The Community of Sentient Beings: J. M. Coetzee's Ecology in *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*

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Coetzee's ecology arises in relation to one of the most troubling suggestions in the fiction of his later career. Already in *Disgrace* (1999), but still more starkly and disturbingly in *Elizabeth Costello* (2002), the modern human community associates itself with a normalization of atrocity; indeed, atrocity seems to situate itself at the very core of the modern. Coetzee's writing registers and then counters this atrocious modernity by opening and extending the ethical bounds of human community, by envisioning animals as fellow beings deserving the consideration and protection that more typically are accorded only to the human being. This extension of entitlement, however, necessarily impugns the typical economy of modern human collectives. As novelist Elizabeth Costello observes to a gathering of academics, her tour of their American college town has included "no horrors, no drug-testing laboratories, no factory farms, no abattoirs. Yet I am sure they are here.... They are all around us as I speak" (Coetzee, *Elizabeth* 65). In denouncing these unacknowledged but omnipresent horrors, Elizabeth voices a deep questioning of how we moderns understand ourselves and our relationships with other living beings.

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To expand the sphere of our community beyond the bounds of the human, Coetzee must adopt a broader sense of the interactions and interdependencies that impact upon and give shape to human lives; he must also expand his delineation of the sphere of human responsibility. Ecological understanding and imagination are required. Ecology, the "study of relationships, energy transfers, mutualities, connections and cause-and-effect networks within natural systems" (Snyder 75), does not dispense with social and political sciences, though it does contextualize them and qualifies their claims to status as autonomous realms of knowledge and enquiry. Coetzee's imagination, as represented in the later development of *Disgrace* and throughout *Elizabeth Costello*, works to discern the relationships human beings establish with the non-human world and to understand and evaluate humanity in terms of these relationships. Animal being—the living presence of the animal, in our world and in ourselves—is a concern that haunts the writing, at times asserting itself as a focal topic, at times abiding as a shadowy but inescapable presence. Intensified focus on the animal enables Coetzee to write in a zone of intersection between sociopolitical and ecological concerns, to elaborate an ecologically oriented ethics that sharpens the critique of modern political regimes that dominate and exploit fellow beings both human and non-human. By conjoining attention to animal being with analysis of the more conventionally defined social and political zones of human experience, Coetzee effectively denounces, as Graham Huggan suggests, "the dominance of instrumental reason as a means of justifying authoritarian behavior … both within and beyond the (human) species" (720). Coetzee also tacitly acknowledges that modern animal fables have been used, even quite recently, "to prop up the social hierarchies and disciplinary regimes that legitimize imperial rule" (Huggan 714). His new kind of animal-inhabited fiction recognizes that the animal is a primordial presence in the structuring of human politics and, more crucially, that animality marks the point of our most intense participation in an expansive, much-more-than-human world of living beings. The relationships we establish with animals, imaginatively and materially, manifest the degree to which we have understood, or failed to understand, our participation and the responsibilities this participation entails. When such understanding fails most entirely, what ensues is atrocity—the distressingly insistent element of the Coetzee text.

Like David Lurie of *Disgrace*, Elizabeth Costello recognizes atrocious aspects of some human-to-human relations as well as being aware of the atrocious treatment of animals by humans. Her preoccupation with the borders of the human, however, is more searching than David's, and she

deliberately chooses to open these borders by making sentience rather than reason the criterion for inclusion in community. Sentient being emerges as the criterion of value determining the human being's relations of responsibility with other humans and with animals. This choice of sentience over reason has to do with reason's historical failures: "reason" has been used to legitimate the abuse of animals and of human groups. The full and dignifying claim to reason has been denied not only to animals but also occasionally to human groups—to women, to non-European peoples—and this has been accompanied by denial of full status within the human community, and by consequent abuses. This naming of the new community-determining trait as sentience co-ordinates with Derek Attridge's important recognition that a late-modern global "great rationalization" is a focal concern in Coetzee's portrayal of troubled times in his later fictions ("Age" 100–02). One should also note, following Barney, Coetzee's clear awareness, throughout his literary career, that rationality has ever been a key measure in the discourse of European imperialism, one that has been deployed in conjunction with "the category of animal life" to specify the deficiencies of non-European peoples with respect to the ostensibly ideal humanity encoded by modern, Western civility (18).

