The Power of Literature in J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*

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ABSTRACT: The power of literature has the ability to elevate the lives of others, including non-human animals. This is poignantly dramatised in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*. The titular character of this fiction asserts that literature has the capacity to imagine and inhabit the existence of others, including non-human animals. If this is possible then animal life can be represented as being just as valuable as a human life. In *Elizabeth Costello* we are confronted with ethical and moral questions to do with the valuing human above that of non-human animals.

The Power of Literature

There is a persistent anxiety voiced in the novels of J.M. Coetzee that has to do with power of representation to manipulate and shape perception. In part, the folkloric power of literature lies in its ability to represent all kinds of life, from material, embodied beings—human animals and nonhuman animals, to immaterial disembodied things—ideas, thoughts, and sensations. The material and the immaterial, the visible and invisible, the embodied and the disembodied all dwell within and through language of literature.

Literature's limits and possibilities, depths and surfaces are its language. Although Jacques Derrida rightly observes that characters have 'no depth beyond their literary' existence there is still a materiality about language that is entwined within materiality of the world.[1] Language is not only of the world and in the world—it is a world. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

> Language itself is a world, itself a being—a world and a being to the second power since it does not speak in a vacuum, since it speaks of being and of the world…[it is] not a mask over Being, but—if one knows how to grasp it with all its roots and its foliation—the most valuable witness to Being.[2]

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1 Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 153.

2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), pp. 96-126.

Coetzee's novels are acutely aware of how language's testimony to being can be unreliable. Whether conscious or not, our values and beliefs are embedded in our language. Part of the power of being a human animal is about being in control of representation. As Derrida writes:

> No-one has ever authorized himself to say of animals that they invent, even if, as it is sometimes said, their production and manipulation of instruments resemble human invention. On the other hand, man can invent gods, animals, and especially divine animals.[3]

In the novels Foe, Disgrace and Elizabeth Costello, there is a persistent uneasiness about language's ability to invent and manipulate others. Although novels have the capacity to create entire worlds—their completeness is always compromised by the fact that they are products of singular vision that is embedded within a particular time, place, culture, and history. Literature thought as a 'secondary power' of vision, not only bears witness to being it also maintains its enigma—for our language cannot know or access all, especially the lives of others, and moreover, our animal others.

Language's Myopia

The limits and prejudices of the English language are considered in the novel Disgrace through the character, David Lurie who is:

> More and more convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulatedness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud the language has stiffened. Pressed into the mould of English, Petrus's story would come out arthritic, bygone.
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> What appeals to him in Petrus is his face and his hands.[4]

Interestingly 'what appeals' to Lurie is Petrus's flesh. Petrus is a black South African farmer who shares a small land holding with Lurie's daughter, Lucy. Lurie thinks that time hard work and history have marked his 'face and hands'. The language of his physical being reveals much. He also sees that he is 'a man of patience, energy, resilience. A

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3 Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 339.

4 J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London, UK: Secker & Warburg, 1999), p. 117

peasant … a man of the country. A plotter and a schemer and no doubt a liar too, like peasants everywhere. Honest toil and honest cunning.'[5]

Bodies reveal, express and carry stories—they are language embodied. The flesh of all creatures is expressive of their being-in-the-world. Movements and mannerisms, sounds and silences are idiomatic of a style of existence that is not a superficial performance of identity—but a deep expression of our embeddings in the world of matter as matter.

In Coetzee's novel Foe Cruso's black slave Friday is also inaccessible to representation. In part this is because 'slave-hunters' render him mute by cutting out his tongue.[6] His loss of speech makes his story difficult, if not impossible to tell. His mutilated body carries the wound of a past that cannot be accessed. In Foe Coetzee writes:

> …The shadow whose lack you feel is there: it is the loss of Friday's tongue…The story of Friday's tongue is a story unable to be told, or unable to be told by me. That is to say, many stories can be told of Friday's tongue, but the true story is buried within Friday, who is mute. The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday.[7]

The question is—would it be possible to access the truth of Friday's story even if he had a tongue? In order for his story to be available to Anglo-Saxon eyes and ears, it would need to be 'pressed into the mould of English.' This would not only change his story—it would also no longer be his story. The essence of Friday, the true Friday, is the missing piece in Foe. In the words of Susan Barton, the novel's central character and narrator:

> … the story of Friday … is properly not a story but a puzzle or hole in the narrative (I picture it as a buttonhole, carefully cross-stitched around, but empty, waiting for the button).[8]

Foe responds to Susan Barton's criticism arguing that there is a difference between his silence, which is the silence of an author and the silence 'of a being such as Friday'—he argues,

> Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal; I say he is a laundryman and he becomes a laundryman. What is the truth of Friday? You will

5 *Ibid.*
6 J.M. Coetzee, *Foe* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1986), p. 23.
7 *Ibid.,* p. 118.
8 *Ibid.,* p. 121.

