

# Saying and the Interruption of the Said: Ethical Considerations in and on J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*\*

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## Summary

Using J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* (Coetzee 1999) as a basis, our article compares the straightforward ethical reading of literature as an unproblematic means for creating reader sympathy (as exemplified by the work of Martha Nussbaum), with an approach based on Emmanuel Levinas's sense of otherness. For Levinas, reading involves an awareness of otherness that does not control or circumscribe the other, but that encourages a continual unfolding of its possibilities. In this connection, he distinguishes between the "said", that which is complete, written down once and for all, and the "saying", that which can "interrupt" our readerly assumptions by revealing the presence of otherness. The sense of otherness, because so fundamental to our interaction with the world, needs to be respected, our ethical obligation or responsibility towards it acknowledged. We believe *The Lives of Animals* fosters such a sense of obligation. It both thematises moral concerns and helps enact moral understanding, unlike a straightforward sympathetic approach, which depends on exclusionary opposition at the expense of a more knowing engagement with otherness.

## Opsomming

Met *The Lives of Animals* (1999) van J.M. Coetzee as basis, vergelyk ons artikel 'n ongekompliseerde etiese lees van letterkunde as 'n onproblematiese werkswyse om simpatie by die leser op te wek (soos beliggaam in die werk van Martha Nussbaum) met 'n benadering gebaseer op Emmanuel Levinas se siening van die begrip "ander". Vir Levinas behels lees 'n bewussyn van anderwees wat die ander nie beheer of begrens nie, maar waarin 'n voortdurende ontvouing van die moontlikhede daarvan aangemoedig word. In hierdie verband maak hy 'n onderskeid tussen dit wat volledig is, wat vir eens en altyd neergeskryf is ("the said"), en dit wat ons aannames as lesers kan versteur ("interrupt") deur 'n onthulling van die teenwoordigheid van die ander ("the saying"). 'n Bewussyn van anderwees moet gerespekteer word en ons etiese verpligting of verantwoordelikheid daarteenoor moet erken word aangesien dit so fundamenteel is in ons interaksie met die wêreld. Ons glo dat *The Lives of Animals* so 'n gevoel van verpligting aanmoedig. Morele oorwegings dien as tema vir hierdie werk en dit bevorder ook morele begrip, anders as in 'n eenvoudige simpatieke benadering wat staatmaak op uitsluitende opposisie wat groter kennis van en verbintenis met die ander teenwerk.

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## Introduction

In the unfolding discourse on the relationship between literature and ethics, the associations of the term “ethics” have undergone profound changes. Ethics has traditionally been treated as a branch of philosophy, in which practical reasoning and conceptual investigation featured conspicuously. In recent decades, Emmanuel Levinas’s thought has prompted a novel conception of the term, in which it is conceived of as the “first philosophy”, which focuses on a primordial relation with those outside the self, and the unique demands placed upon the self by those others (Critchley 1999: 17). The fundamental ethical questions are no longer “How should we live?” or “What should we do?” but “How can we respect the other?” and “What responsibilities do we owe to our fellows?” (Hadfield, Rainsford & Woods 1999: 9). Although there are practical problems associated with philosophical evocations of “respect” and “responsibility”, as will be discussed below (see Eagleton 1993: 123), we believe that a Levinasian awareness of alterity offers an important moral trajectory in our dealings with the world. The meeting with the other, according to Levinas, involves an “interruption” of one’s otherwise engulfing self-hood, whereby the singularity of the other enters the perception of the self. In the case of writing, this entrance of the other is related to the “saying” (with its connotations of continual revelation, of being open to otherness) as opposed to the “said” (with its connotations of the completed statement, of not needing further exploration) (Levinas 1997: 44-49).

Along with this shift in emphasis, a transformation has begun to take place in readers’ views on literature and the role of literary criticism. To oversimplify the case for the sake of our argument: novels in the past, it was understood, trained the moral sensibility of readers, authors schooled their readership in the correct evaluation of and response to character and moral situation, and ethics had a practical, problem-solving role to fulfil in literary criticism (Newton 1995: 9). As Sophie Ratcliffe points out in *On Sympathy*, George Eliot had long since defined “true morality” as the “active participation in the joys and sorrows of our fellow-men ... in a word, in the widening and strengthening of our sympathetic nature” (Ratcliffe 2008: 7). It is in line with this tradition that the work of Martha Nussbaum can be placed. Although she has spoken of literature as not merely a way of producing solutions, but as a constant dialectic that never reaches a fixed conclusion (Nussbaum 1995: 39), her emphasis tends to be on problem-solving, based on an Aristotelian conception of the mimetic nature of literature. When it comes, by way of contrast, to the Levinasian ethical sense mentioned above, we note the absence of a goal-oriented approach centred in moral guidance; rather, more subtle explorations of ethics in relation to literature are undertaken, with a notable emphasis on the inherent responsibility involved in reading (Eagleton 1997: 7).

