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Too much terror?

J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* and the circulation of trauma

Terror is an everyday occurrence in every country, township, and factory, where animal farming is practiced. The everyday life of farmed animals is nothing less than what happened during the Holocaust. These are but a few of the poignant claims made by the novelist Elizabeth Costello, the main character of J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (Coetzee 1999a). Coetzee himself might easily be recognized as a paradigmatically political author in such texts ranging from *Waiting for Barbarians* to *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*. Perhaps in part because his books have so often been read as straightforward political comments, and as *his* political comments, he seems to distance himself from all these quick conclusions by way of this complex, self-ironic novel. As a result, *Elizabeth Costello* is not only about terror, it is also about circulating and distributing terror and trauma through language and speech. The aim of this chapter is not to reveal Coetzee's political opinions with regard to animals; rather it aims at understanding how literary fiction can pose the issues of trauma and terror in new contextual ways. Coetzee-the-author offers a series of explicit and less explicit reading guidelines, and that these guidelines are profoundly helpful for everyone who endeavors to read self-conscious fiction, or arts in general, politically.

Elizabeth Costello is quite openly a novel of ideas. To enforce this model, and certainly not without irony, Coetzee has subtitled his book, “Eight Lessons.” To start with, we do not have titled or numbered “chapters” or any other way to chart the natural flow of events to identify with, just eight separate but intertwined lessons.” In addition, we are not provided with a full account of Elizabeth

Costello's life before or between these lessons. However, the lessons themselves are narrative sections, organized around the life of the Australian writer Elizabeth Costello in her mature years.

Most of these lessons feature a public talk, a lecture, either given or attended by Costello. From the outset, the novel delineates a tension between the public role of an author as a speaker, as giving talks, and her actual role as an author. As we will later see, these roles do not necessarily coincide with each other perfectly. Arguably this infers a tension between ideas, beliefs and, talks of the flesh-and-blood author J. M. Coetzee, and the authorial performance of his novels (on these distinctions, see Phelan 2005). Were there no tension or difference between these two forms of expression, the talks and the novels, there would be no particular reason to read fiction politically.

This obvious division of the roles of the author-as-character can be complemented with a functional distinction suggested by James Phelan (2005, 12–13). He suggests that “character functions” can be seen on three levels, separating “the ways in which characters work as representations of possible people (what I have called their mimetic function), as representative of larger groups of ideas (their thematic functions), and as artful constructs within the larger construct of the work (their synthetic functions).” It may be legitimate to argue that the *mimetic* function of the main character is constrained almost to the limit of plausibility, whereas the *thematic* function dominates much of the early chapters, before giving way to an emphasis on the *synthetic* functions at the end of the novel.

The novel, thus, includes eight lessons and at least six separate talks in context as embedded within these lessons. Elizabeth talks about realism, the lives of animals – both from the perspective of philosophers and poets – and about the problem of evil. An African writer gives a talk on “the novel in Africa,” and Elizabeth's sister Blanche on “the humanities in Africa.” Even though these talks may at first appear analogous in portraying a traveler, a new context, a talk, and a response by the

audience, the lessons are narrated on far from equal terms. The author provides access to the talks from diverse distances, thereby leading us to assume different attitudes towards the speakers.

Traveling focalization

Literary theorists have used a number of terms, such as center of consciousness, perspective, and focalization to describe the point of view from which events are seen, sensed or observed. Gerard Genette (1980, 185–198) pointed out that the earlier visual terms “perspective” and “point of view” problematically merged the positions of the one who observes and the one who speaks. In response, he suggested a clear distinction between *focalizer* (observer) and *narrator* (speaker) (see also Rimmon-Kenan 1991; Herman 2002). As Mieke Bal (1997, 143–144) notes, there is one additional merit in the terminology of focalizing: the word is more flexible in terms of inflection. Therefore, we can have terms for the process (*focalizing*), the subject (*focalizer*), and the object of observation (*focalized*).

