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J.M. COETZEE'S HALL OF MIRRORS: *ELIZABETH COSTELLO* AND THE ANIMAL-POET

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By
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In his closing remarks in Book X of the *Republic*, Socrates proclaims “an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry.” Presumably, Plato’s Socratic dialogue has decisively settled the “ancient quarrel” by subverting the merits of poetry and elevating the significance of philosophy. For Plato, it is indeed the philosophers and not the poets who will carry human civilization into the future. While the poets were not in fact banished from the republic, the conflict between the two disciplines continues today. But with the shrinking prominence of the humanities in the academic sphere, it seems time once again to re-evaluate the relationship between philosophy and poetry. A good place to begin would be to re-envision Plato’s work as staging more than only a logical, philosophic discourse: the Platonic dialogue also synchronizes two seemingly opposite genres that clash across their pages. In his essay on J.M. Coetzee, Martin Woessner describes the connection between poetry and philosophy in Plato’s work: “Plato banished the poets from the republic because in creating fictions they muddled the waters of truth itself. But Plato told us through fiction. What are the Socratic dialogues if not literary works in their own right? Indeed, Socrates may be the most compelling character ever created” (226). Plato’s *Republic* is indeed as much poetic as it is philosophic, as Plato creates the narrative within which his characters philosophize. It does not seem that a philosophic treatise would have the same resonance his philosophic narrative is able to create. Plato constructs his philosophic discourse within a narrative to bring life and force to the text, a narrative with a life force that informs the text as much as Socrates’s philosophizing.

I begin this paper with Socratic dialogue because it sets the foundation for the current poetic dilemma, and by extension, a recurring dilemma in the humanities. As the prominence of the humanities in the academic sphere continues to shrink, the apparent separation between philosophy and poetry begins to dissolve. In no example of literature does one observe the struggle within the humanities more clearly than in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*, both within the text itself and in the surrounding academic discourse concerning the work. *Elizabeth Costello* both reinforces the ancient quarrel and reconciles it simultaneously. While Elizabeth Costello engages in philosophical debate with her academic contemporaries, she remains a poet, reconciling the conflict that Plato wrote of ages ago. Furthermore, by crafting the Costello-character as his own, contemporary, version of Socrates, Coetzee sets poetry against the other major modes of human understanding and reasoning. Through his novel, poetry stands up to philosophy, theology, and science as the chief mode of epistemological and ethical exploration.

Whereas Plato objected to poetry for its "lies" and imitative form, Coetzee seems to thrive within a text that does not adhere to conventional genre construction. Poets are not antagonists of the state as Plato argues, but rather, as Giovanni Boccaccio asserts, people "of profound understanding, which is hidden in their fruit, and of an excellent and highly wrought eloquence, which is evident in the bark and leaves" (158). *Elizabeth Costello* argues Coetzee's position in the ancient debate between philosophers and poets. While Costello's life exists within the novel,

her lectures are not confined to the frame, but rather engage a discourse that is at the heart of the debate over the merits of poetry.

Although this paper traces the life and debates of a single character, Elizabeth Costello, I will also attempt to highlight the various sides to Costello and her various voices that inform and contradict the authoritative poet. The authoritative stance Costello evokes in her debates with other academics should not be mistaken for a monological authority, but rather, as one of the many versions of Costello we meet throughout the text. Like Plato, Coetzee does not present his work as a monological stance against his opponents, but rather conceals a poetic message within a dialogical narrative.

Before discussing the internal intricacies of the novel, it may prove beneficial to examine the external framework that both informs and engages with *Elizabeth Costello*. *Elizabeth Costello* does not maintain the traditional framework of a novel: Coetzee interweaves various planes of fiction and reality into a layered and complex work of metafiction. Coetzee's project begins, not with the creation of *Elizabeth Costello*, but rather with the Princeton University Tanner Lectures of 1997. Addressing the issue of "human values" in the lecture series, Coetzee presents two lectures titled "The Philosophers and the Animals" and "The Poets and the Animals." Coetzee's presentation does not adhere to the traditional conventions of academic discourse. Fiction, not argumentation, constitutes the heart of Coetzee's lecture as he blends together two seemingly irreconcilable genres, and sets the foundation for his later novel that echoes Plato's dialogue. While he engages with the Princeton audience, it is not with his words, but rather with Costello's that he relays "his"

message, if indeed there is a message embedded in the lecture. Coetzee's storytelling mirrors the fictionalized internal discourse of Elizabeth Costello's lecture circuit. Brian Macaskill describes the interconnectivity between author and character in his essay "Fugal Musemathematics Track One, Point Two:" "Coetzee and Costello speak to (and listen in on) one and other—and to the philosophers—as if on an old-fashioned telephone party line" (172). Additional lines are added to the telephone play as thinkers, both fictive and real, are invited to respond, both internally and externally, to *Lives* and later to *Elizabeth Costello*.

While Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* is widely regarded as a novella, a work of fiction, it remains problematic restrictively to confine the work to a single genre: Coetzee blends reality and fiction together over the already various courses of presentation and publication of this work.¹ While the narrative ontology seems self-evident, *The Lives of Animals* also includes footnotes and an index in which philosophers and poets such as Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Blake, and Joyce are listed alongside fictional counterparts such as Thomas O'Hearne, Norma Bernard, and Abraham Stern.² Furthermore, actual works of literature (Swift's "Modest

¹ David Attwell writes that, "the book must in some sense answer to the mystery of its author's being. Coetzee's writing is a huge existential enterprise, grounded in fictionalized autobiography." Attwell goes on to list Coetzee's main autobiographical works: *Boyhood, Youth, and Summertime* (2). In responding to Attwell, Brian Macaskill emphasizes that "all writing is autobiographical," a phrase from Coetzee's *Doubling the Point* that he continually returns to and emphasizes throughout his essay, "Titular Space in J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime*." While Attwell traces the autobiographical characteristics of Coetzee's separate novels, Macaskill illustrates the interconnectivity of Coetzee's writing in the way that "everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it" (*Doubling* 121).