Our basic distinction in this essay, then, is between the ethico-sympathetic approach exemplified by Nussbaum and subscribed to (in effect) by the contributing essayists whose work is in dialogue with J.M. Coetzee's text in *The Lives of Animals* (1999), and the Levinasian approach, deployed by such thinkers as Geoffrey Harpham, Simon Critchley, and Jacques Derrida, which ascribes ethical awareness (through the recognition of otherness evident in the process) to the very act of reading. We focus on *The Lives of Animals* in particular, rather than the later *Elizabeth Costello* (Coetzee 2003), which contains (amongst other writings) the same "lectures" on animals, because the former work has such a clearly demarcated field of reference, underlined by the contributing essays by Marjorie Garber, Peter Singer, Wendy Doniger, and Barbara Smuts.

We start our investigation of the ethical nature of *The Lives of Animals* with a critical consideration of Nussbaum's view on literature and the role of literary interpretation. Coetzee's text, with its various subversive devices, reveals the shortcomings of this view. In looking at Harpham's approach to ethics in the second section, we consider certain philosophical strands related to the character Elizabeth Costello's ideas, with the final aim of demonstrating how Coetzee undercuts philosophical ratiocination. In the third section we focus specifically on Levinas's philosophy, and highlight the Levinasian nature of Coetzee's book by showing how its "saying" is invariably present in its "said". That is, the novella's thematics of sympathy, its arguments and observations, are destabilised by the presence of the saying on almost every page.

## 1

Martha Nussbaum, one of the most outspoken thinkers to defend the ethical effectiveness of the literary imagination, conceives of literature as the "narrative or dramatic presentation of moral questions, dilemmas, embodied in characters, imagined agents, lives, selves or subjectivities" (Parker 1998: 17). For critics who work in this ethico-sympathetic tradition, the key question underlying good literature is the Aristotelian one of how we should live our lives. Literature is the preferred means of representing the moral complexity of human life, as in it human reason is illuminated by emotion and imagination, which enable the sympathetic working through of ethical difficulties – in a manner not available to philosophical texts (Nussbaum 1995: 44). For Nussbaum, a binary opposition exists between reasoned philosophical discourse, whose textual nature is not in contestation (it is fully present on the page as argument), and literature, whose emotion and evocation of the specificities and contingencies of "real life", combined with the heightened ethical awareness of the authors, offer moral instruction to the reader.

Thus, the essential characteristic that distinguishes literature from philosophy is its ability to evoke sympathy, identification and compassion. Through literature, we are invited to concern ourselves with the fates of others like ourselves (Nussbaum 1995: 34) and “identify sympathetically with individual members of marginalized or oppressed groups within our own society, learning both to see the world, for a time, through their eyes and then reflecting as spectators on the meaning of what we have seen” (Nussbaum 1998: 344).

From an ethico-sympathetic perspective, *The Lives of Animals* involves a twofold identification: primarily with Elizabeth Costello, the novelist who is horrified by a “crime of stupefying proportions”, seeing the people around her devouring “fragments of corpses that they have bought for money” (Coetzee 1999: 69); and, secondly, with the oppressed others, the animals themselves. The latter identification is clear to Amy Gutmann in her introduction to the work: “The fictional form, in Coetzee’s hands ... appears to have an ethical purpose: extending our sympathies to animals” (4). This double identification might be regarded as Coetzee’s means to underline the “enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing” which we maintain by eating meat, to persuade his readers to “reconceive our devotion to reason as a universal value”, and, finally, to emphasise the role of sympathy in moral deliberation (5). Without this identification, it would seem, human reason imposes inadmissible limits: in one respect by keeping us caught in the web of instrumental cognition (which would thus eliminate the powerful and sometimes decisive role of emotions) (Gruen 1993: 351); in another by separating animals from human beings because they lack our faculty of reason or consciousness in general (which would thus legitimate our practices).

The resemblance between the ethico-sympathetic view and some of Elizabeth Costello’s utterances in *The Lives of Animals* is striking: “The heart is the seat of a faculty, *sympathy*, that allows us to share at times the being of another. Sympathy has everything to do with the subject, and little to do with the object, the ‘another’”; “there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination” (Coetzee 1999: 34-35). Bearing in mind the assumption of presence inherent in the ethico-sympathetic approach (Eaglestone 1997: 46), this evocation of “the sympathetic imagination” might predispose the reader into thinking of Costello as an actual person. However, this perception provides the grounds for the first objection against ethico-sympathetic understanding: the identification of literary characters with real people can be at the cost of an awareness of the textual nature of a literary work. Such an identification foregrounds the *meaning* of events at the expense of a better appreciation of the *representation* of events. The medium, the text itself, is placed beyond interpretation, and the wide range of ambiguities and indeterminate conclusions that result from the “textual surface”, the words on the page, might remain unseen or neglected (Eaglestone 1997: 46-47).