> respond: he is neither cannibal nor laundryman, these are mere names, they do not touch his essence, he is a substantial body, he is himself, Friday is Friday. But that is not so. No matter what he is to himself (is he anything to himself? — how can he tell us?), what he is to the world is what I make him. Therefore the silence of Friday is a helpless silence, a child unborn, a child waiting to be born that cannot be born'.[9]

Here Friday is compared to an unborn child. Earlier in the novel, he is likened to a dog. His inability to speak and to challenge the speech, desires and representations of others, conveys a certain vulnerability and passivity that is ascribed to pre-linguistic human-animals and non-human animals. There is, however, still a language embedded in and as Friday's body—one that may not be accessible or translatable into English, but nonetheless one that resonates in the world of flesh. For he is after all still described as a 'substantial body' whose silence and inaccessibility shapes the narrative of Foe.

Language's Body

The question of embodied life is central in Elizabeth Costello. It is critical to thinking about the rights of nonhuman animals. We are first introduced to notion of 'embodiment' in the opening chapter on 'Realism' as Coetzee writes:

> Realism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things. So when it needs to debate ideas…realism is driven to invent situations—walks in the countryside, conversations—in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them. The notion of embodying turns out to be pivotal. In such debates ideas do not and indeed cannot float free: they are tied to the speakers by whom they are enounced… [10]

Realism's need to anchor ideas in bodies is a way controlling ideas and bodies. It is also a way of continuing the myth of an uncomplicated, direct relationship between words and things, names and objects, concepts and the world of matter. To an extent, Coetzee follows the conventions of realism by giving voice to ideas through the character of Elizabeth Costello. However, in doing so, he also uses this opportunity to disrupt many of the assumptions of realism by allowing his main character to assert that its 'word-mirror' has been irreparably broken (p. 19). As Costello argues:

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9 *Ibid.,* pp. 121-122.

10 J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (London, UK: Secker &Warburg, 2003), p. 9. All further references to this novel will appear parenthetically in the body of the text.

> There used to be a time when we…used to believe that when the text said, 'On the table stood a glass of water,' there was indeed a table, and a glass of water on it, and we had only to look in the word-mirror of the text to see them…There used to be a time, we believe, when we could say who we were. Now we are just performers speaking our parts. The bottom has dropped out. (p. 19)

Another fundamental law of realism is disrupted when Coetzee's omniscient narration addresses the reader directly to inform us that it will skip over scenes in order to move the narrative along. In so doing, what is brought to the fore are the artificial connections between ideas and bodies, words and characters, authors and readers.

The character of Elizabeth Costello is a famous Australian author who now in her late 60s spends her time travelling the world, giving speeches, and accepting awards for her achievements. In her speeches, she has a talent for saying things that her audience does not want to hear. On this occasion, she questions ability of words to 'mean' what they 'mean.' She questions her art and its capacity to signify and to be significant in order to transcend the here and now. The mortality of words, her words and the words of novels are in part about language's failure to transcend its earthliness. And so like all things of the mortal world, our language dies with us. This is Costello's vision of a nightmare future where there are no more books in libraries because like their dead and forgotten authors, they too are forgotten and reduced to dust.

What is striking about this first speech on realism is Costello's strong sense of the impermanent. She is an author in mourning for her impermanent art. What is brought to the fore here is mortal nature of our words, her words, everyone else's words. Even though the connections between ideas and bodies, words and things are arbitrary—the ideas and the bodies, and the words and the things all share in a finitude. The shattered word-mirror reminds us of the fragility of human invention in its failed desire to transcend the worldly and the material.

The notion of embodying is not only 'pivotal' to the conventions of realism; it is also crucial to Elizabeth Costello's advocacy of animal rights. As she argues in defence of the embodied existence of a bat:

> To be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being. Bat being in the first case, human being in the second, maybe…To be full of being is to live as a body-soul. One name for the experience of full being is joy.
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> To be alive is to be a living soul. An animal—and we are all animals—is an embodied soul. (pp. 77-78)

In arguing for an 'embodied soul' Costello disrupts a philosophical and Christian tradition of dividing the world up into compartments, sections and positions. Divisions are hierarchical—they reveal language's prejudices. The separation of a body and soul is key to distinguishing and valuing human animal life over nonhuman animal life.