² Macaskill further describes the paring of real and fictive personas in "Fugal Musemathematics Track One, Point Two:" "*Lives* accommodates the ontologically non-existent who are nevertheless contextually present, and embraces those who could never strictly speaking have been present 'in the flesh', despite their presence on paper and despite their once having been vital flesh, the dead ones, and links itself also to the still living ones who were not there 'in the flesh' to hear Coetzee speak"

Proposal”) are referenced alongside fictional works (Costello’s *The House on Eccles Street*). This blending of fictive and nonfictive elements represents the sort of “intellectual play” Coetzee applies to his fiction. He explains his affinity to mathematics and its application to fiction in a 1997 interview: “Mathematics is a kind of play, intellectual play. I’ve never been much interested in its applications, in the ways in which mathematics can be set to work. Play is, to me, one defining characteristic of human beings. I look askance at the word ‘work’” (Coetzee, “interview” 83). This intellectual play is at work within *The Lives of Animals* in the ways in which Coetzee layers ostensibly incommensurable genres on top of one another. The interplay between fiction and academic discourse becomes even more convoluted when one considers the commentary that frames the narrative. Along with Amy Gutmann’s editorial introduction, four other academics from various disciplines responded to Coetzee’s Tanner Lecture; these “external” responses are reproduced within the frame of *The Lives of Animals*. Among the responses from literature, theology, and humanist academics, one stands out particularly. Peter Singer—a professor, philosopher, and well known animal rights advocate—mirrors Coetzee’s novella by framing his response as a dialogue between two more or less fictive characters: Peter and his daughter, Naomi. With their dog, Max, observing, the two commence a debate about the form of Coetzee’s presentation and the merit of its content. Within his story, Singer alludes to the struggle between reality and fiction, reason and emotion, and humans and animals that Coetzee creates in *Lives*.

(121). Corporeal flesh becomes a central point in Costello’s discussion of the ways in which poets inhabit other bodies, both of humans and animals.

One section of the Singer dialogue encapsulates many of the thematic characteristics of Coetzee's work. Peter presents a hypothetical situation to Naomi in which Max has been euthanized and replaced by another dog. He presents the hypothetical in order to argue that an animal life does not hold the same value as a human life, concluding that another dog could easily fill Max's place in the family with little to no ethical repercussions. Naomi responds:

“What are you saying—that we could painlessly kill Max, get another puppy to replace him, and everything would be fine? Really, Dad, sometimes you let philosophy carry you away. Too much reasoning, not enough feeling. That's a *horrible* thought.” Naomi is so distressed that Max, who has been listening attentively to the conversation, gets stiffly up from his rug, goes over to her, and starts consolingly licking her bare feet. (88)

We are presented with a similar dilemma in responding to Singer's fiction as we are to Coetzee's *Lives*, and by extension *Elizabeth Costello*, namely, where do we locate the author's voice within the “dialogue?” Do we equate Singer with Peter, who shares his first name and professional vocation? Or do we observe Singer stepping back from the narration, allowing the disparate voices to animate each other while he subverts his own authorial voice? In his book *The Wounded Animal*, Stephen Mulhall also discusses the interaction between Singer and Coetzee's separate fiction.³ Acknowledging the connection between Singer and his fictional protagonist,

³ Other than their separate authorship, the works share continuity under the same publication in *Lives*. Singer continues Coetzee's project both in the narrative's fictive debate and also in the debate

Mulhall chooses to argue for separation between the author and his fictive persona, as the “rational, ethical, and fictional misdeeds” of the fictionalized Peter subvert Singer’s intention to respond to Coetzee in an argumentatively coherent manner:

There is, however, one way of avoiding the attribution of such thoughts and intentions to Singer—namely, by hypothesizing that he intends us to regard Peter as the author as well as the protagonist of this fictional exercise. This would, after all, be one way of understanding its ending, in which Naomi precisely encourages her father to take up Coetzee’s fictional challenge. (67)

Mulhall concludes that this interpretation of the text complements and validates Coetzee: “Then Singer’s creation of Peter would be seen as his silent disavowal of everything that his earlier philosophical work stood for, and hence as a genuinely graceful acknowledgment of the superiority of Coetzee’s distinctive marriage of thought and feeling in fiction” (68). Mulhall’s understanding of the form, content, and authorial stance of Singer’s response reinforces Singer’s narrative as a complementary and graceful nod to *The Lives of Animals*. Instead of engaging *Lives* through an argumentative, logical, and philosophic essay, Singer’s response embodies the positive qualities of *The Lives of Animals*, specifically, the way in which, as Mulhall puts it, thought and feeling interact to provide a broader picture. Singer, like Coetzee, illustrates the ability of fiction, rather than argumentation, to present conflicting perspectives with a concurrent reconciliation.

that encompasses the real and external academic environment. In this sense, Singer builds upon the kaleidoscopic framing of *Lives*.