The second objection against this critical practice is that Nussbaum identifies narrative voice with author, and makes the author a moral guide (Eaglestone 1997: 50). She asserts: “When we follow [the artist] as attentive readers, we ourselves engage in ethical conduct, and our readings themselves are accessible ethical acts” (Nussbaum 1998: 344). Such a view, based on an author’s unproblematically realised ethical sense, is inadequate when we consider the implications. In an essay on Erasmus’ *In Praise of Folly*, Coetzee shows himself very aware of the dangers attending a belief in privileged authorial understanding of moral issues. Even if, like Erasmus (who said, “I would rather die than join a faction”), one were to try to mediate between opposing factions, one would only succeed “in drawing the hostility of both” upon oneself, perpetuating conflict while trying to relieve it (Coetzee 1996: 83). As Adam Newton argues, Nussbaum relies heavily on magisterially articulate literary models (such as the works of Henry James), whose judgments seem at once incontrovertible and too easily achieved (Newton 1995: 63). Newton’s qualification reinforces our sense of the inadequacy of an approach in which readers and critics search for the (implied) author’s ethos and compare his or her moral standards with their own and those of the surrounding community (Booth 1998: 376-379).

Mike Marais, in his essay, “Violence, Postcolonial Fiction, and the Limits of Sympathy” (Marais 2011) writes more specifically of the “limited sympathy” promoted by Nussbaum, and the corresponding need for “limitless sympathy”; if sympathy is not limitless “it is selective and the processes that inform its selections are imbricated in the play of power in ... society” (101). Marais, who has a Levinasian approach in mind, further observes: “Ethical action ... is grounded not in the exculpatory consolations and satisfactions of limited sympathy but in the restless dissatisfaction of knowing that one has not sympathized adequately, that there is yet more to be done, and that what needs to be done can never be done” (104).

Readers of *The Lives of Animals* must notice the various instances in which Coetzee frustrates any readerly attempts to benefit from the “exculpatory consolations and satisfactions of limited sympathy” in the case of Costello. Several authorial devices are used to achieve this: a gap in sympathy is created between Costello, her audience, and the readers of the book; she is made to argue in an inconsistent way, and so undermines her own position; any opportunity she has to clarify her position is passed over. Linked to these devices are those that prevent or compromise a reasoned approach: there is open-ended, inconclusive argumentation among the characters; reason and rational discourse are critiqued yet are nevertheless used, to be revealed, ultimately, as deficient.

To consider first the gap in sympathy created between Costello, her audience, and the reader: our appraisal of her is in part conditioned by the perceptions of her son John and his wife Norma, which emphasise those features that hinder a straightforward identification. Nussbaum’s statement

that literary sympathy involves “the ability to imagine what it is like to live the life of another person who might, given changes in circumstance, be oneself or one of one’s loved ones” (Nussbaum 1995: 5), is ironised through John and Norma’s distant and hostile reactions: “As for Norma, she has never hesitated to tell him that his mother’s books are overrated, that her opinions on animals, animal consciousness, and ethical relations with animals are jejune and sentimental” (Coetzee 1999: 17). John, for his part, feels that her “strange talk” is “ill gauged, ill argued. Not her *métier*, argumentation. She should not be here” (36). Ethico-sympathetic identification is further shaken by troubling pronouncements, such as the equation of the Holocaust with the mechanised meat industry, reminiscent of a remark of Heidegger’s (Critchley 1999: 224), and the objections to Costello’s position, ranging from the satirical to the angry, which are voiced by a number of characters: “Are her distinguished fellow guests going to have to fret through the evening, dreaming of the pastrami sandwich or the cold drumstick they will gobble down when they get home?” (38); “It is licit to kill animals, I would say, because their lives are not as important to them as our lives are to us; the old-fashioned way of saying this is that animals do not have immortal souls” (64); “The Jews died like cattle, therefore the cattle die like Jews, you say. That is a trick with words which I will not accept” (49).

Then, too, the wilful inconsistency in Costello’s argumentation subverts her plea and that of the animal rights activists in general. Following her outspoken attempt to persuade her listeners, through sympathy, about the degradation, cruelty and killing going on around us (21), her pointing to the intolerable ignorance enclosing it (20, 35), and her appeal that we should try to think ourselves into the being of another (32, 35), she says that her vegetarianism comes out of a desire to save her own soul. The swerve from the need for a sympathetic community to the needs of the self is unexpected, to say the least. The moment is further complicated by the fact that the company does not know how to accept this quirky pronouncement, and an awkward silence follows. A little later she states: “I’m wearing leather shoes ... I’m carrying a leather purse. I wouldn’t have overmuch respect [for my vegetarianism] if I were you” (43). Her argument in defence of bullfighting also involves a compromising contradiction: “It is deeply masculine, masculinist. Its ramifications into politics are to be mistrusted. But when all is said and done, there remains something attractive about it at an ethical level” (52).