Some focalizers are internal or *character-bound*, meaning that we see and experience everything through the senses of one or more characters; in other cases the focalizers are not characters of the story, and are thus called *external*. It is noteworthy that focalization and narration do not necessarily overlap. A third-person narration may as well reveal the characters’ most intimate thoughts and feelings. For example, Ian McEwan’s (2005) *Saturday* uses such a technique in accounting for one day in the life of the neurosurgeon Henry Perowne. A strictly *internal*, character-bound focalizer is naturally tied to the perceptions of that particular character, and cannot reveal other persons’ innermost thoughts. In representing fictional consciousnesses, however, the distinction between focalized and focalizer cannot be absolute, as Alan Palmer (2004, 49) has noted. While Henry Perowne is *Saturday*’s focalizer he, of course, is also focalized, that is, observed by himself.

Finally, works of fiction vary remarkably as regarding how fixed or swiftly moving the focalization is presented.

Without a doubt, focalization is an ideologically powerful tool. “If the focalizer coincides with the character,” Mieke Bal (1997, 146) maintains, “that character will have an advantage over the other characters. The reader watches with the character’s eyes and will, in principle, be inclined to accept the vision presented by that character.” John Updike’s (2006) *Terrorist* realizes its strong critical edge due much to the fact that the young Islamist Ahmad is its key focalizer.

Elizabeth Costello’s lessons vary importantly in terms of focalization. As a rule, the speaker is not the focalizer, yet the focalizer is not just a curious or neutral member of the audience. When Elizabeth Costello gives her talks, either on realism or on the lives of animals, the focalizer is either external or it is her son John. Both the black African author and Elizabeth’s sister Blanche we view through the lenses of Elizabeth’s critical consciousness. These solutions build distance between speakers and the reader, and help to resist any easy identification.

Even before Costello’s first talk on realism, a good dose of skepticism is provided by her son, who ponders: “[H]er thoughts would be, he suspects, as uninteresting as most people’s. A writer, not a thinker. Writers and thinkers: chalk and cheese.” (Coetzee 1999a, 10). By quoting John’s thoughts, the author makes relevant the distinction between the roles of author-as-a-speaker and author-as-a-writer. His mother’s weariness, still greasy-looking hair, and an outfit distantly resembling that of Daisy Duck are features that help provide a certain distance. There is a strong resistance to the mimetic function. The narrator bluntly foregrounds the synthetic, textual function by following John’s thoughts: “The blue costume, the greasy hair, are details, signs of modern realism” (p. 4). To accentuate the overall relevance of John’s thoughts we are informed that the son nevertheless

follows and helps his mother “out of love” (p. 3). Even Costello’s closest associates do not thus constitute a solid, like-minded community around her. There is a crack, a distance for the reader to step in and find more space to breathe and think.

The Animal Dilemma

The third lesson, *The Lives of Animals. One: The Philosophers and the Animals*, begins with a particularly tense situation. Elizabeth Costello has been invited to give two talks at her son’s college in the United States, and stays at his house during the visit. Elizabeth initiates the first critical scene by asking why the children are eating in the playroom, and not at the same table with the guest and their parents. Elizabeth insists on receiving an explanation, even though she knows well in advance that the children are eating chicken, something she herself does not want to see at the table. John tries very hard to find a balance between his straightforward mother and his equally outspoken wife Norma, a philosopher of mind from the same college. From the outset, it is clear that this will not be a happy encounter. Norma “has never hesitated to tell [John] that his mother’s books are overrated, that her opinions on animals, animal consciousness and ethical relations with animals are jejune and sentimental” (p. 61).

Elizabeth’s talk is concise, many-layered and provocative. Even during the talk, we are invited to take distance: “Because of the flatness of her delivery, because she does not look up from the page, he feels that what she is saying lacks impact.... He does not look forward to what is coming. He does not want to hear his mother talking about death” (p. 63). But death is what she is going to talk about. By introducing the theme of animal lives, she makes rhetorical use of the unnarrated: “I will pay you the honor of skipping a recital of the horrors of their lives and deaths” (p. 63). Instead, she takes a detour through the Holocaust:

Between 1942 and 1945 several million people were put to death in the concentration camps of the Third Reich: at Treblinka alone more than a million and half. The people who lived in the countryside around Treblinka – Poles, for the most part – said that they did not know what was going on in the camp; said that, while in general they might have guessed what was going on, they did not know for sure; said that, while in a sense they might have known, in another sense they did not know, could not afford to know, for their own sake. (p. 63–64)

The listeners who do not properly know or are not interested in what happens to animals in their neighborhoods, are put on an equal footing with people who lived next to Treblinka. The comparison between the Holocaust and the treatment of animals fills the rhetorical void created above by skipping the details.

