closed" (ANDRIOLO, 2006, p. 102). Chandos's recognition of the inviolable nature of any materialized form of being leads us instructively back to Costello's paralyzing perception of a "crime of stupefying proportions" (COETZEE, 2000b, p. 121) being consumed around us.

[16] This is how "Disgrace" draws to its close: "He opens the cage door. 'Come', he says, bends, opens his arms. The dog wags its crippled rear, sniffs his face, licks his cheeks, his lips, his ears. He does nothing to stop it. 'Come'. Bearing him in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. 'I thought you would save him for another week', says Bev Shaw. 'Are you giving him up?' 'Yes, I am giving him up'" (COETZEE, 2000a, p. 220). Paul's final rejection of Elizabeth's 'sentimental' proposal (about the two of them cheerfully touring the Australian land together) also takes us back to Michael K's fleeing from the hauntingly humanitarian concerns of the medical officer (at the same time, Michael dreams of a blissful immersion in the rhythms of country life to be shared with a humble and unobtrusive companion).

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Received on June 3, 2009.
Accepted on November 12, 2009.