The form of *The Lives of Animals* and the response it receives from the academic community foreshadows the creation and impact of *Elizabeth Costello*. Coetzee's lecture at Princeton becomes *The Lives of Animals*, which in turn is repurposed as two "Lessons" within his novel, *Elizabeth Costello*. Additionally, versions of Lesson one, two, five, and six were presented at conferences and published in journals prior to the publication of *Elizabeth Costello*.⁴ Furthermore, the enigmatic postscript to the novel also comes from a previous publication. These academic lectures come to form the basis of Coetzee's cumulative novel, as Coetzee plays with the continuity between these disparate yet interwoven stories. While *Elizabeth Costello* contains eight "Lessons," the two *Lives* chapters constitute the center of Coetzee's work. From the center, Coetzee builds on the issues he raises in *The Lives of Animals* and the cruel treatment of animals becomes the unlikely scaffolding for Costello's lectures on "Realism," "The Novel in Africa," and "The Problem of Evil," which culminate in her experience of death and redemption.⁵ Just as the faculty and students at Appleton College are shocked by Costello's choice to lecture on animal rights, so too are Coetzee's readers surprised to find the heart and inspiration for *Elizabeth Costello* emanating from this evocative topic. The novel's

⁴ Coetzee presented a version Lesson one at the Ben Belitt Lecture at Bennington College in 1996; a version of Lesson two was presented at Una's Lecture at the University of California in 1998; in 2002, Coetzee presented a version of Lesson six in a Nexus Conference in Tilburg, Holland. Lesson five appeared as 'The Humanities in Africa' at Siemens Stiftung in Munich, Germany in 2001 (dates, locations, and events are cited from *The Wounded Animal* and "Acknowledgements" in *Elizabeth Costello*).

⁵ As I discuss later in this paper, whether or not Costello achieves salvation is left ambiguous. Coetzee ends the novel with Costello suffering within a version of purgatory in which paradox thrives. In this sense, the "afterlife" constitutes an extension of the intellectual suffering Costello experiences throughout the later stages of her life.

convoluted form and its disparate, yet interwoven sources, constitutes the sort of narrative play that enhances the capabilities of poetry.

The novel becomes a kind of debate hall in which the advocates of philosophy, science, theology, and poetry battle for power, significance and influence. While Costello, by profession, is a proponent of the poetic, her position becomes more and more ambivalent as the story progresses towards her death. Although the struggle within the humanities constitutes one of the main epistemological concerns of the text, the narrative framework contains the solution. As the dying humanities battle for survival, the novel in which they debate illustrates the continuity between the disciplines. In this sense, the novel, or poetry itself, becomes the medium within which these disciplines clash and coalesce simultaneously. While the end of Elizabeth Costello's life is left ambiguous, the work of art within which she argues, philosophizes, and creates thrives as a source of understanding.

Although Costello addresses the proponents of science, philosophy, and theology separately, her opponents are aligned by their epistemological dependence on reason. Costello addresses the champions of reason on their own grounds through her various lectures, but rational thought does not compose the bedrock of her message because it remains a restrictive exercise. Instead, Costello advocates for understanding that has a poetic origin. Costello begins with the claim that "God is reason... the universe is built upon reason" (67), a statement that she will refute shortly after with the bold claim that "both reason and seven decades of life experience tell me that reason is neither the being of the universe nor the being of

God.” Costello’s rebuttal of reason with reasoning is a claim that is later criticized by her daughter-in-law, Norma, but it serves to establish the notion that there are other human faculties to understanding. Costello attempts to step outside of reason in order to explore other avenues by which we understand the world, the main way being through her use of corporeal imagination, which, for Giambattista Vico, involved a sublimation of the imagination within a corporeal form.⁶ The method and practice of inhabiting the body of another being through embedded imagination, and not logic, becomes the main virtue of poetry for Costello.

Costello extends her critique of reason in chapter one to a critique of specific modes of “theological, scientific, and philosophical” modes of understanding within the *Lives* section of the novel. Mulhall traces the conflict between poetry and theology, science, and philosophy in Costello’s references to Aquinas, Kohler, and Nagel. In the *Lives* chapters, Costello does not go into a detailed discussion of Aquinas, but rather uses him as an exemplar of reason and philosophy applied to theological concepts. Her true battle with religiosity will not occur until the next chapter in her interactions with her sister, Blanche. Costello begins with a description of Kohler’s experiments on Sultan, which tests the ape’s problem solving capabilities. Costello argues that the practical, scientific experiments restrict Sultan’s imaginative faculties. Kohler restrains Sultan from asking, “why is he

⁶ See Vico’s *The New Science*. The connection between Costello and Vico’s understanding of corporeal imagination becomes more evident in the discussion of Costello’s critique of Thomas Nagel which occurs later in this paper in discussing the conflict between poetry and philosophy: imaginative ignorance versus rational understanding as a way of inhabiting another being.

staving me? What have I done? Why has he stopped liking me? Why does he not want these crates anymore?" (72).⁷ Costello concludes,

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 towards lower, practical, instrumental reasoning (How does one use this to get that?) [...] A carefully plotted psychological regimen conducts him *away* from ethics and metaphysics towards the humbler reaches of practical reason [...] A good man but not a poet. A poet would have made something of the moment when the captive chimpanzees lope around the compound in a circle. (73-74)

Costello connects Kohler to Franz Kafka in the way that Sultan, "in a certain sense," is the "prototype" of Kafka's fictionalized ape, Red Peter—who has been conditioned in human behavior and thought (72).⁸ Under the poet, the ape (Red Peter) is liberated, or at least explored in a more interesting way, whereas Sultan is subjected to Kohler's imaginatively subversive experimentation. While Kohler's experiments leave Sultan trapped and intellectually destitute, Kafka's imaginative experiment liberates Red Peter from the confines of his cage and places him in the position to consider questions of ontological and epistemological significance. By presenting his thought experiment within a fictive framework, Kafka more effectively accesses the

⁷ Kohler's experiment involves Sultan's ability to use crates in order to reach a suspended banana.

⁸ See Kafka's *A Report to the Academy*.

rational faculties to produce a fuller picture of the dilemma of scientific experimentation.