The particular understanding of the relationship between the animal and the human that one finds in Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* has a quite broad range of antecedents in the modern history of ideas. Continental thinking of the last half century has taken up as a more than incidental topic the ethical implications of human relationships with the animal world. Theodor Adorno has asserted that animals should be, in themselves, objects of ethical consideration and has traced his own thinking back to Schopenhauer, who had much earlier taken up a like position and opposed it to an earlier established and more prevalent Kantian position. Emmanuel Levinas also has taken the measure of the animal as a possible manifestation of the ineluctable other, "le prochain," upon which Levinasian ethics is founded. Giorgio Agamben, more recently, has addressed the question of animal being, most notably in response to Levinas. Among Jacques Derrida's posthumous publications is his volume on the place of animals in human thought and experience, which notes a deeply encoded disavowal of the animal, particularly in philosophical traditions, but also the unignorable prominence of the animal in literary, poetic writing.[1]

1 See Adorno *Negative Dialectics*, Levinas "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights," Agamben *The Open: Man and Animal*, and Derrida *The Animal That Therefore I Am*.

Coetzee's vision, however, most clearly reveals its affinities with a modern line of Anglophone-world utilitarian ethics, for which Peter Singer provides the most prominent contemporary voice. His landmark book, *Animal Liberation*, dates from 1975 (and consolidates still earlier short publications), but Singer has remained true to his original thinking in his subsequent and still enduring career. He enjoys the support of various like-minded (if at times debative) contemporaries, of whom Tom Regan is perhaps the most noteworthy, and his arguments trace back through the contributions of immediate predecessors such as R. M. Hare to an origin frankly located in Bentham. For Singer, modern human collectives have shown themselves quite universally guilty of "speciesism," a cast of mind he directly associates with more prominently contested discriminatory orientations: racism and sexism (see "All Animals"). The speciesist, like the sexist or the racist, unjustifiably confines his or her sense of ethical responsibility within the scope of a self-defining, self-affirming group identification. Singer's countering ethics presents as its core imperative an "equality of consideration of interests" that extends to all sentient beings, to all beings capable of suffering and of enjoyment of life (*Practical* 21ff.; "All Animals" 84).

Questions of animal being and animal rights figure prominently in the flood of critical response that has followed the publication of *Disgrace*, which has become in a short time, despite its position in the author's later career, Coetzee's most discussed book. This bringing into focus of the animal topic is partly due to, and also justified by, the publication, also in 1999, of the lectures titled *The Lives of Animals*, material that was subsequently incorporated in *Elizabeth Costello*. (Singer, noteworthily, is one of the several respondents published in *The Lives of Animals*.) Even the critical texts on *Disgrace* that do not offer significant address to the animal topic manifest a sense that one needs, at least, to make mention of it. The spectrum of views is perhaps best suggested by its extremes: Tom Herron affirms that *Disgrace* is crucially about animals, that "animals become the novel's matter; they become what matters" (474); Gayatri Spivak, focusing strongly on the figure of Lucy Lurie, argues that her father David's eventual intense concern with animal lives is an instance of misprision, arising out of his general failure to understand his daughter. Herron's position seems slightly dubious, although it is strongly argued and enlightening in many of its aspects. But unless the far from unprecedented affirmation we-too-are-animals has become Coetzee's main point, rather than a preliminary point or premise, it would be curious indeed to find that his intensified attention to animals and animal being actually reflected the animal's ascent to the

status of an absolutely *per se* organizing concern. Yet, Spivak's sense of the place of animals in Coetzee's text seems still less accurate. Her particular understanding of Lucy Lurie's narrative function—as the site of narrative "counterfocalization" (22)—is crucial for the novel's best interpretation, but it hardly requires Spivak's contingent dismissal of the novel's animal-focused passages. Coetzee's publication of *The Lives of Animals*, and a little later *Elizabeth Costello*, clearly suggests that Spivak has accorded too little esteem to Coetzee's animals (as represented in *Disgrace*). Indeed, the choice of a woman as the principal character of the 2002 novel and the earlier *Lives* would seem to confirm that gender and animality are, in Coetzee's new line of thought and imagination, linked rather than distinct concerns.