Language's Prejudice

Another way of distinguishing species, involves the invisible mind—a faculty associated with reason. Costello blames reason, the God of reason and the philosophers of reason, Aristotle and Descartes, for denying animals their fullness of being. She suggests that it is far easier to treat any living creature as a 'thing' to be used, exploited, and eaten, if it is thought to be dumb, unconscious and unaware.

Like the Negro-slave Friday in Foe such silent 'creatures have no power' over representation. Because they cannot talk to us or challenge us, we are at liberty to invent their otherness. Costello argues that, 'Animals have only their silence left with which to confront us. Generation after generation, heroically, our captives refuse to speak to us.' (p.70.).

Divisions try to make the world less complicated by ordering, classifying, and valuing ideas, species, and all things that can be thought, imagined and experienced. But all that divisions do is cover up the messiness and complexity of being alive: of being a body in a world of many bodies. Costello explores this complexity in both her life and in her speeches. She acknowledges the true strangeness of being a body that thinks, feels, and writes:

> Not only is she in this body, this thing which not in a thousand years could she have dreamed up, so far beyond her powers would it be, she somehow is this body; and all around her on the square, on this beautiful morning, these people, somehow, are their bodies too.
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> Somehow; but how? How on earth can bodies not only keep themselves clean using blood (blood!) but cogitate upon the mystery of their existence and make utterances about it and now and again have little ecstasies? Does it count as a belief, whatever property she has that allows her to continue to be this body when she has not the faintest idea how the trick is done? (p. 210)

Deeply aware of her failing body, she calls it a 'gentle lumbering monster' (p. 210). Nevertheless her ageing body still has the capacity to surprise in its 'little ecstasies' and 'utterances.' Her body is both strange and familiar. It is strange to think of oneself as a body, as if thinking means that we have somehow thought ourselves out of our bodies. Importantly, Costello points out that she is not 'in' her body, as if she is

held captive by it, but is her body. The thought that we are somehow trapped in our bodies is, according to Gillian Rose, 'another travesty of Plato for the soul is not a prisoner of the body' but rather the 'body is the soul.'[11]

Non-human animals are neither dumb nor mute matter since their bodies are their souls. Like us, they are an embodied consciousness and embedded life. We share a common flesh and a common mortality. We all desire, feel pain and die. Because the thoughts and feelings of animals cannot be translated into a common idiom does not mean they lack reason or intelligence, rather it means that we are yet to devise a language imaginative and open enough to hear their stories.

Perhaps literature has the flexibility to do this. As a particular kind of language, literature has the capacity to invent and imagine all kinds of life—the known and unknown, the material and the immaterial, the familiar and the strange. Derrida suggests that the democracy of literature lies in its ability 'to say everything in every way…,' and as such it 'stands on the edges of everything, almost beyond everything, including itself.'[12] Derrida's notion of literature standing 'on the edges of everything' captures the freedom and possibility of its form.

Costello suggests that being a writer of fiction involves thinking oneself into the lives of imaginary characters. This of course is not an easy task but if it were easy, she says 'it wouldn't be worth doing' since "'t is the otherness that is the challenge' (p. 12). She argues that if it is possible to create and imagine the lives of non-existent beings, then it is possible to think oneself into the lives of real animals. This is about sharing 'the being of another' and 'sympathy has everything to do with' this (p. 79).

Literature's Imagination

By imaginatively embodying the world of non-human animals we would in turn expose ourselves to our own animality. Indeed, the edges between the human animal and the non-animal would blur and disappear. For some, such an undertaking may be dangerous because it would shatter the veils of convention that define and structure our humanity—and much of this has to do with asserting our difference from other animals.

There is no doubt an enormous responsibility that comes with literature's freedom of being able to 'say everything in everyway.' There

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11 Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.10.

12 Jacques Derrida, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature,' *Acts of Literature* (London, UK: Routledge, 1992), pp. 36, 47.

is also the risk of failure. For we are only mortals, and so whatever we do and make can only ever be of the same mortal substance—and eventually one day, as Elizabeth Costello predicts, it will all be consigned to oblivion.

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