After a while Costello discovers an entirely new dimension of her key comparison:

“They [Holocaust victims] went like sheep to the slaughter.” “They died like animals.” “The Nazi butchers killed them.” Denunciation of the camps reverberates fully with the language of the stockyard and slaughterhouse that is barely necessary for me to prepare the ground for the comparison I am about to make. The crime of the Third Reich, says the voice of accusation, was to treat people like animals. (p. 64–65)

At this point, Costello’s argument is perhaps at its most powerful. The talk draws our attention to the curious fact that the unusually cruel and obscene treatment of human beings is regularly represented by a discourse on animals. The animal is, in this language, the absolute Other, the natural site of cruelty and instrumentality. The uncanniness of the quote may be tested by trying to

replace “animal” by any politically incorrect expression of segregation or subjugation. The quote would be either implausible or so gravely prejudiced that it would be counterproductive. But using animal in those sentences is still dreadfully natural. It is almost as if the power of language would betray exactly those people who resist oppression, racism and cruelty, and as if the capacity to express extremities would dissolve in case the decent treatment of animals would be the intuitive presupposition. That is, in case they would not be treated “animally” but “humanly.”

Costello proceeds next to discuss intelligence tests conducted on chimpanzees. She foregrounds the cruelty attached to the imprisonment and solitary confinement, but seems simultaneously to take an odd step towards humanizing the animals. She suddenly turns to fiercely criticizing the philosopher Thomas Nagel. Nagel had posed the question concerning what it is like to be a bat. According to Nagel, we can only know how a bat behaves. She quotes Nagel:

‘Merely to think what it is like to live as a bat does, says Mr Nagel –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 is like to *behave* like a bat. (p. 76)

Nagel’s thought might enable the recognition of the radical difference between us and bats or other animals, to help us delimit the colonizing impulse of human consciousness. Instead, Costello chooses to attack the idea passionately. Her key reply is that she is able to imagine herself as dead. If she can do that, why could she not imagine herself as a bat? “To be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being,” she retorts (p. 77). From this observation, she returns to the Nazis and their incapacity to imagine themselves in

the cattle cars, that is, as Jews. This coldness indicates the lack of any capacity for empathy. By this means, Elizabeth Costello is ready to conclude:

If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed [referring here to her fictional figures], then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life. (p. 80)

Can I, then, competently imagine being a Muslim woman, Islamist fighter, or an Australian aboriginal? Are imagination and “fullness of being” universal keys to another being’s experience? Costello is obviously mixing a few things here. One can indeed imagine a mental world where houses and trees act and suffer, but it is not necessarily the same thing as *understanding* houses. It is extremely difficult to imagine oneself without the level of assumed key mental capacities—and their deficiencies—of observation, feeling, reflection and language that are a characteristic feature of humans; therefore such imagination necessarily inappropriately transfers human reasoning and mentalities to fictional animals. It is enough to remember the conceptual difficulties of writing history without anachronistic exports from contemporary thought.

Empathy, as important as it is in terms of ethics and politics, does not offer much in the way of understanding bats. And why stop with bats and oysters? Can we not work our imagination into that of a birch tree? Even though I fully know that cars do not actually think and feel, there is nothing to stop one from feeling empathy with his or her old car, and to imagine its sufferings, wishes, or cravings for the fresh spring air.

The imagining of bats was vital to Costello for a particular reason. The most horrendous feature in death camps was not that humans treated other humans like lice because that would be “too

abstract” as she reckons. The worst thing was that the perpetrators failed to think *themselves* in the position of their victims (p. 79); the divide between “we” and “them” was too absolute. Costello is right; to imagine the horrors of victims would have made the crimes much harder to execute. Still we are on a slippery ground, because many theories and testimonies of the Holocaust resist the very idea of “understanding” the experience of concentration camps (see, for example, Parvikko in this volume).