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The existing criticism, however, has well and thoroughly argued a few key points. Josephine Donovan, and still more comprehensively Louis Tremaine, have asserted and evidenced the general importance of animals in Coetzee's fictional career from its very beginnings. However, these contributions give more attention to *Disgrace* than to *Elizabeth Costello* and, therefore, see in both works a sharpening of focus on the animal question rather than a new enunciation of the relationship between human and animal being. More crucially, several critics have noted that animals have become part of, and in fact central to, the elaboration of Coetzee's ethical vision. David Atwell, while engaged in the analysis of Coetzee's treatment of race, observes that ethical consciousness in Coetzee turns its focus from history's disheartening facts to "the conditions which humanity shares with all the earth's creatures: the fact of biological existence" (339). Elleke Boehmer, although like Spivak in giving her most focused attention to the topic of gender, asserts that Coetzee, in *Disgrace* and in subsequent works, "proposes animals as the essential third term in the reconciliation of human self and human other" (346). Tom Herron finds in Coetzee's animals the principal figures of the other—the other whose full recognition is the source and foundation of ethical awareness. Mike Marais acknowledges that the ethical importance of sympathetic imagination manifests itself in *Disgrace* partly in relation to animals, and in this respect the 1999 novel looks forward to the more strongly stated ethically-charged link between animals and sympathetic imagination in *Elizabeth Costello*. The various analyses of Coetzee's ethical content share a sense that Coetzee, to arrive at an effective articulation of values, must accord value to the animal.

The new orientations in *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello* follow from those of the earlier fictions but also show, through retrospective examination and comparison, how the later work makes distinct use of earlier

established topics. Taking the example of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, published in 1980, one can see that Coetzee was already concerned with atrocious violations of the codes of common humanity. The Magistrate at the centre of this early work suffers confinement, humiliation, and ultimately torture. He accounts for his experience using animal analogies, which are deployed in close relation with a documenting of dehumanizing bodily experience. Thus, even quite early in his imprisonment he reflects, "I guzzle my food like a dog. A bestial life is turning me into a beast" (80). Later, his reduction to merely animal subsistence is equated with an exclusively carnal sense of self: like Pavlov's dogs, he begins to salivate uncontrollably upon the presentation of food, and he comes to know "the misery of being simply a body that feels itself sick and wants to be well" (87). Still later, he recounts his submission to torture, saying that his tormentors aim to demonstrate "what it mean[s] to live in a body, as a body", and thus to show him "the meaning of humanity" (115). In this narrative, what differs significantly from the orientations of the later fictions is the unshaken belief that one arrives at animal existence through a process of violent reduction; one is reduced to a life that is no more than bodily life. The novel measures the value of humanity and human life in relation to *mere* animal life, *mere* bodily life. This state of being is the ground zero that remains after human complexity has been destroyed. In the later works, the human being's animal life or bodily life is presented as a main site—even as *the* main site—of human complexity; it manifests itself as a foundation on which to build a sense of the human that is more expansive and more inclusive.

The early pages of *Disgrace* are significantly marked by animal analogies that are only seemingly casual. As is commonly the case in literary works, and indeed in everyday speech, animals provide touchstones for the delineation of human experience. Thus, David Lurie very promptly announces that the "totem" of his sexual character is "the snake" (2). This early, pseudo-anthropological mention of the totem immediately reminds us of how deep the animal analogy goes in human self-conception. Such animal inscriptions have been amply documented by critics and established as essential elements in Coetzee's texts. *Disgrace*, in its early development, does not press beyond earlier works with respect to the ethical and political considerations of the relationship between animality and humanity. The early use of animal figures serves only to prepare the ground for later, more searching reflections, which first arise in debate with Lucy, in the period after her father's academic disgrace. Although not so intensely animal-focused as the other key woman character Bev

Shaw, Lucy distinguishes herself by articulating her thoughts and feelings about animals in ethical and political terms. (These are significant aspects of Lucy's complex agency within the novel, which Spivak, in her counter-focalization of the character, fails to note with due emphasis.) Lucy observes that animals, dogs among others, have no place in "the list of the nation's priorities," thus implying that they should have a place, though they do not. More crucially, Lucy asserts, again in debate with her father, "there is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals" (74). Significantly, David tries to counter his daughter's assertion of shared life by taking up a rather tired but readily recognizable stance: "We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different" (74). In a different national context, this response might be merely knee-jerkish, intellectually lazy, but David and Lucy are in South Africa, where not-higher-just-different has been the gentler statement of Apartheid logic—specifically, the argument and policy of "separate development." In other words, in South Africa (and indeed elsewhere) David Lurie's logic has been used, in oppressive, violating ways, against human beings.

