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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*.¹ 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."²

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

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

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

replaced oracular prophecy. Yet "Postmodern" can be misleading unless a distinction is made between the two Postmodernisms of literary technique and human personae. While on the one hand Coetzee's *prose* is increasingly lean and straightforward, not "experimental" or tricky, (although his early *In the Heart of the Country* comes off as a sometimes tedious cross between Woolf's *The Waves* and a Faulkner novel), on the other hand his literary *persona* reflects the philosophical modesty that comes from living in a world with radically damaged foundations of belief. Realism is a way out, a means by which the Postmodern literary persona can seem to avoid Postmodern techniques: "Realism has never been comfortable with ideas," he remarks in his own voice in the Bennington lecture, sharing Costello's fictional point of view. "Realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no separate existence, can exist only in things. So when it needs to debate ideas, as here [in the Elizabeth Costello story invented for the lecture], it 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 is cardinal."³ It's worth adding that the fiction Coetzee has invented to present his presumed endorsement of Realism is filled with echoes of other writers at the same time that we hear a complaint about rehashing the classics; it expresses the view that language, timebound and conventional, writes us (rendering genuine creativity almost impossible) even as one of the characters expresses a preference for making it new; and it ends with Costello's son contesting his mother's aesthetic and extolling the creative miracle of the Romantic imagination while rejecting Realism's "smelly underwear." But Coetzee's Postmodern persona has been throwing curve balls for a long time. In an oft-quoted 1984 essay about his time as a graduate student in English at the University of Texas in Austin (where he arrived from his native South Africa in 1965), he wrote: "If a latter-day ark were ever commissioned to take the best that mankind has to offer and make a fresh start on the farther planets, if it ever came to that, might we not leave Shakespeare's plays and Beethoven's quartets behind to make room for the last speaker of Dyirbal, even though that last speaker might be a fat old woman who scratched herself and smelled bad?"⁴ But don't expect Coetzee to rush out to make it with the fat lady. For with him, what the left hand giveth, the right hand taketh away.

Coetzee started out in mathematics, moved on to linguistics, and found his niche in fiction. In an interview in *Salmagundi*, he remarks, "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 of the defining characteristics of human beings." And when asked about the implications of fictional narrative,

³ *Salmagundi*, p. 65.

⁴ J.M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. by David Atwell (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), pp. 52-3.

he replies, "I can't make an exhaustive list, but they do include abandoning the support that comes with a certain institutional voice, the voice of the historian or sociologist or whatever. It entails no longer being an expert, no longer being master of your discourse."⁵ In still other interviews, these notions of play and the inauthenticity, so to speak, of the author keep resurfacing. He speaks of "an awareness, as you put pen to paper, that you are setting in train a certain play of signifiers with their own ghostly history of past interplay," and he wonders whether earlier writers like Defoe felt similarly trapped by history and culture. Contemporary writers are "like children shut in the playroom, the room of textual play, looking wistfully out through the bars at the enticing world of the grownups, one that we have been instructed to think of as the mere phantasmal world of *realism* but that we stubbornly can't help thinking of as the *real*." Though he doesn't want to "sound silly" by talking about the muse, writing is an activity cut off from daily life and propelled by a dynamic of its own, a dynamic that makes the everyday person who happens to be the author not much more of an authority about his writings than the reader who reads them.⁶ Unsurprisingly, Coetzee has been criticized for his relative disengagement from politics—unlike his countrywoman Nadine Gordimer—and for not dealing head-on with the turmoil of South Africa, focusing instead on individual consciousness in relation to which South Africa is more background than foreground.

As an academic *malgré lui*, Coetzee comes off at first glance as a model of political correctness. He seems to hold the positions that today's professors are supposed to hold. He is particularly sympathetic to women. In *In the Heart of the Country*, he even writes as a woman. He can be hard on male insensitivity and predatoriness. Yet when pressed for his "correct" opinions by interviewers, he has a way of slipping out of their lassoes, of refining his outlooks and refusing to be tied down. In place of easy-to-define political positions and polemics, which he dislikes, he has come to value (I'll put it in quotes, since I'm creating it as a term here) the "sense of being," a distinctly Heideggerian rejection of time-and-culture-bound social incarnations in preference for living in the body, experiencing one's sentience of the moment without cosmic claims. This is dramatically revealed in his 1983 Booker Prize novel, *Life and Times of Michael K*.⁷ Its protagonist, whom I would characterize as an idiot savant, wanders around South Africa during an imagined time of what amounts to civil war between the minority whites and the majority blacks, largely oblivious of or uncaring about what is going on except insofar as it impinges on his individual consciousness as a sentient being. Mainly concerned simply to survive in personal freedom, literally and figuratively cultivating his garden without money, home, or health, he

⁵ *Salmagundi*, pp. 83, 101.

