
Coetzee in Oxford

MATTHEW SIMPSON

ON June 11th, the novelist J.M. Coetzee will be visiting Oxford. That will be a valuable opportunity to see and hear this eminent man, who is very rarely willing to perform in public. He will be giving readings rather than lecturing, but even such lectures and addresses as he has given in recent years have commonly taken the form of fiction-readings. In fact Coetzee has created for these occasions a sort of front-woman, Elizabeth Costello, through whom he has been able to speak his mind with that whole repertoire of reservations and narrative enforcements which a novelist commands. This woman is herself a famous novelist in oldish age, living (as Coetzee now does) in Australia, evidently consenting to be lionized, yet tired and rather contemptuous of all that, and of much more besides. Her (Coetzee's) various speaking engagements have been published as *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). She also plays a characteristically post-modern part in the more recent *Slow Man* (2005).

Probably Elizabeth Costello won't be fronting for Coetzee at Oxford, but the first of those three fictions does have particular relevance here.¹ Its origin was an invitation to Coetzee to give the Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Princeton in 1997-8. His first lecture on that occasion disconcertingly began thus: "He is waiting at the gate when her flight comes in." (One person who was there has said, "there could be no doubt about the surprise produced by Coetzee's opening words."²) Then followed the various encounters between Elizabeth Costello and her hosts and audiences at Appleton College during her presentation of the annual Gates Lecture on her chosen subject 'The Lives of Animals'. This unexpected situation at Princeton, a lecture within a lecture on an awkward subject, might have been devised with a view to wry comedy of some sort, but readers of Coetzee will know that his stories are likely to make only the gods laugh, and then with more vindictiveness than good-humour. He is the most sombre and serious of novelists. And since these lines of interest—university manners and animal ethics—cross at Oxford with quite a bang these days, or ought to, it may be worth wondering what Coetzee was really getting at.

For many years Coetzee was a professor of literature at the University of Cape Town. One of his special interests has been the relationship between literature and censorship, and as a South African he has been in a strong position to know and feel what he's talking about on that subject. American universities don't censor ideas, of course: nor do British ones, as we know. On the other hand, animals, as moral claimants rather than as zoology, are a tiresome and embarrassing subject—and if the claims are taken seriously, a subversive one. Coetzee puts the point into his narrative clearly enough. Elizabeth Costello has chosen to speak to her academic audience "not about herself and her fiction, as her sponsors would no doubt like, but about a hobby-horse of hers, animals", and the bad etiquette of her decision colours

that first day: awkward silences, menu problems for the dinner, the company schismatized into kindly propitiators and indignant retaliators. The dinner itself is not the convivial symposium it ought to be, but something "to get through". When one of the academics speaks about dietary taboos, another of them—the speaker's husband—thinks, "She is right, of course. But wrong": right about the subject, that is, but wrong to complicate the politics of the dinner like this. It's exactly a censor's two-mindedness, and in the right order. But the husband is John Bernard, the decent, liberal son of Elizabeth Costello. He only wants things to go well. His anxiety, in fact, is an index of the morally inhibiting power of university good manners.

This is only social discomfort, of course, but anyway Elizabeth Costello herself is frankly indifferent to it. She begins her lecture by saying that she feels rather like the educated ape Red Peter in Kafka's story 'Report to an Academy'. In case any of her audience should smile amiably at this self-deprecation, mistaking it for one of those "light-hearted remarks whose purpose is to set the audience at ease" (and they may be smiling or not: she "does not look up from the page"), Elizabeth Costello corrects them:

"I say what I mean. I am an old woman. I do not have the time any longer to say things I do not mean."

These uncontracted verb forms—severe, unconvivial—enforce the point. She is determined to protect her subject from the enfeebling effect of friendliness.