In its early enunciations, David's insufficiently thoughtful attitude toward animals is typically compromised by darkly suggested analogies with his disposition toward other human beings. So, for instance, Bev Shaw, the book's most deeply committed animal lover, hopefully queries the former professor about his affection for animals. He responds that he undoubtedly does "like animals" because he eats them; he at least likes "some parts" of them (81). David's attitude to women seems notably similar, as is evidenced by his occasional trivializing and unoriginal "animalization" of Soraya, and more particularly by his subsequent responses to Melanie. David fetishises Melanie's body to a very notable degree, dwelling upon her girlishly slim hips, her perky breasts; one may say that he evidently likes her, or at least some parts of her.

David's sardonic irony is typical of his early responses to questions about his attitude to animals, and also to other human beings. Irony, the predominant disposition of modernist thought and imagination, is an appreciably complex, sophisticated disposition of the thinking being, the rational mind. Yet dispassionate irony, of the sort David Lurie repeatedly manifests, seems in Coetzee's view to be decidedly inadequate to the ethical and political considerations due to late-modern realities, particularly as these are manifested in late-twentieth-century South Africa. Such irony is left behind once David comes to understand animals as fellow beings, and one should note that Elizabeth Costello is devoid of irony in all her

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reflections upon eco-ethical and eco-political issues. Indeed, she insists that her comparison of herself with Kafka's ape is not "ironically" intended: "It means what it says. I say what I mean" (62). This rejection of irony is also a refusal to evoke the animal as a figural, allegorical representation of human traits or types—the typical literary and pedagogical use of the animal, which David very much goes in for in the early sections of *Disgrace*. Elizabeth steadfastly refuses to be sophisticated about animals. She strives repeatedly to discover and enunciate an integrated, unifying perspective upon sentient being, without ironic dualities or oppositions, without adopting or attempting to stage a superiority of perspective.

David's initiation to a much more inclusive envisioning of the community of sentient beings begins with his experience of atrocity in the human world—atrocity in which he is inescapably implicated both as perpetrator and as victim. His change of heart arises out of desperation—indeed, it develops on the far side of his despair. David commits both his sympathetic feeling and his ethical reasoning to the plight of animals, *because* he has lost all faith in the possibilities of an exclusively human *kind*ness. Elizabeth Costello's eco-ethical positions seem not, however, to have any such traumatic origin. At one point, Elizabeth recalls a youthful experience of sexual violence, but this abuse, although shocking, is not on a par with what David and his daughter are made to live through. Nor is there any strongly manifested link between Elizabeth's memory of long-ago abuse and her eco-ethical beliefs. Her narrative development suggests that one does not require an extraordinarily unfortunate personal history to recognize the dearth of real humanity, real humaneness, in the life of modern human collectives. The constitutive atrocity of the modern human experience is there to be seen; what is extraordinary, if anything, is our "willed ignorance" (Coetzee, *Elizabeth* 64), our stubborn refusal to see it for what it is.