⁶ *Doubling the Point*, pp. 63, 205.

⁷ New York, 1983.

sides neither with whites nor blacks (himself presumably black—a fact Coetzee has concealed in the interests of a different sort of apolitical focus). Michael K is an illuminating embodiment of Coetzee's muse-driven, Existential literariness, his Great Refusal, a hybrid of Melville's *Bartleby*, Kafka's K and hunger artist, and Camus's *Stranger* (with a bit of *Robinson Crusoe* thrown in for good measure). In a culminating scene, after Michael K refuses help from the medics in a refugee camp where he has been herded (What was the food in the wilderness that made all other food tasteless to you? he is asked) and after he escapes to a wretched, impoverished freedom, we discover, through a medical officer's internal monologue, how deeply K's mode of being in the world has affected him: "I slowly began to understand the truth: that you were crying secretly . . . for a different kind of food, food that no camp could supply. . . . Slowly, as your persistent *No*, day after day, gathered weight, I began to feel that you were more than just another patient. . . . Did you not notice how, whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away? . . . The garden for which you are presently heading is nowhere and everywhere except in the camps. . . . It is off every map, no road leads to it that is merely a road, and only you know the way."

This rejection of social constructions and abstractions in favor of immersion in a uniquely personal sense of concrete being during a time of unbelief (in this instance, the collapse of traditional South African society at the end of apartheid) is an inveterate feature of Coetzee's own psyche, a feature that accords well with the uprootedness of Postmodernism as it animates his fiction and interviews. As a reluctantly cerebral academic, he would rather just *be*. Instead, the world of political correctness, of which he is only a half-hearted citizen, keeps flogging him as it did Michael K to reveal which side he is really on.

The Lives of Animals brings to bear on many of the contradictions described above. Presented as the Tanner Lectures at Princeton in 1997–8 shortly before the brouhaha resulting from Princeton's appointment of Peter Singer, author of *Animal Liberation*, to its philosophy department, the presentation is a veritable Postmodern hall of mirrors: a fiction writer, J.M. Coetzee, invited to speak philosophically on an ethical problem, instead gives two lectures that are in fact short stories about a fiction writer, Elizabeth Costello, who is expected to talk about literature but who instead gives two lectures on the philosophic subject of animal rights. The characters, locale, and venue are given slightly askew versions of the names of actually existing professors and places, while the narrative that surrounds the fictional lectures is highly critical of both Costello herself and the things she has to say. As if this weren't dizzying enough, the book version is laced with authentic scholarly footnotes by Coetzee documenting his fictional statements about animal lives and rights and it concludes with brief commentaries by four preeminent thinkers in literature, philosophy, religion, and anthropology, all packed into 122 supercharged pages.

This time around, Costello again visits her son and daughter-in-law at

Appleton College but they are none too happy to see her, knowing that she is a difficult and uncompromising person who will soon attempt to make everyone feel guilty about killing animals and eating their meat. The son, a professor of physics and astronomy, is wary of her tendencies toward emotional blackmail, and the daughter-in-law, a professor of philosophy, finds Costello's views jejune. The story is told with uncharacteristic wit and irony, rhetorical modes that Coetzee has customarily avoided but that here serve as intentional feints to throw the reader off the trail that might identify the author's point of view (which he himself may not yet have identified). Costello informs her audience that she will skip a concrete recitation of the horrors animals suffer through human abuse and will confine herself to more general issues. Comparing the farming of animals for meat and lab experiments to the slaughter of the Holocaust (with analogies to the gold fillings and skins for lampshades culled from the corpses), she remarks: "Let me say it openly: we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them." She attacks Plato, Aquinas, Descartes, and Kant for their views of animals as machines designed for human gratification and makes an all-out assault on Reason (which is used to justify animal abuse) as a socially self-interested human construct. "Of course reason will validate reason as the first principle of the universe—what else should it do? Dethrone itself?" (But her daughter-in-law will respond: "Human beings invent mathematics, they build telescopes, they do calculations, they construct machines, they press a button, and, bang, *Sojourner* lands on Mars, exactly as predicted. . . . Reason provides us with real knowledge of the real world.")