Curiously, Costello's argument will alter significantly from the way in which she addresses Kohler. In addressing Nagel, who does contemplate the metaphysics of inhabiting the being of a bat, Costello retracts her use of rationality a step further. The transition between the way in which Costello addresses Kohler and Nagel may appear as equivocation or fallacy within philosophical discourse, but the fluidity between conflicting modes of understanding emphasizes Costello's poetic ability to deconstruct those epistemological modes: metaphysics and ethics are her tools to disassemble scientific experimentation, while corporeal imagination becomes the method by which she attacks philosophy.

Costello turns to a discussion of Thomas Nagel's philosophic question: "What is it like to be a bat?" and she summarizes Nagel's conclusion:

To imagine spending our nights flying around catching insects in our mouths, navigating by sound instead of sight, and our days hanging upside down—is not good enough, because all that tells us is what it would be like to *behave* like a bat. Whereas what we really aspire to know is what it is like to *be* a bat, as a bat is a bat; and that we can never accomplish because our minds are inadequate to the task—our minds are not bats' minds. (76)

Costello responds, "but this denial that we can know what it is to be anything but one of ourselves seems to me tragically restrictive[:] restrictive and restricted." At this point, Costello establishes the grounds upon which she will abandon reason and

traditional thought. The metaphysics by which she addresses Kohler will prove inadequate for the question of “what is it like to *be* a bat?” Instead, Costello describes the “sympathetic imagination” as the mechanism by which one may inhabit not only a bat, but also all living creatures that share the “substrate of life” (76-80). It is by way of the heart and not the mind that Costello enters into the being of another creature, as she returns to her analogy of the Holocaust to explain:

They said, “It is *they* in those cattle cars rattling past.” They did not say, “How would it be if it were I in that cattle car?” They said, “It must be the dead who are being burned today, making the air stink and falling in ash on my cabbage.” They did not say, “How would it be if I were burning?” They did not say, “I am burning, I am falling in ash.” In other words, they closed their hearts. The heart is the seat of a faculty, *sympathy*, that allows us to share at times the being of another [...]

There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination. (79-80)

While Costello describes an example of thinking her way into the bodies of other persons via the heart, she seems to abandon the way in which we would think our way into the being of a bat by the end of her first lecture. Her son picks up on the apparent lack of continuity in her talk as he reacts by saying, “A strange ending [...] A strange ending to a strange talk [...] ill-gauged, ill-argued. Not her *métier*, argumentation. She should not be here” (80). It is not until her talk on the second day, “The Poets and the Animals,” that Costello expounds upon the potential of one to think one’s way into the being of another animal via sympathetic imagination.

In her second talk, Costello goes into greater detail regarding a poet's ability to inhabit the body of another animal. She uses Ted Hughes's work as an example,

In these poems we know the jaguar not from the way he seems but from the way he moves. The body is as the body moves, or as the currents of life move within it. The poems ask us to imagine our way into that way of moving, to inhabit the body. With Hughes it is a matter—I emphasize—not of inhabiting another mind but of inhabiting another body. (96)

Costello's emphasis on corporeal form seems to reflect Vico's own understanding of the relationship of imaginative and epistemological modes of understanding, or lack of understanding, as the body—rather than the mind, or rather than only the mind—becomes the means by which the poet enters all things. Vico describes the distinction in *New Science*:

So that, as rational metaphysics teaches that man becomes all things by understanding them (*homo intelligendo fit omnia*), this imaginative metaphysics shows that man becomes all things by *not* understanding them (*homo non intelligendo fit omnia*); and perhaps the latter proposition is truer than the former, for when man understands he extends his mind and takes in the things, but when he does not understand he makes the things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them. (320)

Costello channels this mode of understanding in her discussion of inhabiting the bodies of animals. When Vico describes corporeal imagination, he describes a

primitive but powerful mode of understanding that eventually develops into rational thought, and although the split occurs, poets have the faculties by which to access this primitive mode of understanding in which ignorance is a virtue and knowledge is subversive and often reductive. Costello expands upon Vico as she describes the tradition of poets who emphasize an embodied experience, as Hemingway's depictions of bullfighting become her next example: "We can call this primitive. It is an attitude that is easy to criticize, to mock. It is deeply masculine, masculinist. Its ramifications into politics are to be mistrusted. But when all is said and done, there remains something attractive about it at an ethical level" (97).⁹ Later, on the second day of the lecture series, Costello engages in a debate with Thomas O'Hearne—a professor of philosophy at Appleton College—in which she, again, emphasizes the corporeal connection between animals and human-animals. In his third proposition, O'Hearne declares, animals "do not *understand* death as we do, or rather, as we fail to do [...] Thus to equate a butcher who slaughters a chicken with an executioner who kills a human being is a grave mistake. The events are not comparable" (109). This is not the first time Costello has been criticized for comparing the events of the Holocaust with the slaughter of livestock. Earlier in the chapter, Abraham Stern, a poet, writes Costello a letter in which he denounces the similitude of Costello's analogy between killing a human and killing an animal.

⁹ In his essay, "Emerging from Censorship," Coetzee also describes his affinity towards primitivism: "Artistic creation of a certain kind involves inhabiting and managing and exploiting quite primitive parts of the self. This is not a particularly dangerous activity but it is a delicate one, one that may take a writer years of preparation till he/she finally gets the codes and the keys and the balances right, and can move in and out more or less freely. It is also a very private matter, so private that it almost constitutes the definition of privacy: how I am with myself."