In a problematic way we seem to come back to the human, cognitive capacity to *narrativize* almost anything. To narrativize the life of animals from the human perspective by way of an uncontrolled imagination could well be criticized as a new form of colonization. Costello’s discussion on the intelligence tests of chimpanzees fails precisely here. She introduces the test animals and their dilemmas as if they were human-like thinkers, without proper notice of the particular mental qualities of the species. In this imagination, the bats do not have independent worlds constitutive of their own priorities, nor their own cognitive ways of world-making. Here I suggest Yann Martel’s (2002) *The Life of Pi* as an alternative and intriguing attempt to understand and honor the otherness of animals qua animals.

Animals and concentration camps

The strong comparison between the Holocaust and the cruelty against animals in the food industry is the key idea of Elizabeth Costello’s talk. But how legitimate is this comparison?

Both ethically and politically it is problematic, if events within radical trauma and suffering are transformed into aspects of political competition. In such a case, the position “Our suffering surpasses all other historical sufferings and cannot be compared with any other sufferings” becomes

as problematic as its abstract counterpart, according to which “All suffering and destruction is equally bad.” Costello herself seems to lean towards the second alternative: “A sparrow knocked off a branch by a slingshot, a city annihilated from the air: who dare say which is the worse?” (p. 159). Even though all distinctions are necessarily negotiable and questionable, it is, however, necessary to acknowledge the ethical and historical gradations of evil actions.

In contrast to Costello’s comparison, some remarkable differences remain. No matter how ethically problematic contemporary industrial animal farming is, the *purpose* of the industry is not to keep the inmates in extreme hunger, cold, and forced labor day after day, until their death of starvation. No known farmer is working to annihilate cows, chickens, pigs or horses out of existence and of natural history. The farmed animals are not hunted from amongst a free and wild life, stigmatized, and *then* closed into over-populated and purposely cruel camps. Indeed, cruelty is hardly the conscious purpose of animal farming, and as a counter-part there is no such thing in nature as a kind and stress-free way of dying at an old, dignified age. The conditions of animal farming are thus, at least potentially, a matter of negotiation and possible reform, whereas the suffering of the Holocaust victims was exactly the point and thus absolutely beyond reform and mitigation.

Of course it is debatable as to how much such differences matter, and which ethical consequences they may hold. What I find worth resisting, even repulsive, however, is the transformation of the Holocaust experience to that of a free-for-all rhetorical tool to boost other political and ideological issues whatsoever, even apparently good ones. If we accept that we truly can drop key historical characteristics of the Holocaust, in the name of abstract “evilness,” and turn the figure into a generalized source of outrage, we are on the slippery slope towards normalizing the experience itself. Following Costello, the Holocaust is always already deeply rooted in every town. She seems to declare a sort of “animal universalism,” and strong emotional continuity from human beings to

that of bats and oysters. This is a sound argument against the binary opposition between humans and animals, and yet, by the same token, it erases the significance of all differences. Shall we now renounce all distinctions, and consider eating our neighbors on equal terms with the eating of oysters?

Against this universalistic line of reasoning arises a theme of particular relevance for those who are closest to us. Norma, Elizabeth's daughter-in-law grows more and more hostile towards Costello's line of argumentation. In addition to her more academic comments, there is one particularly important remark made to her husband, the night before Elizabeth's departure: "I would have more respect for her if she didn't try to undermine me behind my back, with her stories to the children about the poor little veal calves and what the bad men do to them. I'm tired of having them pick at their food and ask, 'Mom, is this veal?' when it's chicken or tuna fish. It's nothing but a power game" (p. 114).