On the one hand Costello refuses to follow rigid rules regarding her moral choices and is unwilling to provide a consistent prescription for action – “I have never been much interested in proscriptions, dietary or otherwise” (37). On the other hand she seems ashamed of her inconsistency: she refers to eating meat and her wearing leather as “Degrees of obscenity”, thus acknowledging with some disgust her participation in the mistreatment of animals (44). The production of leather goods, based on “bringing animals into the world for the purpose of killing them”, is as reprehensible as running

farms and laboratories. These awkward passages provide what might be considered a reason for examining and modifying our own views. Although she is a fully-realised character with whom we might empathise, and although it becomes clear that all moral choices bear some degree of inconsistency, one could argue that these contradictions make it difficult to gauge her precise relation to us, and therefore do not allow us to side with her in any clear-cut way.

## 2

To consider a possible approach to literary works that obviates the shortcomings of a theory of “sympathy as contamination”, or the “lending out of states of experience” (Newton 1995: 9), we turn to Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s discussion of ethics in the first chapters of his work, *Shadows of Ethics: Criticism and the Just Society*. Following Levinas, he sees “the key to the kingdom of ethics” as an “intimate and dynamic engagement with otherness” (Harpham 1999: x). He conceives of ethics as a discourse to investigate particular maxims or judgments relating to social action and civic duty: “Ethics is the arena in which the claims of otherness – the moral law, the human other, cultural norms, the good-in-itself, etc. – are articulated and negotiated” (26); “ethics places imperatives, principles, alternatives on a balanced scale, sustaining an august reticence, a principled irresolution to which, nevertheless, the limited and precise prescriptions of morality must refer for their authority” (30). The “principled irresolution” essential in an ethical discourse disallows both philosophical and literary works to become straightforward moral agents. He is aware that the “contentious history of ethics itself constitutes powerful evidence that ethics can never hope to resolve its internal difficulties and offer itself to the world as a guide to the perplexed”. “Articulating perplexity”, in his view, “rather than guiding, is what ethics is all about” (27). He emphasises the structuring task that ethical discourse has to fulfil: “Ethics does not solve problems, it structures them.” (37) The notion of an ethical approach as a structured articulation of perplexity might be applied to *The Lives of Animals*. Let us explore this issue further.

First, this structured problem or “balanced scale” on which imperatives, principles and alternatives are placed should not be interpreted as implying a clear-cut distribution of the claims made by both sides: Costello as opposed to her interlocutors; or, those in favour of a moral consideration of animals and those against it. Arguments for and against are not neatly divided among or produced by the respective sides. Here we find Coetzee deploying the device of open-ended, inconclusive argumentation. For instance, John Bernard speculates on his mother’s response to the possible question, “What led you, Mrs. Costello, to become a vegetarian?” He sketches what he

privately calls “The Plutarch Response” with a morose fascination that shows he himself is not untouched by it:

His mother has it by heart; he can reproduce it only imperfectly. “You ask me why I refuse to eat flesh. 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”. Plutarch is a real conversation-stopper: it is the word *juices* that does it. Producing Plutarch is like throwing down a gauntlet; after that, there is no knowing what will happen.

(38)

Further instances in which arguments supporting one cause are articulated by others (with varying degrees of goodwill, ill will, or scepticism), are those in which Costello’s audience reflect on and debate the implications of her arguments among themselves (39-45), and those moments when John takes sides with his mother in the face of Norma’s dismissive reasoning (47-49). The text is clearly polarised, opposing Costello to her audience, sympathy to reason, philosophers to poets, and animals to humans. However, clear arguments in favour of or against the ethical treatment of animals are not expressed by the opposing camps: the arguments are destabilised by open-endedness and ambiguity. *The Lives of Animals* not only fails to act as a guide, corroborating Harpham’s sceptical view of the role of ethical discourse; it cultivates destabilisation. We will expand on this claim in the following paragraphs.

Coetzee’s “articulation of perplexity” is “structured” around Costello’s two lectures at Appleton College and her debate with Thomas O’Hearne, professor of philosophy. The first lecture is preceded by a meeting with her son and followed by a dinner at the Faculty Club, and presented under the heading “The Philosophers and the Animals”. The second lecture and subsequent debate are enclosed by discussions between John and Norma, and together these make up the second part, “The Poets and the Animals”. In both parts, claims concerning poets and philosophers and sympathy and reason continuously merge into each other, but the most remarkable blend of reason and emotion is to be found in Elizabeth Costello herself. She begins her appeal against the all-embracing power of human reason by reminding us of Kafka’s humanised ape, Red Peter, and the moral outrages of the Second World War (18-20). Thereafter she makes the following claim, siding to an extent with the promoters of rational, philosophical discourse: “Such a language is available to me, I know. It is the language of Aristotle and Porphyry, of Augustine and Aquinas, of Descartes and Bentham, of, in our day, Mary Midgley and Tom Regan .... I have that language available to me and indeed for a while will be resorting to it” (22). A little later, though, she veers once more, declaring her lack of sympathy for “the discourse of old philosophers”: “Reason is the being of a certain spectrum of human thinking. And if this is



so, if that is what I believe, then why should I bow to reason this afternoon and content myself with embroidering on the discourse of the old philosophers?" Thus, she deliberately offers opposition to a reasoned position and continues to do so during her lectures. For instance, in a question and answer session she claims that "if the last common ground" to be shared with Michael Leahy were reason, "and reason is what sets me apart from the veal calf, then thank you but no thank you, I'll talk to someone else" (67; see Leahy 1994: 218).