Although *Elizabeth Costello* addresses the animal topic in detail and explicitly promotes ecological values, it does not do so in all its chapters or "lessons"—a fact about the text's overall contents which opens up the critical possibility of considering the animal topic as of secondary importance in the range of Coetzee's concerns. Derek Attridge, notably, focuses attention elsewhere. The "Epilogue" of his 2004 book, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, considers the case of *Elizabeth Costello*. This positioning, as it were in the realm of afterthoughts, makes it clear that the 2002 novel was not central to the conception of the critical monograph. Not surprisingly, therefore, Attridge remains true to his argument-orienting understanding of literature as event, downplaying the importance of the

animal topic and placing emphasis on the lecture format: most of the novel's chapters originated as public lectures; most of the chapters stage lecture presentations. Attridge's argument is informative and compelling, but it does not seem entirely clear on just how seriously one should consider the actual contents, the carefully elaborated topics, that the novel's various discursive situations present. Attridge first cautions against the readerly belief that the making of arguments is the "fundamental purpose" of the episodic fictions that house these arguments. He admits that the arguments "deserve to be taken seriously," but asserts that this particular disposition to attentive seriousness cannot claim to catch "the full ethical force of the fictions themselves" (197). However, when Attridge ventures statements about how one might locate this full ethical force, he is obliged to return again to arguments and their contents. Thus, he considers that the crucial ethical "burden" the character Elizabeth Costello figures forth has to do with her being a novelist. This is specifically "the burden of feeling one's way into other lives, including the lives of animals: the greater one's capacity to enter imaginatively into a different mode of existence, the stronger one's horror at behavior that denies its value" (202). Attridge cannot really avoid "including" animal lives here, because it is most pertinently in relation to animal lives that Elizabeth Costello intensely experiences and describes the burden of sympathetic imagination—which is clearly a burden that accords with sentient humanity and a novelist's specific burden only by way of the fuller, more habitual awareness of the weight of it.

The opening pages of *Elizabeth Costello* set up an analogical relation between humans and animals, an analogical relation very similar to that which one finds in the early passages of *Disgrace*. Elisabeth Costello's son speculates, for example, on what kind of "creature" his famous-author mother might be: not "seal" nor "shark" but "cat," he concludes, a large, undomesticated, predatory cat (5). Amusingly, this large-cat author is in the habit of thinking of certain literature fans as "the goldfish" (6). And there are other casual or casual-seeming references to the universe of animals. The author's young university-appointed guide is a "dogsbody," whose conversation is marked by a couple of "mouselike pounces" upon the dauntingly distinguished visitor (5, 6). The point here, as in *Disgrace*, is to remind us how habitual, how basic, it is for the human being to measure and evaluate human experience, the human condition, by means of animal analogies. *Elizabeth Costello*, however, goes an important step further than its predecessor by the metatextual gesture that makes the animal analogy a matter of explicit, focused critique. At the centre of Costello's first public lecture—she offers a few during the course of the novel—is a

Kafka ape, Red Peter, whose appearance serves to reveal the deep problems that inhere in our habit of animal analogy. The lecture does not put forward, nor even as yet imply, a well-developed ecological vision, but it serves significantly to remind us that the human being is an animal, an animal that may learn to wear clothing conforming to certain conventional standards, to eat with instruments and chew with mouth closed, to speak its thoughts in more or less orderly sequence—but an animal nonetheless. Therefore, Kafka's ape is justified in undertaking his demonstration of human status: why can he not be just another animal who has adequately appropriated the forms of human being? Is that not what we all are, animals who learn to see ourselves, and who learn to expect that we will be seen, as human? But if the substructure of our community, of our sense of shared being, is animality rather than a supposed humanity, which we perhaps too facilely claim—what then? We would be obliged to review, with a rigorously ethical gaze, our relationship with animality, with animals. This understanding, toward which David Lurie spends much of his narrative life groping, is a pre-established premise for Elizabeth Costello. In this respect, her vision manifests a very significant change from that which characterizes the narration of the Magistrate's experience in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. In this much earlier fiction, Coetzee is still working in relation to a well-established ethical measure: it is atrocious for a human being to treat another human being like an animal. In *Elizabeth Costello*, what is atrocious is the way those who think of themselves as human treat those they think of as merely animals—or merely animal-like.