Costello, in turn, is herself agonized by the contradiction between her absolute principles and non-response on the part of people she encounters. On the trip to the airport, Elizabeth talks to her son:

'It's that I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easy among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? ... 'It's as if I were to visit friends, and to make some polite remark about the lamp in their living room, and they were to say, "Yes, it's nice, isn't it? Polish-Jewish skin it's made of, we find that's best, the skin of young Polish-Jewish virgins." (p. 114–115)

We may read these lectures as desperate ethical-cum-political argumentation. Some readers may find them repulsively self-righteous. The irritation and tension between these interpretations offers the first instance of “too much terror.” In these two lessons, Elizabeth Costello is on her moral mission, and does not hesitate to throw graphic details and wild comparisons at her audience in order to promote her cause. She gives little thought to the peace of her son’s family life, nor does she hesitate to evoke the imagination of little children. Terror, shock, graphic details—they are good enough tools to promote a good cause. In a manner of speaking, this section presents Elizabeth Costello who declares a war against terror.

Elizabeth in Africa

The next lesson, *The Humanities in Africa*, is given by Blanche Costello, a Catholic nun and Elizabeth’s sister. This time we experience everything through Elizabeth. Blanche’s talk is a provocative, dogmatically Catholic attack on the relevance of the humanities. Her talk is indeed a hard piece to digest in a college of the humanities but, after all, it is a coolly academic talk without evocative, emotional images. Ironically, in the previous lesson Costello did all she knew how in order to erase the distinction between human beings and animals; now in Africa, she is affronted by Blanche’s attack on *humanism*. During one of their conversations, we are informed of Elizabeth’s thoughts:

She does not like it when her sister gets on her high horse and preaches. It happened during her speech in Johannesburg and it is happening again. All that is most intolerant in Blanche’s character emerges at such times: intolerant and rigid and bullying. (p. 138)

The whole setting of Elizabeth's lessons is reversed. Now Elizabeth is—in vain, it seems—seeking out personal closeness with her sister, “on the brink of passing” (p. 155). During the previous lesson, Costello hardly recognized the feelings of her family and never missed the opportunity to preach, to project *her* intolerance and self-righteousness. Is this at all the same person? What has happened to her, and her own sermons? The effect of introducing a sermonizing and dogmatic sister is to relativize the previous Elizabeth herself. While the thematic function of Elisabeth's character was more prominent when she preached about animals, she now recovers a lot of mimetic credibility. We are about to become more familiar with Elizabeth than previously.

The Problem of Evil

The sixth lesson, the problem of evil, marks a return of the earlier themes while shifting the setting of narration. This is the first lesson with a speaker who is also the focalizer. Therefore, we are ushered into Elizabeth's inner tremors and scruples during the preparation and execution of the talk. Elizabeth has been invited to Amsterdam to give a talk on the problem of evil, an offer she would have immediately rejected had she not read Paul West's book on the last days of the group of conspirators against Hitler. At the end of the story, the conspirators are humiliated and hung in a cellar.

That is what Paul West, novelist, had written about, page after page, leaving nothing out; and that is what she read, sick with the spectacle, sick with herself, sick with a world in which such things took place, until at last she pushed the book away and sat with her head in her hands. Obscene! She wanted to cry but did not cry because she did not know at whom the word should be flung: at herself, at West, at the committee of angels that watches impassively over all that passes. (p. 158–159)

Does the name of the author Paul West imply a broader cultural criticism against “western” fascination of suffering and trauma? In Africa, Costello was shocked by the case of an adept craftsman working for Blanche. The man, by no coincidence called “Joseph,” never did anything other than wooden crucifixes, day in, day out, dedicating his whole adult life to the sufferings of Jesus. By carving and imagining such sufferings, the black Joseph was vicariously partaking of the paternity of Jesus and the culture of suffering.

Elizabeth now considers that Paul West has gone too deeply into the soul of the executioners. The horror of the victims is portrayed far too graphically, from point to point, rendering them without any dignity. The evil inscribed so powerfully has caught Paul West as well, and eventually even Elizabeth herself as a reader. And what about us, the readers and commentators of Coetzee? What Coetzee does here is to suddenly foreground the synthetic, textual function. The case of animal suffering was mainly discussed on a thematic level, as *ideas* roaming in the human world, while here we are reminded of the effects of texts, inviting us to recognize the novel and the story as *artistic* product.