Costello, like Aldo Leopold, Roderick Nash, and other ecological thinkers, wants to extend the range of personhood (in varying degrees) to include animals and is militantly opposed to a Cartesian cogito that favors rational consciousness over animal sentience. "To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being—not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the sensation—a heavily affective sensation—of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world" (cf. Michael K). You can't feel full of being when you are confined to a pen with other animals by keepers who refuse to "think themselves into the place of their victims." Costello's claim for human ability to think oneself into the Other is based on this intuition of a shared sentience of being, but its assumptions are fallacious and weak, resembling Aldo Leopold's "thinking like a mountain," which turns out to be thinking like a person thinking about a mountain. Believing that she *really can* share animal feelings, she quotes with disapproval the philosopher Thomas Nagel on the futility of trying to think like a bat: "Insofar as I can imagine this [how it feels to have

webbed feet] . . . it tells me only what it would be like for *me* to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat." Like most of Costello's claims, there is a certain emotional power in what she has to say on this subject, but it is the power of human desire rather than the power of truth, a distinction she seems unable to make. There is a danger of narcissistic ruthlessness in this form of presumed human sympathy; and when it is carried to its extreme, when one "speaks for" God or the State or the Race—or animals—(i.e., when one's puny human consciousness puts on world-historical or cosmic robes *à la* Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell), there may very well be a holocaust lurking in the wings (one thinks of Conrad's Mistah Kurtz). Her son is fearful she will be asked why she doesn't eat meat and that she will give her customary antinomian answer (which chills his blood): "I, for my part, am astonished that you can put in your mouth the corpse of a dead animal, astonished that you do not find it nasty to chew hacked flesh and swallow the juices of death-wounds."

When her son asks whether she would put a jaguar on a soybean diet, she says no, "Because he would die. Human beings don't die on a vegetarian diet." But he replies, "No, they don't. But they don't *want* a vegetarian diet. They *like* eating meat. There is something atavistically satisfying about it. That's the brutal truth." Other fictional respondents to Costello make equally harmful points, ranging from still more defense of reason: "There is no position outside of reason where you can stand and lecture about reason and pass judgment on reason" to the distinction between a human and an animal death. Since animals, unlike people, do not fear death, "For that reason . . . dying is, for an animal, just something that happens, something against which there may be a revolt of the organism but not a revolt of the soul. . . . It is only among certain very imaginative human beings that one encounters a horror of dying so acute that they then project it onto other beings, including animals."

Not "a revolt of the soul"! The distinction is startling in its brilliance—and when Costello is pushed against a wall, unable finally to offer convincing reasons for her aversion to animal killings, she replies that ultimately she wants to save her soul. But what is this soul, in any case, but human subjectivity, projecting its desires upon the canvas of a silent universe amenable to infinite interpretations? Costello's performance is eloquent and powerful but in the final analysis unpersuasive.

The replies to Coetzee's two lectures are all of great interest, but it is Peter Singer's that most directly addresses the issues in question. Singer's landmark book, *Animal Liberation* (first published in 1975), was principally concerned with the pain and suffering we inflict on animals, particularly in the needless mass production of meat by means of farm factories. His account of the torturous process whereby veal calves are penned, constricted of movement, and deprived of proper nutrition to make them anemic was horrifying, and his description of chicken-raising

no less alarming. He recommended vegetarian diets, railed against "speciesism" (which ignores the complex lives of other species), and detailed the extraordinary waste of natural resources involved in feeding calves twenty-one pounds of plant protein to produce one pound of animal protein for humans.⁸ (Even now, the American meat industry is moving into China, cutting down forests for grazing and introducing Western diets to a people largely free of the diseases connected with the highly saturated fats of animal-based foods.) There are so many devastating by-products of a carnivorous diet (destruction of trees needed for oxygen and erosion control, bad human health, pollution from mountains of excrement, production of methane gas, denuding of prairies from grazing, etc., etc.) that a good case can be made for limiting it. Yet even Singer is somewhat turned off by Elizabeth Costello's antinomian retreat to "feeling" as arbiter of moral action. In a little short story of his own that he wrote as comment upon *The Lives of Animals*, Singer remarks through his fictional stand-in, "When people say we should only *feel*—and at times Costello comes close to that in her lecture—I'm reminded of Göring, who said, 'I think with my blood.' See where it led him. We can't take our feelings as moral data, immune from rational criticism."