Yet she must "bow to reason" (23); she does not have a choice: "If I do not subject my discourse to reason, what is left for me but to gibber and emote and knock over my water glass and generally make a monkey of myself?" Not only is the general aim of her argument, her appeal to sympathy, explicitly voiced in rational terms by philosophers such as John Fisher and Lori Gruen (Gruen 1993: 351), Elizabeth Costello's lecture itself is also punctuated with arguments taken from leading theorists on the subject, which she effectively masks as her own. The most troubling and offensive claim – of which she is deeply convinced – where she compares the murdered Jews and the horror of the Holocaust to animals and their treatment in farms, laboratories and zoos (19-22, 34-35, 53), is suggestive of the preface to Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (Gruen 1993: 351), and also evokes prior rational accounts of this matter by other philosophers and thinkers, such as Isaac Bashevis Singer and Derrida (Singer 2004: 750; Patterson 2002: 50).

Costello's following assertion reminds us of Tom Regan, who defends a reasoned case and rational inquiry into the debate (Regan 1983: xii). Costello claims, "to thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation ... of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world" (Coetzee 1999: 33). Regan, a representative of a philosophical position denoted as the "rights" view, has emphasised in *The Case for Animal Rights* that "subjects-of-a-life" (all mammals of a year or more) have inherent value (independent of their goodness or usefulness to others) and should thus be granted rights (Regan 1983: 243). This idea is apparent in Costello's claim that it would be insufficient to grant only the great apes rights because they are humanoid. Her following assertion points even more clearly to a traceable philosophical influence: "The question to ask should not be: Do we have something in common – reason, self-consciousness, a soul – with other animals? (With the corollary that, if we do not, then we are entitled to treat them as we like, imprisoning them, killing them, dishonoring their corpses)" (Coetzee 1999: 34). This passage, that is, seems continuous with one by Jeremy Bentham, in his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*: "a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day or a week, or even a month old .... The question is not, Can they reason? Can they talk? but Can they suffer?" (Bentham 1948: 311). Costello's words recall, too, related declarations by Gruen and Peter Singer:

“if a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration” (Gruen 1993: 348). In addition to this, Costello’s vehement refutation of an argument by Leahy (Coetzee 1999: 65) also draws on Singer and Regan:

A calf who has not mastered the concepts of presence and absence, of self and others – so goes the argument – cannot, strictly speaking, be said to miss anything. In order to, strictly speaking, miss anything, it would first have to take a course in philosophy. What sort of philosophy is this? Throw it out, I say. What good do its piddling distinctions do?

(66)

As Gruen notes, the “bias in favor of one’s own species has been called “speciesism” and is considered morally on par with sexism and racism” (Gruen 1993: 350).

Elizabeth Costello is not the only one who covertly relies on the rational accounts of philosophers and theorists; so do a number of other characters. Yet, in the end, all these instances settle no issues. The book “articulates perplexity”, and so compromises the role of reason; but it goes one step further than discrediting maxims and principles through “reticence and ... principled irresolution”; it also thwarts our expectations that Costello will invariably clarify her point of view.

This particular device is exemplified in the debate between Costello and O’Hearne (Coetzee 1999: 60-65). Thomas O’Hearne wonders whether animals are not “properly thought of as belonging to another legal and ethical realm entirely, rather than being placed in this depressing human subcategory?” and whether it does “not make more sense for such rules to apply to us and to our treatment of them, as at present, rather than being predicated upon rights which animals cannot claim or enforce or even understand?” (62). As these objections are presented as a critique of Costello’s position, one assumes that she would need to oppose them. Yet nothing is further from the truth: in her first lecture she had questioned the very notion of “rights” when she pointed out that Red Peter was not asking for the right “to be treated as a mentally defective human being” (26). O’Hearne’s questions straitjacket Costello as a proponent of the animal-rights movement, while Costello never argues for equal rights, but, specifically, for a universal respect for alterity. She is not given (or does not take) the opportunity clearly to respond to this misconception: the tricky subject of rights is only touched upon, and immediately followed by what amounts to a paraphrase of the argument she had already given regarding Red Peter and Köhler’s experiments: “the program of scientific experimentation that leads you to conclude that animals are imbeciles is profoundly anthropocentric” (62).