Costello does not reply to Stern's note. She does, however, respond to O'Hearne's "third proposition," using these words:

Anyone who says that life matters less to animals than it does to us has not held in his hands an animal fighting for its life.¹⁰ The whole of the being of the animal is thrown into that fight, without reserve [...] That is why I urge you to read the poets who return the living, electric being to language; and if the poets do not move you, I urge you to walk, flank to flank, beside the beast that is prodded down the chute to his executioner. (110-111)

It is not through reasoning that animals come to understand their existence, but through an embodied life, and it is through corporeal imagination, not rational understanding, that humans are able to enter into the lives of animals and sympathize with rather than exploit their being. It is a poetic, not philosophic, understanding of animal life that allows one to inhabit the being of an animal and provide insight into the likeness between creatures who are made of the same "living flesh."

Costello uses Aquinas, Kholer, and Nagel as rhetorical representatives of their disciplines but her problem with rational modes of understanding continues outside of the academic sphere. Costello's interactions with her family extends the conflict into a more intimate sphere as those closest to her challenge her values,

¹⁰ In *Disgrace*, Coetzee's protagonist, David Lurie, volunteers at an animal shelter where he participates in a number of animal executions. His responsibility is to both comfort and physically restrain the animal as it is killed. The experience changes David's apparent apathy at the beginning of the novel towards the suffering of animals, as he is so overcome after the days work that he is left crying on the side of the road so physically upset that he cannot drive his car.

embedding the academic struggle within her personal life. We observe this erosion in the emotional conclusions to both the *Lives* chapters and “The Humanities in Africa.” In the first instance, Costello cries as her son, John, holds her and consoles her by telling her ““there, there. It will be over soon”” (115). At the end of the next chapter, after Costello’s experience with her sister and their conflicting perspectives on the significance of the humanities, Costello is left questioning her own convictions in the face of religious salvation. Both instances reinforce how the issues presented in her lectures bleed into her personal life and intermittently undermine her judgments of poetry.

While the conflict between poetry and philosophy is played out in the public sphere through Costello’s presentation on Nagel and her debate with O’Hearne, a struggle between Costello and her daughter-in-law underscores the public debate. Costello’s daughter-in-law, Norma, is also a philosopher, specializing in the philosophy of the mind, in the same track of epistemology Costello attacks in her lectures. The personal tension between the poet and the philosopher is heightened by Norma’s inability to acquire a teaching position in Appleton, further reinforcing the growing struggle within the humanities professions in the university. Norma also serves as a counterbalance to Costello’s lectures and portrays the way in which Costello’s argument falls apart, as she finds Costello’s ““philosophizing rather difficult to take”” (91). Responding to Costello’s first lecture, Norma explains the paradox of her mother-in-law’s reasoning to her husband, ““There is no position outside of reason where you can stand and lecture about reason and pass judgment

on reason” (93). Michael Deckard and Ralph Palm further explain the predicament Coetzee places Costello in:

her rejection of reason is expressed using the vocabulary of reason itself [...] From the point of view of the literal, rational observer, this is absurd. However, if interpreted in Rortian terms, these sorts of oppositions (between what Costello holds dear and what she is able to express) capture her ambivalence about reason as a final vocabulary. She repeatedly and explicitly rejects reason, yet she has difficulty escaping its terminology. (342)

This is precisely the predicament Costello finds herself in: she sees no other rhetorical method to deconstruct philosophy without addressing it on its own terms whether or not Norma or any other philosopher finds her lecture convincing. The reader observes a number of adverse reactions from various characters as well as the audience’s ambivalent response. But Costello knows that philosophical argument is the wrong medium in which to relay her message. Yet, Costello undertakes the seemingly contradictory mission of criticizing reason with reason. Even though her conclusion points towards a poetic understanding of humanity’s relationship to animals, Costello relays that message through the medium of what is perceived by the audience to be a philosophic argument. In taking up this endeavor, it seems that the flaws in Costello’s argument serve to reinforce the limits of reason, as she directs the audience’s attention towards the poets as the proponents of truth. While Costello’s lecture is in the form of argumentation, her lecture lacks all of its necessary characteristics, including a well-defined conclusion, as Jennifer Flynn

explains, “Costello does not present us with an argument about the proper treatment of animals, but asks us to participate in her struggle with the issue. In inviting us to think in terms beyond conduct morality, Costello does not give us instructions about how exactly she thinks we ought to behave” (324). While Norma is correct in her assessment of Costello’s contradictive reasoning, she does not realize the larger implications of her mother-in-law’s presentation. The lecture proceeds in consort with the ambiguities of literature rather than according to the authoritative stance of argumentation.

In her essay “Coetzee and Alternative Animal Ethics,” Elisa Analtola argues that Costello’s refusal to engage the academic community within traditional rhetorical discourse stems from an act of heroism, the same heroism that is the source of animals refusal to communicate with humans. For Analtola, Costello and animals are linked in their heroic silence, and the fact that Costello does “badly in theory” is excused by her elevation of poetic understanding (121). While Anatola reinforces her argument with references to *Lives*, a consideration of her points within the larger context of *Elizabeth Costello* complicates the position, as the ground upon which poetry operates is repeatedly debased.

