

HAROLD FROMM

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## Coetzee's Postmodern Animals

"THERE USED TO BE A TIME WHEN WE KNEW. We used to believe that when the text said, 'On the table stood a glass of water,' there was indeed a glass of water, and a table, and we had only to look in the word-mirror of the text to see them both." So remarks Elizabeth Costello, a novelist invented by J.M. Coetzee for a talk on Realism at Bennington College in 1996 and destined to reappear in Coetzee's recent novella, *The Lives of Animals*.<sup>1</sup> In the earlier incarnation she has flown from Australia to Appleton College in Massachusetts to receive a literary award that prompts her to discuss the matter of Realism in literature. "But all that has ended." She continues, "The word-mirror is broken, irreparably, it seems. . . . The words on the page will no longer stand up and be counted, each saying, 'I mean what I mean.'" But disintegration has set in even further: "The dictionary, that used to stand beside the Bible and the works of Shakespeare above the fireplace, in the place occupied by the household gods in pious Roman homes, has become just one code-book among many." The ramifications for a writer are dire: "There used to be a time, we believe, when we could say who we were. Now we are just performers, speaking our parts."<sup>2</sup>

Risky as it may be to use fictional words as if they expressed the sentiments of their creator, we're not going to get very far in connecting with this, or any, author without trying to establish a point of view. And with someone as slippery as Coetzee (a performer speaking his part?), we need all the help we can get. Coetzee sets his new lives of animals into the existing framework of his Bennington talk about Realism, retaining not only Elizabeth Costello, but her son, Appleton College, and the idea of a public lecture, but the substance has been drastically changed. Costello's diffidence about the correspondence between words and things—a legacy of Coetzee's years in America as a linguistics graduate student during the period of structuralism and deconstruction—mitigates somewhat her powerful moral assertiveness in the earlier version but functions more quietly in the later where, instead of literature, she lectures on animal rights.

This diffident assertiveness is perhaps Coetzee's most salient characteristic as Postmodern author for whom playful Realism has necessarily

<sup>1</sup> THE LIVES OF ANIMALS, by J.M. Coetzee. Ed. and with an introduction by Amy Gutman. Princeton University Press. \$19.95.

<sup>2</sup> J.M. Coetzee, "What is Realism?," *Salmagundi*, Summer 1997, pp. 70-1.