When O’Hearne states that “it is quite appropriate that we should agitate for the humane treatment of animals, even and particularly in slaughter-houses”

(64), Costello again stresses the fundamental demand for an unconditional responsibility (65). It is not clear that this responsibility, in Costello's view, might include humane treatment as a sufficient condition, but the evasive answer offers proof to the contrary, leaving her auditors exasperated and disconcerted. Again, she is characterized in a particular way and not given the opportunity to modify the impression she makes. Consequently, *The Lives of Animals* is not a work in which a clear choice of principles is made very likely: indeed, our understanding of principles is systematically blunted in the course of the text.

Though the above instances highlight seeming inconsistencies that might discredit Costello's argument and the general plea for an unconditional responsibility, they make difficult a straightforward reaction to the text. It is impossible to take sides or deduce a neat synthesis. It is impossible to read the book as a discourse that clearly distinguishes reason from madness, truth from falsity, subjectivity from objectivity (Ijsseling 1992: 24), because the arguments presented in it cannot be placed on a balanced scale. The work could be interpreted as an attempt to divide subjects along the lines of those with a right to speak and those deprived of it, the conventional and the eccentric, the rational and the emotional. It would be a poor interpretation, though, that did not take into account the troubling trace of the opposite apparent in each pole.

It becomes clear that ethical understanding is not properly served by weighing the competing claims of literature and philosophy, where the principal question is: "Which medium is best equipped to render ethical solutions?" While aware of the risk we ran when considering the text in the light of an extra-textual approach, possibly denying it any performative power of its own (although we have emphasised the book's own destabilising devices), we did this to motivate another approach to the work, one which would help us avoid the temptation of a single, definitive interpretation. By turning to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in what follows, we try to promote an "endless critique, or scepticism ... destroying the conjunction into which [the work's] saying and said continuously enter" (Eagleton 1997: 169).

### 3

Mike Marais, in "Writing with Eyes Shut: Ethics, Politics, and the Problem of the Other in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee", long since discerned the value of a Levinasian approach to Coetzee when he asked, "how may the novel inscribe a relation to the other that falls outside the sphere of mastery?" Elsewhere in the same essay he claims, "Coetzee, in all his novels, endeavours to represent not otherness, but the way in which otherness is routinely foreclosed upon by attempts to represent it" (Marais 1998: 48). Marais' essay, and his subsequent

writings, tends to focus on Coetzee's ethical relation to history and politics through otherness. Another notable critic, Derek Attridge, has recently applied Levinasian ideas (filtered largely through Blanchot and Derrida) to Coetzee in more general terms in his book, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (Attridge 2005). More recently still, Carrol Clarkson, in *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices*, relates Coetzee's understanding of the "pure potentiality" inherent in deictic markers, such as "I" and "you", to Benveniste and Buber's correlations with Levinas (Clarkson 2009: 53). She complicates our understanding of Levinas by questioning the very possibility of an ethical approach that does not consider thematic materials, that does not consider what she herself refers to as the "said", but then uses this position as a means to underline Coetzee's own emphasis on the process of thematising rather than the finished theme (70-71). This fact leads her to link the ethical and linguistic realms through Bakhtinian dialogism (influential in Coetzee's thinking), where any act of writing is not complete in itself but anticipates the responses of others, and is thus ethically responsible to these others (72-74). While we appreciate that Bakhtin is appropriate in relation to an understanding of the ethical responsibility inherent in a Coetzee text, we are not convinced that particular theories necessarily inform the conscious practice of a creative writer. Further, we consider the Levinasian distinction between the saying and the said (as an underlying condition of the writing rather than a theory applied by the author) useful for our present purposes, where we reveal the limitations of the said in thematic terms, and then show how the saying permeates the said.

We focus briefly on three major concepts in Levinas's philosophy: otherness, unconditional responsibility, and the tension between the said and the saying. According to Peter Baker, "exteriority in Levinas's thinking represents the other-directed thrust of human existence" (Baker 1995: 67). Levinas stresses the uniqueness and ultimate alterity of the other, first empirically encountered in the "exteriority" of the face of a present interlocutor, later understood through the phenomenon of language, which cannot be reduced to the "same" and should continually be affirmed as other, "exceeding the idea of the other in me" (Critchley 1999: 198). This sensitive, carefully attuned awareness of the ineffable presence of the other is central. In Levinas's view, the other is a real and unique presence (*l'autrui*, a "neighbour") that we have to take into account (Levinas 1997: 85). The notion of the "neighbour" counters Terry Eagleton's sense that the Levinasian approach dispenses a "mysterious, unknowable moral law, embodied for us in some Other, which [lays] upon us an absolute, unconditional demand, and which [evokes] from us an equally infinite sense of responsibility" (Eagleton 2003: 153). While Attridge stresses the fact that the other is "an impingement from outside that challenges assumptions, habits, and values and that demands a response" (Attridge 1992: 32), the localisation of this response in a unique presence comes with its own conditions and specific responsibilities. In