While Aquinas served as a stand-in theological representative in the Appleton College lectures, the true conflict between poetry and religion plays out in “The Humanities in Africa” chapter, in which Costello visits Zululand to attend an honorary ceremony and lecture by her sister, Blanche. Here, we observe a reversal from the previous chapters as Blanche, and not Costello, presents the lecture, while Costello is relegated to the position of observer. Like her sister, Blanche is

unapologetic in her critique of the institution that has given her a stage upon which to speak. Blanche begins, “We must sometimes be cruel to be kind, so let me begin by reminding you that it was not the university that gave birth to what we today call the humanities but what, to be more historically accurate, I will henceforth call the *studia humanitatis* or human studies, studies in man and the nature of man, as distinct from *studia divinitatis*, studies pertaining to the divine” (120). From the onset of Blanche’s speech, Coetzee establishes the antagonism between theology and the humanities, and, as we come to learn further on in the speech, the humanities come to be a substitute for literature. Blanche goes on briefly to explain the history of the humanities in textual scholarship, which of course has its origins in scriptural scholarship. In this sense, Blanche inverts Costello’s model of the humanities, in which theology dominates the other disciplines. In contrast to Costello, Blanche, or Sister Bridget as she became known after taking holy orders, is of the opinion that the humanities are “branches of study that do not, by the standards of the ultimate, matter” (123). In fact, religion, or scriptural studies do not fall within the humanities according to Blanche, who deconstructs the humanistic system as a home for both poetry and theology alike. She continues, “The *studia humanitatis* have taken a long time to die, but now, at the end of the second millennium of our era, they are truly on their deathbed [...] it has been brought about by the monster enthroned by those very studies as first and animating principle of the universe: the monster of reason, mechanical reason.” Like Costello, Blanche shares a similar suspicion of reason that establishes the grounds upon which she criticizes academia.

Costello finds herself defending her sister's position during the luncheon following the ceremony in which she engages in a debate with Professor Godwin, who teaches eighteenth century English literature: "The Age of Reason," as Costello ironically comments. Costello explains her interpretation of the implications of her sister's lecture: "If the humanities want to survive, surely it is those energies and that craving for guidance that they must respond to: a craving that is, in the end, a quest for salvation" (127). This is not the first instance in which Costello discusses a desire for salvation. During the luncheon following the Appleton College lecture, she is asked by President Garrard, "But your own vegetarianism, Mrs. Costello [...] it comes out of moral conviction, does it not?" (88). Costello responds, "No, I don't think so [...] It comes out of a desire to save my soul." At this stage of her life, Costello still believes she can find salvation through poetry. Her belief wavers when she reads Paul West's book later in the novel and observes that the poet, by way of the novel, is in this instance complicit in providing evil an avenue by which to enter the reader. Still, for both Costello and Blanche, salvation is the shared goal of their professions and it is on this plane of consciousness that the two disciplines collide when Blanche reveals the true target of her lecture later on in the luncheon:

I do not need to consult novels [...] to know what pettiness, what baseness, what cruelty human beings are capable of [...] We are fallen creatures. If the study of mankind amounts to no more than picturing us our darker potential, I have better things to spend my time on. If on the other hand the study of mankind is to be a study in what reborn man can be, that is a different story. (128)

Costello's visit with her sister ends when Blanche announces that the humanities, and by extension Costello and poetry, backed the wrong Greek. The humanities should have channeled "Orpheus instead of Apollo. The ecstatic instead of the rational. Someone who changes form, changes color [...] Someone who can die but then come back" (145).¹¹ Blanche concludes that her sister is lost and that salvation cannot be found within the humanities.

While Coetzee gives Blanche, and Christianity, the last word on Costello's trip to Africa, Elizabeth gets the final word of the chapter as she sits down to write a letter to her sister explaining the significance of the humanities. Costello arouses the power of corporeal imagination and poetic sympathy as she retells a time she allowed her mother's colleague to paint her in the nude. Costello emphasizes the body as the mode of artistic inspiration: "The humanities teach us humanity. After the centuries long Christian night, the humanities give us back our beauty, our human beauty. That is what you forgot to say. That is what the Greeks teach us, Blanche, the right Greeks. Think about it" (151). Curiously, Costello does not send the letter to Blanche. Writing becomes a method of reinforcing her own convictions rather than communicating them to her sister, who has already displayed her skepticism of novels. Although the letter ends with Costello retelling the idyllic scene of human beauty, the actual story continues after Costello has set down her pen. Costello revisits her mother's friend, and in her second visit, the human body

¹¹ Mulhall points out that, "the opposition between Orpheus and Apollo is not exactly Nietzsche's famous opposition between Dionysus and Apollo, but it is close enough to recall the way this dispute is articulated in philosophical terms (going right back to Plato), and to suggest that Blanche is in effect turning Nietzsche against himself" (198).

becomes a source for sexual pleasure instead of artistic inspiration as Costello performs fellatio on the dying man. Mulhall explains the muddling of idyllic beauty and sexual pleasure in the scene:

In the end, then, the human, body—call it the spirit’s necessary embodiment in flesh and blood—may pose an insuperable problem for both Hellenism and Christianity, for humanism and religion alike; and if for them, why not for any cultural system of sense-making? Perhaps that is the truth about the body: it is both the origin of human ways of making sense of things, and that which exceeds any such sense-making system. (201)

There were a number of places where Coetzee could have ended the chapter and have avoided an ambivalent ending to a peculiar “Lesson.” But Coetzee’s narrative style does not allow for continuity and neat conclusions.

Costello undergoes a seemingly authoritative crusade against the proponents of reason within the religious, philosophic and scientific disciplines, using poetry as her champion of truth and understanding through “sympathetic imagination,” but at various points throughout the novel Coetzee undermines Costello’s authorial voice. Costello has ceased creating works of literature, and instead embarks on the lecture circuit as her profession as “poet” has been replaced with the title of “lecturer” or “thinker.” Furthermore, just as Costello comes into conflict with other disciplines throughout the novel, she also finds that little continuity exists between herself and the fellow poets she meets throughout her journey. Emmanuel Egudu, Abraham

Stern, and Paul West are all writers with whom she has fundamental disagreements with about poetry's purpose and ethical significance.