Costello is haunted by a doubt that she is herself simply too sensitive, getting too old and too responsive to emotional shocks. Was not her first lesson on “realism,” and what other than realism and freedom of speech can be considered in the wake of the horrific and repulsive facts as Paul West has documented them? Trauma studies offer a different perspective on the ethics of representing trauma. Following the work of Dominick LaCapra (2001; 2004, 73–105), for example, I suggest the concept of *transitional trauma*. Like evil, trauma is able to catch people who were not originally subjected to it. The concept was at first used to characterize the problem of intergenerational and interpersonal transition from the extreme traumas of the Holocaust.

Historiographers and artists often disregard the fact that in studying trauma intensively from the perspective of victims, perpetrators, or the immediate spectators, they are themselves exposed to the effects of transitional trauma. To put it simply, we are not inviolable. An artist or a scholar who delves into trauma, into the inner workings of terror, is always at risk of repeating the original trauma and terror emotionally. Eelco Runia (2004) gives a powerful example of such “parallel processing” in the case of the official Dutch study to the Un/Dutch failure in protecting Muslim population in Srebrenica.

This problem of representing trauma and terror grows out of the problematic experience of trauma as such. Often trauma seems to be entirely inaccessible, without any proper memory of the event. Often the cognition and emotion appear separately: either one remembers the event coolly, without any touch of emotion, or one experiences the shocking emotion in the form of *acting out* or *repeating* the original scene. There is however, as LaCapra continues to emphasize, a possibility of the partial *working through* of the traumatic experience. But because working-through and acting out are not binary oppositions, which could be kept in entirely separate worlds, the process of working-through itself assumes elements or moments of the repetition of the traumatic scene.

Elizabeth Costello, in this sixth lesson, is indeed negotiating over how much she is ready to receive of the traumatic imagery in the form of sheer and raw repetition, at the risk of being traumatized and harmed herself, and how much she presumes of artistic and emotional working through, including an artistic distance to horror. I quote:

Obscene: not just the deeds of Hitler’s executioners, not just the deeds of the blockman, but the pages of Paul West’s black book too. Scenes that do not belong in the light of day, that the eyes of maidens and children deserve to be shielded from. (p. 159)

Costello considers that West indeed is obsessed with a desire to go too close to such evil. So we travel with her to the Free University of Amsterdam. The day before her talk, Elizabeth learns that the writer Paul West will attend the conference. This changes almost everything. She was prepared to talk about an absent, unknown and abstract novelist, and instead she has a concrete, flesh-and-blood author in the audience to deal with. In this rhetorical-cum-ethical setting, the difference between *implied author* (Booth 1961) and *flesh-and-blood writer as a person* is vital. Is she at all fair to Paul West? Is it at all tolerable to say such things about the touch of evil to a person attending her lecture? If I translate Elizabeth's agony into the language I suggested earlier, we might ask whether Elizabeth's own strong emotional and ethical reaction against Paul West is one more moment of acting out the trauma or not. In reacting to evil and the trauma it has issued forth, there is no site of absolute goodness, no solid ethical ground with which to climb onto the moral high horse of the earlier lessons.

Elizabeth's agony leads to a desperate attempt to re-write her whole talk. She hectically tries to meet West in advance. In her musings, she questions the soundness of her whole thought. West is a writer just as she is. Yet she reasons that story-telling can open the bottle, and release the genie into the world, "and it costs a hell to get him back in again" (p. 167). This is exactly the way trauma will be transferred:

Through Hitler's hangman a devil entered Paul West, and in his book West in turn has given that devil his freedom, turned him loose upon the world. (p. 167–168)

But Costello already ponders how West receives “thousands of defenders,” and she instead will be recognized as an old-fashioned fool. “*Paul West is not a devil but a hero: he has ventured into the labyrinth of Europe’s past and faced down the Minotaur and returned to tell his tale*” (p. 168).

Immediately before her talk Costello eventually finds West, sitting in the back row. Awkwardly, she tries to make peace and mitigate in advance what she is going to say. She is a speaker in a state of full disarray, trying to claim and erase at same time, to resist and criticize West while understanding him. Elizabeth Costello now works remarkably hard in order to take her audience’s emotions into account. The self-righteous air of earlier lessons has evaporated entirely.