And she needs to do so, because there is more to this agreeable ambience of university discussion than good manners. It's a convenient fact about academic and more generally literary life that thought and opinion can be considered professional property. To regard them as in this sense belonging to the person rather than wild and autonomous is also to do something to prevent them getting loose and causing harm. It's true that Elizabeth Costello may seem to have escaped this limitation by speaking outside her speciality, and in fact the English professor who introduces her first lecture "makes no attempt"—John Bernard notices—"to link his mother's novels to the subject of the lecture." But of course this only tames her subject another way: if it's not her speciality, then it's not, as her daughter-in-law recognizes, "something she knows about". And anyway, most of the others are too polite to think or voice that point of view. Rather, receiving the novelist, like good hosts, as a more eminent one of themselves, they treat her impassioned opinions as indeed peculiarly hers, a sort of moral accomplishment:

"I have a great respect for it," says the Appleton President of her vegetarianism.

"I too have the greatest respect for codes based on respect for life," says the Dean.

Neither, however, is apparently a vegetarian, and

Elizabeth Costello refuses this means of disposing of the matter: "I'm wearing leather shoes [...] I'm carrying a leather purse. I wouldn't have overmuch respect if I were you."

The President gamely encourages her: "Surely one can draw a distinction between eating meat and wearing leather."

"Degrees of obscenity," replies his guest. She won't allow them to make the subject into a turn of hers.

Although the President steers this dinner with invulnerable suavity to its proper terminus, there are images of broken discourse throughout the book. At the dinner itself there is an empty place: the resident poet, Abraham Stern, has been offended by the lecturer's extended reference to the Holocaust. The next day, Elizabeth Costello herself tells her audience that she would not be willing to eat with the philosopher (Michael Leahy) who argues that veal calves, having too little intellectual self-awareness, cannot be said to miss their mothers; in fact she doubts whether there is even that "last common ground" of reason for the two of them to share. When she leaves early in the morning for the airport, her daughter-in-law, a philosopher, does not get up to wish her good-bye.

These ruptures of communication are not simply the damage caused by strong feeling. It is part of Elizabeth Costello's argument that academic philosophy cannot anyway get at the heart of her subject, is not the proper meeting-place for exchanging valuable ideas about it, that reason itself is only "one tendency in human thought" and not the apt one here. So of course reason's institutions cannot comfortably accommodate her subject. How, then, can an accurate appreciation of what she calls "a crime of stupefying proportions" be communicated to this "learned gathering" as the feeling which is its proper form? The second of the book's two chapters is called 'The Poets and the Animals' (the first was 'The Philosophers and the Animals'), and here Elizabeth Costello, addressing an English Department seminar, looks more hopefully to poetry for a type of discourse that "does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead the record of an engagement with him": that is, the poetry *is* that engagement, made permanent in the poem. She takes her audience through Rilke's 'The Panther' (unsatisfactory: the animal is really "a stand-in for something else") and Ted Hughes's 'The Jaguar' (certainly there's "engagement" here). But even the poetry of Hughes, for all its primitivist reach, has "something Platonic about it". It is really about the species—about, for instance, "jaguarness embodied in this jaguar"—and not about the transitory individuals, whereas only in those individuals is there life like ours, addressing ours. Such individuals no more feel themselves servants to the species or to an ecology than humans do: "Every living creature fights for its own, individual life, refuses, by fighting, to accede to the idea that the salmon or the gnat is of a lower order of importance than the idea of the salmon or the idea of the gnat." Perhaps after all, as John Bernard afterwards suggests to his mother, poetry is "just another kind of clever talk."