But, of course, Elizabeth Costello is not satisfied merely to refocus or reorient the way human beings think about human status, about animals, about relations between the human and the animal. Her challenge does not restrict itself to the manner of thinking but addresses the very fact of thinking, the tacit faith that we humans can think our relation with animality, and think it rightly, reasonably. Elizabeth Costello specifically asserts that she refuses to "bow to reason" (67), to "subject [her] discourse to reason" (68). She does not accept, as the philosophical tradition has done, that reason is "the being of the universe"; for her, it is "a certain spectrum of human thinking" (67), and one that has been abusively applied to the delineation of the human relationship with the animal. The denunciation of this abuse is the precise point of Costello's engagement with experimental intelligence-testing as applied to higher apes. Such testing, she argues, insensitively pursues demonstrations of instrumental reason. It unreasoningly ignores the fact that reason is an occasional adjunct of sentient being, and that it can *never* maintain itself autonomously, apart

from a state of being that is also sentient. Thus, the right reason of a chimpanzee confronted with a bunch of bananas suspended out of reach and a nearby wooden crate is not the instrumental reason the human scientist is looking for: drag crate to position under bananas, climb on crate, retrieve bananas. The right reason of a sentient being would take shape as an anxious questioning, such as: Why has my caregiver decided to torment my hunger rather than feeding me? The ape may or may not reason as a sentient being—fairly much impossible to verify that—but it is clear, at least for Elizabeth Costello, that the human scientist has failed to do so. Notwithstanding the starkly drawn differences between the world views of Elizabeth and her sister Blanche (Sister Bridget), Blanche, in a later chapter, unwittingly echoes her sister's condemnation of primate studies, publicly denouncing the human sciences, which have "enthroned … the monster of reason, mechanical reason" (123). The discourse of *Elizabeth Costello* thus registers an important advance beyond that which one finds in *Disgrace*: it is not simply the valorization and use of reason but the valorization and use of a reason disconnected from sentience that may lead to inhumanity, subtle or stark.

Early in *Disgrace* one finds an acerbic denunciation of "the great rationalization" (3) of the contemporary university, a late-modern development which, as Derek Attridge rightly argues, needs to be understood as global, not merely South African. However, this great rationalization is never associated with the ethical questioning of relationships between the human and the animal. One may say rather that David Lurie's eventual ethical position suggests that he has learned to feel his values more than to think them, and that, in this way, he has struck upon something like the proper reason of a sentient being. David decides that his "idea of the world" forbids him to allow dog corpses to be beaten with shovels "into a more convenient shape for processing" (146). David here refuses the instrumental reason that sees the shovel, like the ape's wooden crate, as a tool that can be used in a practical way to solve a practical problem. He is refusing to violate what one might call a poetics of sentient being, which discerns in a dog's lifeless body the *formal* affirmation of sentience. But David, unlike Elizabeth Costello, never manifests any clear self-consciousness about his change of mind, his change of heart. He does not look past the individual experiential fact to the formal truth it instantiates. He never therefore calls deeply into question, as Elizabeth does, "the great Western discourse of man versus beast, of reason versus unreason" (69). And he very nearly falls into an ethical confusion that she carefully avoids: Elizabeth does *not* choose to be ethical about animals *instead of* being

ethical about human beings. Her guiding recognition is that one cannot maintain a human-or-animal either/or in the making of a viable ethics. "To me," she states,

> a philosopher who says that the distinction between human and non-human depends on whether you have a white or a black skin, and a philosopher who says that the distinction between human and non-human depends on whether or not you know the difference between a subject and a predicate, are more alike than they are unalike. (111)

The question is not which of these two philosophers is more wrong; the question, the ethical question, arises in the recognition that both are wrong, and that both are wrong *in similar ways*.

The question is not which of these two philosophers is more wrong; the question, the ethical question, arises in the recognition that both are wrong, and that both are wrong *in similar ways*. In both cases, one chooses to see and valorize difference rather than commonality, community.

Elizabeth Costello's eco-ethics also represents an advance on David Lurie's in that she attempts to specify how one might come to recognize and know the being we share with animals. In this writing, I have been calling it sentient being. Costello names it more poetically: she speaks of what it means "to be full of being" (77); she speaks of "fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being" and then of the experience of "being alive to the world" (78). This is what the human being can share with animals, and, by extension, one may say that atrocity, that ultimate form of human failure, arises out of a failure to find and maintain this fullness of being. Using the example of poetry, Costello suggests that the struggle toward human fullness of being entails "feeling [one's] way towards a different kind of being-in-the-world" (95); "it is a matter … not of inhabiting another mind but of inhabiting another body" (96). The central importance of the body, of embodied life, is stated here at the level of theory. This theory, however, is amply sustained, in *Elizabeth Costello*, by the insistent inscription of bodies and bodily life in the text. Laura Wright's assertion, "The animal rights argument offered by Costello is, at its core, about bodies" (207), is entirely apt and accurate if one understands that animals and bodies cohabit in the text, that the body comes to the fore to the same degree that the animal does so. The body, clearly, is the coin, the currency, sustaining the fiction's ecological economy. Fullness of being absolutely requires the experience of embodied life, its gratifications and its liabilities; ecologically ethical life requires the recognition that such experience is profoundly shared.[2]