emphasising the importance of the body in contrast with the “sublimely enigmatic” moral speculations of such thinkers as Levinas and Derrida, Eagleton introduces “the continuity between humans and animals”, while warning that it might be taken to extremes, because of the unavoidable difference between animals and humans. Yet, he affirms, we are “universal animals, because of the bodies we are born with” (Eagleton 2003: 157). However, the notion of the other, according to Derrida, also applies to a singular and irreducible *animal*, although it is true that this fact was never acknowledged by Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, Lacan or Levinas. In “L’animal que donc je suis” (The Animal That Therefore I Am) he describes his cat’s unsettling gaze: “He has his point of view about me. The point of view of the absolute other, and no other moments than those in which the gaze of this cat rests upon me, causing me to see myself naked, have made me contemplate this deeply the absolute otherness of the neighbour or that which is close-by” (our translation) (Derrida 2006: 28).<sup>1</sup> The cat is “close-by” as an animal body, but is as “other” as Eagleton’s amusing example of the otherness of the “stoat” (Eagleton 2003: 157-158). Derrida (and Levinas), while not outlining practical procedures for moral problems, a fact with which Eagleton takes issue (2003: 153; 1993: 123), does not undermine the importance of the body, of the singular other.

We believe that the responsibility towards the singular other is thematised in *The Lives of Animals*. Elizabeth Costello reveals herself as essentially other, irreducible to a homogeneous self, calling the notion of sameness into question and being obliged to take responsibility for her otherness. Costello’s idea of the animal also exemplifies otherness: she recognises the animal as a being “whom I cannot evade, comprehend, or kill and before whom I am called to justice, to justify myself” (Critchley 1999: 5). As we’ve seen, she questions the anthropocentric program of scientific experiments and does not seek to define animals in terms of their relation to ourselves (Coetzee 1999: 34). The principal moral questions for her are: “How can we respect the other?” and “What responsibilities do we owe to our fellows?” We thereby resist treating the other as a polarised opposite, as an object by which we define ourselves, instead of as “a completely heterogeneous alterity that overruns all oppositionality” (Attridge 1992: 13). This attitude is also exemplified in the type of poetry Costello favours, and she illustrates her ideas with reference to Ted Hughes’ “The Jaguar”: “That is the kind of poetry I bring to your attention today: poetry that does not try to find an idea in the

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1. In his brief essay with its attached interview, “The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights” (2004: 47-50), however, Levinas is tempted “to extend his ethics beyond the species divide” (though in the end he does not). See Karalyn Kendall-Morwick, “Dogging the Subject: Samuel Beckett, Emmanuel Levinas, and Posthumanist Ethics” (2013: 102). See also Barbara Jane Davy’s tracing of the inclusion of nonhuman others in Levinasian ethics in “An Other Face of Ethics in Levinas” (2007: 39-65).

animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead the record of an engagement with him” (Coetzee 1999: 51).

However, how we should foster this engagement and respect, according to Costello, is through the awareness of a shared fullness, an embodiedness, a shared sensation of being inspired by “sympathy”, which is, in fact, as pointed out near the beginning of this essay, not unrelated to Nussbaum’s notion of the function of “sympathy”: “The heart is the seat of a faculty, *sympathy*, that allows us to share at times the being of another” (34-35). Hughes “shows us that we too can embody animals – by the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will” (53). Though these passages reveal the possibility of identification with the other through a sympathetic process, the inexplicable, inexpressible nature of the immersion in alterity involved, is that which is not considered when we work solely from an ethico-sympathetic viewpoint.

Levinasian thought stresses the obligation we all have to the singular other. What is other to our being comes before our being and before our ability to theorise the relationship (Eaglestone 1997: 137). Our responsibility to it is unconditional, because it is at the centre of the paradigmatic ethical situation of our being “pre-reflectively addressed by the other person in a way that calls us into question and obliges us to be responsible” (Critchley 1999: 48). If we extend this notion of the other to all living beings, it becomes clear that Costello’s views are “called into question” by a singular sense of otherness before she can reflect on them, and this calling into question (an *experience* of being under obligation) precedes every rationalised account of it. This seems to be what she is pointing to when she states: “If principles are what you want to take away from this talk, I would have to respond, open your heart and listen to what your heart says” (Coetzee 1999: 37). She does not wish to override anyone or anything, to posit set norms for personal and social behaviour, to rely on rationally founded moral principles; she only experiences the primordial ethical call of the other, and is unable to refuse the other’s approach. Though she had already made an explicit attempt to persuade her listeners of the enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing and the ignorance enclosing it, and though she had clearly formulated an appeal to end the treatment of animals as mentally defective human beings, her deflecting the request to clarify her statements compromises, again, the rationality evident in these attempts. The seemingly trite cliché, “open your heart and listen to what your heart says”, would also probably be regarded as minimalising the provocative considerations in her lecture, leaving the questioner disappointed and forcing the reader to react in a similar way, to the point where Costello’s argument would seem to be subverted: “The questioner gives a huge, expressive shrug and sits down” (37). However, if we emphasise the Levinasian sense of unconditional responsibility underlying her answer – based on being open to what is *other* than the “principles” of the reasoning mind – we are left with a very different impression.