If poetry fails, and if reason fails, there remain the wordless prompts to fellow-feeling: common experience ("I urge you to walk, flank to flank, beside the beast that is prodded down the chute to his executioner") or the seat of feeling itself ("open your heart and listen to what your heart says."). But this is desperate, unacademic talk. The questioner to whom that second injunction is addressed

"gives a huge, expressive shrug and sits down." The Dean "looks nonplussed." Futile appeals to humanity, supervised by a polite and baffled Dean of Humanities: yes, this is the sort of comedy which only gods can really enjoy. In his 2007 novel *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee wonders—or rather, his aging, Nobel Prize-winning male novelist narrator wonders—whether "all languages are, finally, foreign languages, alien to our animal being."³ If they are, then no wonder Elizabeth Costello can't find the right words to persuade Appleton College with. Her own "animal being"—as "this fleshly white-haired lady", quickly wearied, last seen as a weeping face turned to her son—is strongly present throughout the argumentation. It is thus that we come to see that she is indeed like Red Peter: "I am not a philosopher of mind but an animal exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word I speak." Necessarily a wound, because if one is to acknowledge and feel this animal being in oneself, and the animal solidarity it entails, then one must share also the giant, systematic suffering which our animal species is now imposing on the others ("It is I who am in that cattle-car").

This provides us with a clue as to why Coetzee should have chosen to lecture to Princeton in this oblique way. On the face of it, such fictionalization distances the opinions which appear in it, relegates them to time, place, personality. And this is indeed one of the common ways of keeping animal rights ideas at a distance, to view them as a "hobbyhorse", or as a merely Anglo-Saxon preoccupation, or as a pathology affecting "delicate sensibilities", or as a "fad" or even a "power-game": all of these explanations or demotions of Elizabeth Costello's cast of feeling about animals are attempted somewhere in the book. And at such a distance, with a merely experimental personality to take any blame, Coetzee can, for instance, lob in the Holocaust comparison, have it fought over, leave its status undecided between offensive hyperbole and subversive truth. He can get for himself a sort of immunity (and was indeed criticized for that by some reviewers). He could make an equivalent immunity available to his Princeton audience too, as Elizabeth Costello doesn't for hers at Appleton. But I don't believe that that was his purpose. Coetzee has, in his own person, been quite willing to make that problematic comparison, though more carefully, more justly and unanswerably, than he lets Elizabeth Costello put it. He has been willing to lend his fame to the purpose which Elizabeth Costello represents. For instance, he is a supporter of the Australian animal advocacy organization called Voiceless, and has expressed himself publicly on their behalf.⁴ Nearer home—this home, that is—he is a patron of VERO (Voice for Ethical Research at Oxford). And even in his more orthodox fictions, Coetzee's belief in that obscured but factual solidarity between all living things, which modern civilization has so pitilessly betrayed, is quite evident—most memorably in the tremendous last pages of *Disgrace* (1999).

No, it is not in order to distance Elizabeth Costello's passion that he creates her for it, but exactly to show that it properly is a passion, in the sense of an involuntary suffering: not essentially an opinion or body of thought but a necessary inheritance with modern human life, which either you know by suffering it or refuse to know by "a certain willed ignorance". Words may "touch on" the wound, but they do not and cannot themselves induce it,

cure it, or conjure it away. To make, as a lecturer, words go as far as they can is Elizabeth Costello's ordeal in this book: the rest has to be the passion itself, instanced in her. And this explains, also, another thing about her which seems to have disappointed some readers: that she is not much elaborated as a novelistic character (though her mental and physical presence in the book is powerful enough). As she tries to insist, her subject is not, or should not be, a matter personal to her, a matter of personality at all. That first sentence read out by Coetzee at Princeton makes the point: "He is waiting at the gate when her flight comes in." A man and a woman, a son and a mother, two humans, two animals: the book starts with these, and it ends with them:

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."

Not much consolation in the words; not much meaning, perhaps: just a reminder of what there is between fellow-beings – what there ought to be, that is.

¹ *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton, 1999) includes as an appendix "reflections" by four academics, and is edited and introduced by Amy Gutmann. The main text of it appears again, without the academic apparatus, as chapters 3 and 4 of *Elizabeth Costello*.

² Derek Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 2004, p.193. Other quotations in the present article are from *The Lives of Animals*, unless otherwise identified.

³ *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), p.197

⁴ His address to the Australian organization Voiceless on 22 February 2007, which includes the comparison mentioned above, can be found at www.voiceless.org.au