In "The Novel in Africa" chapter, Costello has been invited to lecture on a cruise where she prepares, or recycles, a presentation titled "the future of the novel," in which she presents a seemingly boilerplate representation of the novel:

The novel is thus an exercise in making the past coherent. Like history, it explores the representative contributions of characters and circumstance to forming the present. By doing so, the novel suggests how we may explore the power of the present to produce the future. This is why we have this thing, this institution, this medium called the novel. (39)

Costello presents a straightforward and succinct definition of the novel, avoiding the public controversy she enters later, which in turn sets up Egudu's following lecture. Whereas Costello's lecture understands the novel as a universal medium, Egudu approaches the form as a reflection of its regional origin, in this case, the novel in Africa. Here we observe Coetzee displacing Costello from the center of the chapter, instead using Egudu's lecture as the chapter's title. Unlike Costello, Egudu does present a controversial understanding of the novel: he argues that the African novel is not primarily a written work, but rather based in the oral tradition, it is an "oral novel" (45). While Costello's matter-of-fact lecture did little to stir her audience, Egudu's charismatic presentation of the African novel as a "critique of the Western novel" receives a positive response from his listeners. While she is not entirely critical of Egudu at first, there is something about the lecture that leaves Costello

uncomfortable. This is presumably so because Egudu has just critiqued Costello's own definition of the novel, and as we discover later, Costello does not believe that a novel can be primarily an oral genre. Curiously, Egudu's argument that the "African novelist can embody these qualities as no one else can because we have not lost touch with the body [...] On the page it is inert, only half alive; it wakes up [...] from deep in the body" (45), seems very similar to how Costello will use poetry to address the lives of animals through sympathetic imagination. While Costello also argues that the power of poetry derives from embodiment and inhabiting the being of another creature, she takes offense to the way in which Egudu relegates this corporeal power solely to African novelists. Costello's lectures at Appleton could be read as her attempt to prove that embodiment is a necessary characteristic of all novel writing, not just the novel in Africa

In the exchange between Egudu and Costello, Coetzee establishes a fundamental disagreement between alternate conceptions concerning the nature of literature, which is echoed later in the story among Costello and other poets she meets. Coetzee seems to undermine Costello's authority as a proponent of the poetic in this early chapter, as he simultaneously establishes Costello's authoritative voice in the *Lives* chapters. Just as Costello disagrees with Egudu's understanding of the African novel, so too will Abraham Stern take offense to Costello's connection between abattoirs and Nazi death camps. The ethics of poetry come full circle in "The Problem of Evil" chapter in which Costello seems to undermine and contradict her own poetic ambitions earlier in her career and also the poetic sympathy she advocates for in her earlier lectures. In this heated exchange between poets, Coetzee

challenges his own protagonist's authority as a poet. As Costello challenges other disciplines for prominence, internal forces simultaneously challenge her within her own discipline.

In the sixth "Lesson" of the novel, Costello has been invited to give a lecture on "The Problem of Evil." She chooses to focus her talk on Paul West's book titled *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*, a book—a book that actually exists, a book indeed written and published by Paul West—about Hitler's failed assassination and the subsequent execution of the would-be assassins. The passage that Costello focuses on in her presentation includes vivid details of the executions, details she deems too "obscene" for depiction and presentation. Whereas we observe Costello's strong poetic convictions in earlier lectures, we now observe how the same convictions become eroded by the ability of poetry to channel not only good but also evil. Costello argues that such evil scenes "ought not to be brought into light but covered up and hidden for ever in the bowels of the earth. Like what goes on in the slaughterhouses of the world, if one wishes to save one's sanity" (159). Costello has come a long way from her *Lives* lecture in which she was the one who shed light on the obscenities in the slaughterhouses. She damns West for doing the same with the depraved scene from World War II, the same source she raids in her *Lives* lectures. Costello outlines the moral implication of venturing into the "darker territories" (160), thinking that "she is no longer sure that people are always improved by what they read [...]. Once upon a time she would have said, All honour to a writer who undertakes to follow such a story to its darkest recesses. Now she is not sure" (161-163). While Costello is torn between the moral implications of an

“obscene” novel, Coetzee still gives evil a stage within *his* novel. Not only does Coetzee describe the obscenities of West’s book, but he also describes, in vivid detail, Costello’s rape and assault when she was younger:

When she resisted, he tried to force her. For a long time, in silence panting, she fought him off, pushing scratching. To begin with he took it as a game. Then he got tired of that, or his desire tired, turned to something else, and began to hit her seriously. He lifted her off the bed, punched her breasts, punched her belly, hit her a terrible blow with his elbow to the face. When he was bored with hitting her he tore up her clothes and tried to set fire to them in the waste-paper basket. Stark naked, she crept out and hid in the bathroom on the landing.

(165)

Coetzee puts the reader directly in the room with Costello, in both her mind and the presence of evil, as the assailant’s demeanor turns from violent playfulness to sadistic abuse. Coetzee traces the nuanced change in the attacker’s demeanor: in this account, the descriptive energy originates from Coetzee in much the same way that West, according to Costello, invests authorial energy in his depiction of the Nazi execution: “the energy came, in a certain sense, from West himself,” accuses Costello (177). Just as the “cellar in which the July 1944 plotters were hanged is one such forbidden place,” so too should the motel room in which Costello was raped and beaten remain forbidden. The chapter depicts Costello’s starkest split from the potential achievements of poetry and also a definitive separation between Costello

as character and Coetzee as author (even if Coetzee himself also sometimes has doubts about the morality of fiction).