Nevertheless, Paul West does not respond at all. After the lecture, no discussion arises between the two authors. Elizabeth tries to perceive at least some reaction from his face, but “there is no sign she can detect, not at this distance, just a short man in black on his way to the coffee machine” (p. 176). Costello escapes to the ladies’ room to once again ruminate her argument back and forth. She ponders the source of the nauseating energy of the description and concludes that it cannot be anyone other than West himself. She recalls how she *did not want* to read the book but West had *forced* her to do so by the sheer power of his narration. The problem of evil is thus a problem of writing as well. These ponderings lead her to an important self-reflection:

Yet she does the same thing, or used to do. Until she thought better of it, she had no qualms about rubbing people’s faces in, for instance, what went on in abattoirs. If Satan is not rampant in the abattoir, casting the shadow of his wings over the beasts who, their nostrils already filled with the smell of death, are prodded down the ramp towards the man with the gun and the knife, a man as merciless and as banal... as Hitler’s own man (who learned his trade, after all, on cattle)... (p. 179)

Costello admits first her complicity of writing and speaking in the same way as West, and delves immediately into the thought again, subscribing to her old ideas but colored now by the work of Paul West. It is remarkable that Costello is just thinking, and not preaching. It is thus the narrator of the novel who commits himself to the faults of West. West is thus not just an adversary; rather, he is an integral aspect of the problematic of writing.

Costello never meets West again, and she never learns of his reaction. The image is powerful: mute and non-responding Paul West going to fetch his coffee, nervous and self-conscious Costello contemplating her talk in the shelter of the ladies' room. This image leaves open the possibility that West indeed is touched by evil, knows the evil, and is unable to feel anything. Costello, on the other hand, tries to find the answer in the peace of the ladies' room, thus finally missing the chance of dialogue. The image is also a perfect ending for the section on evil, accentuating the fact that whatever we try to do with trauma, a final peace and closure is inaccessible.

From yet another angle the image shows the power of focalization. We are invited to follow Costello's inner thought, but can only see the vacant exterior of Paul West. What would have been our conclusions if we had been able to see the possible turmoil and reflections inside West, and instead met Costello again as a rigid speaker disappearing soon after her talk?

The reading guidelines

If the reader has not yet renounced his or her wish to attach Costello's political statements to the author of the novel, this last lesson "At the Gate" makes the point even clearer. In *At the Gate*, Elizabeth Costello tries to negotiate her way through in order to meet St. Paul, not St. Peter. Besides

these few heavenly references, the setting is explicitly Kafkaesque and rather clichéd. The content of the repeated encounters with the gatekeepers and law court meetings is *a statement of belief* Elizabeth Costello is required to make in order to pass. “We all believe. We are not cattle,” maintains the guard. Elizabeth resorts to Aristotle and maintains that it “is not [her] profession to believe, just write” (p. 194).

When Costello’s first statement is overlooked, she has to write another:

I am a writer, a trader of fictions, it says. I maintain beliefs only provisionally: fixed beliefs would stand in my way. I change beliefs as I change my habitation or my cloths, according to my needs. (p. 195)

This unfeigned letter is of no help to excuse her of the responsibility of belief. She finds her situation far from elevated and rather recognizes elements of the gulag and Holocaust in her dormitory. Before the court, she offers a new formulation:

I am a writer, and what I write is what I hear. I am a secretary of the invisible, one of many secretaries over the ages. That is my calling: dictation secretary. It is not for me to interrogate, to judge what is given to me. I merely write down the words and then test them, test their soundness, to make sure I have heard them right. (p. 199)

She reiterates her point: in her line of work “belief is a resistance, an obstacle” (p. 200). Again, the judge challenges Costello’s whole humanity in the case that she does not believe in anything. Here, Elizabeth’s retort is an elaboration of her position: “To put it another way, I have beliefs but I do not believe in them. They are not important enough to believe in. My heart is not in them” (p. 200).