In reading *Elizabeth Costello*, one can understand most clearly the fundamental importance of animality, embodied life, and ecological vision

when this cluster of concerns finds enunciation in chapters that have no strong evident need for it. "Realism" does not seem to have any clear need of Red Peter to make its theoretical points—and yet Red Peter is present, and prominently so. One should also note the strange and disturbing confrontation with the mother as animal body that brings this chapter or "lesson" to its conclusion: as Elizabeth Costello dozes, open-mouthed, her adult son John half-observes, half-imagines "her gullet, pink and ugly, contacting as it swallows, like a python.... No, he tells himself, that is not where I come from, that is not it" (34). Thus, John's rather fraught relationship with his mother finds its summary form as he confronts her as a procreative animal body and thus recognizes, unwillingly, that animality is the deepest, most substantial source of the human life she has accorded to him.

"The Novel in Africa," which also precedes the bringing into prominence and focus of ecological concerns in chapters 3 and 4, again manifests no real interest in animal questions until it moves toward its resolution. First Macquarie Island, formerly a site of mass commercial slaughter of penguins, presents itself in the course of Elizabeth's voyage and recalls the long history of atrocious human interventions in the animal world. Then, while visiting the island, Elizabeth encounters an albatross. This unexpected bird—Elizabeth is looking for penguins—has, like the penguin, a history of suffering violent human threats to its species existence, and in modern literature since Coleridge, this bird is probably the best known exemplum of the culpable human relationship with the animal kingdom. An encounter develops: two sentient beings, both female and both mothers, confront and examine each other across the gap of species difference. Implicitly recognizing that such face-to-face, egalitarian, and relational terms are hardly characteristic of the history of humans with their animal fellows, Elizabeth situates the experience "*before the fall*" (Coetzee's italics, 56), before the fall of animate beings into distance and difference. Moreover, this new or rediscovered relational encounter effectively mediates Elizabeth's dialogical exchange with another human female who comes up to view the great bird. Elizabeth, curiously but significantly, does not feel such complete and immediate fellowship with the human newcomer, only finding a basis for sympathetic feeling, right at the end of the chapter, in that arguably animal aspect of human experience,

2 The ordering concern with ecology, it should be noted, is what is really new here. Brian May has asserted in relation to earlier Coetzee fictions, the "presence, primacy, and power" of bodies (416); also an "ethical fascination with the body" (414), and a sense of the body as a potential "ethical agent" (413).

carnal pleasure (which both women have had and have shared with one particular man, Emmanuel Egudu—though at distinct moments in their own personal histories).

Chapters 3 and 4, as has already been demonstrated, treat ecological topics explicitly and in detail. However, the book's remaining chapters do not abandon the topic, though its presence becomes more muted. In "The Humanities in Africa," Blanche (Sister Bridget) aligns herself with certain key positions Elizabeth has earlier taken in relation to animality and ecology—despite radical differences of perspective characterizing the two sisters' thought. Blanche also rejects the too exclusively human determination of value in the modern world (as exemplified by the Humanities), rejects the modern enthronement of reason (123), along with the related modern claim that human beings are (or can be) "masters of nature" (141). She even goes so far, when pressed, as to propose Orpheus as the missed opportunity of the predominantly Apollonian Humanities—Orpheus, the irresistible charmer of animals; Orpheus, who is himself a kind of magical animal, "A chameleon. A phoenix" (145). And it is noteworthy that this chapter concludes, as the two earliest had done, by elaborating upon Elizabeth's fleshliness. The chapter's final mediations are upon the measure of beauty, both human and animal, Elizabeth once enjoyed and upon her coming into greater awareness of the embodied being's universal susceptibility to degeneration, decline, and death.