In the later chapters of the novel, Costello becomes less and less sure of the principles she presents in her earlier lectures. The poetic conviction she once had has been debased by the time of her Paul West lecture. Furthermore, Costello has abandoned writing all together: her famous novel, *The House on Eccles Street*, is a distant achievement from the past. The only writing she does is the letter to her sister, which she does not send to her in the end. It seems that the authorial poet that we meet in the beginning of the story has lost much of her place in the world, has lost her sense of the significance of the art form she once believed in. Not only has Costello stopped writing, but also she constantly travels, putting on shows for her audience. Costello begins her lecture on realism by asking her audience, “Am I going to pretend I am the ape, torn away from my natural surroundings, forced to perform in front of a gathering of critical strangers? I hope not. I am one of you, I am not of a different species” (18). But Costello is not one of “them.” Little continuity exists between her and the audiences she addresses. We do not observe Costello in her homeland of Australia, and she continues to exhibit characteristics more reminiscent of Red Peter than of the poet she claims to be. Mulhall writes of Costello, “she (like Kafka and Red Peter) sees herself as a hybrid, as a scapegoat, and above all as a wounded animal who touches on that wound every word she speaks” (54). Coetzee uses animals as comparisons to Costello’s character throughout the novel in which she appears more similar to the caged ape than the authorial poet. The

following passage from Coetzee's essay "Emerging from Censorship" predates *Elizabeth Costello*, but seems to inform the nature of Costello's character:

No one believes any longer that the self is the monadic unit described by classical rationalism. On the contrary, we picture the self as multiple and in many ways divided against itself. We picture it as a zoo, for instance, in which all kinds of strange beasts have residence, over which the anxious, overworked zookeeper of rationality has rather limited control. In this zoo there are few internal bars. At night the zookeeper sleeps and some of the beasts roam about (we call this dreaming). (par. 11)

In the novel, Coetzee turns the psychological animal outward, as Costello's animalistic nature becomes figured as her external characteristics. In the opening pages her son, John, describes her as "a seal, an old, tired circus seal" (3). Later, John compares his mother to a cat, "one of those large cats that pause as they eviscerate their victim and, across the torn-open belly, give you a cold yellow stare" (5). Again, her son uses animals to describe Costello, "A writer, not a thinker. Writers and thinkers: chalk and cheese. No, not chalk and chees: fish and fowl. But what is she, the fish or the fowl?" (10). John goes from an analogy in which his mother is a passive, captive, performing animal to one in which she is a predator. The distinction between the powerful and weak animal becomes convoluted in the third analogy in which John can no longer fit his mother into a particular class of animal, the "unusual being—a chimera with a body of a philosopher and the head of a poet" (Greiger 151). The same question that Costello asks of her animals in the *Lives*

lectures applies to herself: “Where is home, and how do I get there?” (75). Instead of home, Costello ends up in a “purgatory of clichés” by the end of the novel (206). She spends the latter part of her life looking for consolation that never comes to her, and she is eventually forced to reenact in the afterlife the role she played in the novel: “Why not go out and play her part, the part of the traveller cast up in a town she is doomed never to leave?” (206). The only place in the novel Costello finds consolation occurs on the island with the albatross colony, the only place in the novel in which she felt at peace: “So she and the two birds remain, inspecting each other. *Before the fall*, she thinks. *This is how it must have been before the fall. I could miss the boat, stay here. Ask God to take care of me*” (56). But the habitual motion of the story interrupts the Edenic scene as Costello is thrown back into circulation: the circus seal and not the free albatross. The purgatory Costello finds herself in by the end of the novel could not be further from the albatross colony.

Indeed, by the story’s end Costello is not the same character we meet at the beginning of the novel. But, tracing the linear digression of Costello’s poetic authority does not exactly do justice to the nuances of Coetzee’s work. Costello is never the authoritative poet she presents in the *Lives* lectures, but rather a body of contradictory ideas exhibiting many voices. Mikhail Bakhtin wrote of the novel, “The author participates in the novel (he is omnipresent in it) with *almost no direct language of his own*. The language of the novel is a *system* of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other. It is impossible to describe and analyze it as a single unitary language” (239). In his interview with Johanna Scott at Skidmore College, Coetzee explained the relationship of Bakhtin’s theorizing to his own

writing: “Again, bear in mind that monologue is not necessarily monological, if I understand Bakhtin. Nor is dialogue Dialogical. There is a certain kind of monologue in which voices are evoked and contested and played with that is part of the dialogical” (89). Coetzee’s understanding of Bakhtin perfectly encompasses the characteristics of Elizabeth Costello.¹² The reader observes many versions of Elizabeth Costello throughout the novel: the poet, the academic, the mother, and the animal, to name a few.

Like Costello’s lectures, Coetzee avoids a definitive conclusion to the life of Elizabeth Costello, in the same way that Coetzee does not in the end reveal whether or not Costello finds any semblance of home, peace or salvation. The insight that poetry provides at the beginning and middle of the novel recedes in the end when poetry gives rise to more questions and confusion rather than answers. While the content of the novel is ambivalent towards poetic significance, the fact that these conflicting ideas are housed within the form of the novel speaks to the significance of poetry as a mode of understanding the world. Whereas Elizabeth Costello is left questioning the merits of poetry, Coetzee reinforces its significance by simply telling the story. Coetzee writes the novel Costello abandons, and the external philosophic debate that the text informs continues the work of Elizabeth Costello, as “*Elizabeth Costello* the novel says something that Elizabeth Costello the character cannot” (Greiger 343). Whereas Costello illustrates the discontinuity between poetry and other disciplines in the humanities, the novel itself displays the ways in which the

¹² Both *Costello* the novel and Costello the character: the novel exhibits many voices and many conversations, while Costello, herself, embodies many voices and continuous and discontinuous perspectives.

disciplines of the humanities inform each other, as the chaos in the content reveals the harmony in form. Poetry becomes the medium in which conflicting perspectives can clash and coalesce simultaneously. In this sense, Coetzee takes Plato's antiquated form and applies it to a novel in which the debate between poetry and philosophy still exists today, but the novel, rather than the Socratic dialogue, illustrates a union of academic disciplines rather than epistemological repulsion.

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