That which can be considered the said in the case of Costello comprises, on the surface of it, the two lectures delivered at Appleton College, her answers to the objections of O’Hearne, and her share in the discussions. It would be tempting to interpret her underlying plea to respect alterity, which she cannot come to formulate clearly, as the saying, but both of the above interpretations would be limited. In the first case, Costello’s lectures are destabilised by perplexity, are never conclusive, are subject to continual saying. In the second case, the saying cannot be encapsulated in what the text implies; it is something *other* that cannot be appropriated, that preserves its alterity.

Instead of using the thematics of the literary work in question as an illustration of Levinasian theory (as opposed to Aristotelian theory), using “the ‘schema’ (which is not a schema) of the saying and the said” (Eaglestone 1997: 168), we should consider *The Lives of Animals* in its entirety as that which deliberately subverts any attempts at rational consensus. Its saying can only be glimpsed through the said of *ongoing* interruption and interpretation, as demonstrated through our detailing of its various subversive devices. Coetzee, in our reading, is not aiming at a clear grasp of issues such as rationality, sympathy, and our differences from animals; he does not want to persuade his public in any way (be it explicitly, by an apparent but doubtful polarisation, or implicitly, by seemingly discrediting one side); he is confronting us with a chance to assume responsibility. In his essay on Erasmus’s *In Praise of Folly*, Coetzee shows how both Huizinga and Zweig “try to make of Erasmus a figure in their own political quarrels”, whereas what he attempts in the essay is “to bring forward ... an extraordinary resistance in the Erasmian text to being read into and made part of another discourse” (Coetzee 1996: 103). *The Lives of Animals* shows a similar resistance.

## Conclusion

Critchley claims that “the very possibility of ethics” is based on the “ambiguity between what is said in a text, the language of ontological propositions, and the very ethical Saying of that text” (Critchley 1999: 19). He adds that his above utterance “is also true of the text” he is “writing at this very moment”, which on the one hand “seeks to persuade the reader by presenting its argument as if in a ‘final and absolute vision’” (278)<sup>2</sup> yet which on the other hand is (paradoxically) “neither final nor absolute, rather a particular address to an interlocutor”. We would like to make a similar claim with regard to the critical aspirations of this article, which seeks to “persuade” with its type of reading of *The Lives of Animals*, but does so to enable the

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2. The term “final and absolute vision” is from Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* (1979: 81).

book's saying to resonate through its said. We refer, in this respect, to Derrida's ethical process associated with the "gift" of otherness, as a means, fundamentally linked with language, of preparing for the arrival of the other without any preconceptions or expectations: "the given of the gift arrives, if it arrives, only in narrative" (Derrida 1992b: 41). We have tried to provide a responsible reading of Coetzee's "narrative", making room for the "gift" of otherness, stressing the ambiguities and open-endedness in the text, without presuming to give a final interpretation, without presuming to render an integrating, definitive view.

Derrida, writing on Levinas, emphasises the presence of "limitless" saying in the ethical "moment" before which the call of the other has "always already" engaged one's sense of responsibility: "the responsibility in question is not merely said, named, thematized, in one or the other occurrence of 'this moment'; it ... is first of all yours, the one of reading to which 'this moment' is given, confided or delivered over. Your reading is thus no longer a simple reading that deciphers the sense of what is already found in the text; it has a limitless (ethical) initiative" (Derrida 2007: 161). Coetzee's *Lives* came upon us in a "moment" as the call of the other, as, to quote Derek Attridge, an "impingement from outside challenging assumptions" (2004: 32). It did not primarily challenge our assumptions concerning the treatment of animals – in contrast to its impact on Singer, Doniger and Smuts (Coetzee 1999: 85-120) – but it called into question issues surrounding representation and the enactment of alterity in the medium, as well as issues surrounding limited sympathy and the type of extended sympathy implicit in the recognition of alterity.

Though it is tempting to interpret *The Lives of Animals* as a moral discourse, it contains fractures and anomalies that prohibit any such straight-forward reading. Harold Fromm, in a review of the book, feels that Coetzee's "point of view, his moral stance, are hard to determine, although one senses a tentative drift maintained with sails never fully rigged" (Fromm 2000: 343-344). We hope that we have rescued *The Lives of Animals* from a reading that seems unaware of Coetzee's authorial subtleties. We have shown that the text both invites the reader to take sides by way of either explicit or implicit persuasion, but then subverts this apparent invitation. The reader must, in the end, appreciate the singularity of the work, without feeling the need to look for neat answers in it. The ethical nature of this response (a making room for the book's evocation of the other) is invested in such an appreciation. Although one could argue that we have, in Derrida's words, simply "deciphered the sense of what is already found in the text", thus subscribing to the tenets of a logocentric and metaphysical tradition, we have tried to render a cautious appraisal of the level of undecidability in *The Lives of Animals*; we have tried to meet its singularity with a corresponding critical and ethical singularity.



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