The susceptibilities of embodied life, of fleshed animal being, again move to the foreground in "The Problem of Evil," which steers inexorably toward its recapitulation of Lear's terrible recognition "of what poor, forked, quivering creatures we all are" (178).[3] "Eros" emphasizes the other end of the spectrum of embodied experience, considering the desiring, pleasure-capable body as a boon, rather than simply a mortal liability, and pondering its potential for congress with divinity. But even here, divine being, godliness, reveals itself most cogently in animal forms: the experience of "a full-grown male swan jabbing webbed feet into your backside while he has his way, or a one-ton bull leaning his moaning weight on you." Even the Virgin Mary's traditionally chaste conjunction with God is reconfigured in fleshly, animal terms, as the experience of "the issue of the Holy Ghost running down her thighs" (184), of "being fucked by a whale," or by the more strictly Biblical "Leviathan" (187). And in "At the Gate," Elizabeth finally attests to her judges a measured belief in frogs, in

3 In Shakespeare's tragedy, the King's precise response to half-frozen, shivering Tom o' Bedlam (Edgar in disguise) is: "Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art" (*King Lear* 3.4.105–06).

the irrepressible life of the Dulgannon River's tiny frogs, which she recalls from childhood. Earlier in this final chapter, she had asserted—in accord with Attridge's ordering idea—that her vocation as artist and author forbade her any strong commitments to belief, but she relents, when pressed, and it is to palpable manifestations of animal life that she turns.

The novel concludes with a seemingly discontinuous "Postscipt"—the organizing presence of Elizabeth Costello is absent here. Yet the text's main protagonist and proponent of ecological values is present, as it were, in spirit; as Lucy Graham has noted, Lady Chandos, the speaker of the "Postscript," signs herself finally as "Elizabeth C." Like Elizabeth Costello, Elizabeth Chandos resists "rationalizing language" and strives to present truths "sited in her body" (Graham 228–29). Animals are insistently present in Lady Chandos's impassioned prose, and her letter, despite all its anguished confusion about the notion of likeness in human experience, includes a key statement that one may describe as primordially ecological: "Each creature is key to all other creatures" (229). The letter itself, as a material appeal for recognition by an other, attests to a desperate yet enduring faith in this "key" connection.

Coetzee's ecology demands that social and political issues be examined within a broader field of concern.

This argument, now reaching its conclusion, has striven to demonstrate that the most prominent organizing concern in Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* is ecology; more precisely, that this work pushes beyond the eco-ethical initiatives of *Disgrace*, positing a community of sentient beings and understanding this community as the basis for human values, decisions, and actions, both ethically and politically.[4] In speaking thus of ecology, the argument shifts attention away from necessarily more limited points of focus such as animal rights, or the value of sympathetic imagination, or the social value of literature. Coetzee's ecology demands that social and political issues be examined within a broader field of concern. It calls upon readers to look beyond the human, and in this action of looking beyond, the social and political value of Coetzee's work becomes evident. As my argument notes in its early development, the category of the animal, and the animal analogy by which it is most commonly deployed, have a deep

4 Concerning the relationship between the ethical and the political, which it has not been the purpose of this paper to articulate thoroughly, Spivak is particularly instructive. She argues that the ethical and political considerations informing Coetzee's fictions—and particularly *Disgrace*—are contingently though oppositionally staged; the textual orientation is *not*, by turns, ethical and then political and then ethical again; the ethical and the political are ongoingly contingent and oppositional. Power and value, interest and responsibility—these concerns are always in play, always connected, always in tension.

and detailed history in the legitimating discourses of social systems of discrimination and subordination. Closely—indeed, contingently—allied to conceptual and discursive uses of the animal, moreover, is a privileging of reason among the human faculties and the establishment of biased systems for defining what rationality is (or should be), and for limiting or denying access to the status of rational being. Coetzee's enunciation of his ecology demonstrates that such uses of the animal and of privileged reason are essentially, inescapably abusive (rather than only occasionally, circumstantially so); that such uses are not to be remeasured, limited, and corrected, but denounced.

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