Elizabeth Costello's selective derogations of reason and retreat to soul-saving feeling ignore the fact that not only have standards of behavior toward animals (apart from industrial farming) improved during the past century (try harming suburban raccoons, deer, or even Canada geese and see what trouble you're apt to get yourself into) but that—to repeat words I have used on prior occasions—to be alive is to be a murderer. Anyone who has witnessed five lions tearing apart a living zebra on the Discovery Channel or PBS can hardly be sentimental about the benignity of animals toward other animals, nor is there any way to stay alive without killing something else for sustenance. Doubtless, the more complex the consciousness, the more criminal the cruelty towards it—and there is plenty of room for improvement. But the Real Original Sin would seem to be Life itself, which continues only through the exercise of slaughter and destruction. What are animal rights but the obverse side of the coin of animal sacrifice, an attempt to expiate the guilt of simply being alive by making a show of relinquishing a little power? Whether this is a "good thing" is another matter. A totally scrupulous moral consciousness might want to consider suicide, the ultimate gift to Others—because "alive" and "innocent" can't be put into the same sentence except as oxymoron.

In Coetzee's latest novel, *Disgrace*,⁹ David Lurie, a libidinous white South African professor, is unapologetic after he seduces an all-too-willing young student, who later charges him with sexual assault. Forced to resign unless he recants and contemptuous of the political correct-

⁸ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (second edition, New York, 1990), p. 165.

⁹ DISGRACE, by J.M. Coetzee. Viking. \$23.95.

ness that lies behind the treatment he receives from his university, he departs from Cape Town and goes to live with his convention-flouting lesbian daughter, who owns a small farm in a post-apartheid countryside now increasingly dominated by majority blacks. After initial feelings of superiority to much of his new surroundings, he begins to work in an animal shelter run by his daughter's neighbor and gradually finds himself humbled by pathos and tender feelings toward the dogs being put to death for lack of any takers. In a shocking episode, the daughter is raped by three black young men, acquaintances of her black, formerly socially submerged, neighbors; her own dogs are shot and her father is set on fire but survives in mostly good shape. Lurie, who loves his daughter, is fearful of AIDS and pregnancy but the daughter, who indeed becomes pregnant, accepts it as an inevitability of the new order and decides to keep the child. The novel ends with Lurie tenderly escorting doomed dogs to their death.

What is one to make of all this? There is, after all, no unqualified spokesperson in either set of fictions. Costello, who emerges as the impassioned protagonist, is so widely and persuasively criticized, her arguments so shaky, that it is hard not to wonder what Coetzee is up to in placing her center stage. And who is the spokesperson for *Disgrace*? Is it Lurie, whose political incorrectness is treated as abrasive (yet who is nonetheless rather winning in the current atmosphere of moral blackmail), who functions for most of the novel under a cloud of disapproval, but whose "conversion" is admittedly regarded with sympathy? (Conversion, however, to little more than a compassionate dogzapper.) It's surely not his daughter, whose righteousness is off-putting and whose willingness to be raped and otherwise violated for the new social order is less than charming. Is the younger generation necessarily wiser than the older? Are we really to think that black thugs are more virtuous than white ones?

What finally can a Postmodern author, an academic intellectual, an Afrikaner with a mission more cosmically aesthetic than locally moral (and because of it, criticized by his countrymen) seem to be telling us? Coetzee's flirtations with political correctness have a nervous and self-cancelling quality. He recognizes the validity of many of its claims but he is unable to avoid supplying damaging counter-arguments through his wide spectrum of characters, who collectively see through everything. Are vegetarianism or gentle canine euthanasias going to snatch us from our original sin of being alive? Will accommodating ourselves to the inevitabilities of "progressive" history save our always-already damnable souls? Does immersing ourselves in a bodily sentence of being rescue us from trendy moral ideas that have a nasty way of looking corrosive when their currency expires? What's a Postmodern person—author, reader—to do?

Coetzee seems to have taken on the only plausible role for a *fin-de-siècle* skeptical wiseman who sees too much for his own good. As a Sensitizer rather than a Doctrinizer he has limned with skill a multiplicity of

human possibilities, veering toward a handful of what seem like desirable choices but always acutely conscious of the treacherousness of history and the self-deceptions of human consciousness. His point of view, his moral stance, are hard to determine, although one senses a tentative drift maintained with sails never fully rigged. Looking out for animals, giving new social orders their due, entertaining the claims of Others, remaining open but unbedazzled—this is consciousness-raising without doctrine, or perhaps a fine-tuning of the stethoscope by means of which a Postmodern author listens in—with some anxiety—on the murmuring heart valves of humanity.