This last specification is important. Elizabeth Costello does not maintain that she is entirely unlike the other humans, instead she once again points towards the difference of her roles as citizen and writer. This is again to radicalize the contrast between Elizabeth-the-lecturer and Elizabeth-the-author.

The judge eagerly takes the figure of “dictation secretary” and demands answers about the voices she hears. What about the murdered Tasmanian children, the almost annihilated people? Does she not hear their voices? Now the judge is taking a more cunning position as regards the ethics of writing. Costello has to admit that she can only dictate the voices she hears, nothing more. Then she offers an even more questionable remark:

‘A word of caution to you, however. I am open to all voices, not just the voices of the murdered and violated.’ ... ‘If it is their murderers and violators who choose to summon me instead, to use me and speak through me, I will not close my ears to them, I will not judge them.’ (p. 204)

Costello has suddenly arrived problematically close to Paul West. If she hears the voice of a murderer, must she also “release the genie,” without hope of ever catching him again? Coetzee seems to accept the hearing of perpetrators, but not giving them the whole energy and vividness of trauma. In any case, Coetzee’s modest theory of writing seems to effectively cut short any easy connection between the author and the statements of the characters. The theory is by no means a literary whim, because similar ideas are recognizable in his *Disgrace* (Coetzee 1999b) and *Slow Man* (Coetzee 2005). However, does this theory of writing as dictation undermine all attempts at political reading of the novel?

This is not the case. The project of *Elizabeth Costello* is not simply to undermine and entirely erase Costello's hectic talks. Recall the remark on method: "I merely write down the words and then test them, test their soundness, to make sure I have heard them right" (p. 199). In a genuine democratic and civil meaning, Coetzee brings the "true" voices around, as parts of the drama. He does not need to take a definite position, as a writer.

Politically speaking, then, the key theme of the novel is cruelty, and cruelty in its unending forms. Coetzee begins with the theme of cruelty against animals, knits it together with the worst possible cruelty against humans, but then turns the tables around to show how cruelty may be enacted by representing and circulating cruelty too graphically. Coetzee is undeniably a fierce critic of the cruelty enacted on animals, but, just as clearly, he outlines Costello's politically sterile dogmatism in preaching her message.

In presenting all of the story-world debates, the novel systematically resists easy mimetic identifications. From the early marks regarding realistic details to the postscript ("Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos"), the implied author keeps foregrounding the synthetic, textual function of the novel. How to write a novel; how to hear the voices; how to be politically and ethically responsible while writing; how to speak about trauma are questions that the novel foregrounds repeatedly.

The strongest ethos of the novel might ironically reside in listening, not in lecturing. Does the Kafkaesque lesson "at the gate" demonstrate a pressure to have beliefs, opinions, solid identity, to commit to preaching a message? Do the guards not implicate that "belief" is that which distinguishes us from "cattle"—from animals, and in this context, obviously from the Jews in the cattle car? The judges and guards accuse Elizabeth of cynicism, of course, because she does not

volunteer to join the choir of having deep beliefs. In her erasure of firm identity and firm beliefs, she privileges the performance of the reader:

‘On my humanity? Is that of consequence? What I offer to those who read me, what I contribute to their humanity, outweighs, I would hope, my own emptiness in that respect.’ (p. 201)

The point is no longer Costello’s humanity or virtuosity. What matters, is the complex ethical and rhetorical performance of the novel, and the ways readers react. Terror and trauma are not disease-like natural phenomena that could straightforwardly be represented and fought against; rather, such outraged reactions seem problematically to partake in the cultural circulation and expanding of trauma. The objectivistic and distanced approach of Paul West is ethically as questionable as Costello’s originally militant stance towards terror and trauma. The reign of terror may continue in discursive, textual forms, but these discursive struggles are vital in (re)defining something as terror. Coetzee uses the novelistic form, indeed the *novel of ideas*, to resist the wish for morally and politically absolute positions in regard to terror and cruelty. The dilemma, for a political scientist, is then to recognize this complex of narrative thinking, re-evaluations and erasures, and not merely to identify Elizabeth Costello’s early, militant declarations.

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