

# “King of the Amphibians”: *Elizabeth Costello* and Coetzee’s Metamorphic Fictions

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## Summary

This article analyses the multi-generic and protean formal properties of *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) in order to illustrate how Coetzee’s experiments with literary form constitute a distinctive intervention in contemporary political, philosophical and aesthetic debates.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel analiseer die multigeneriese en proteaanse eienskappe van *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) om te illustreer hoe Coetzee se proefnemings met letterkundige vorm neerkom op ’n ingryping in hedendaagse politiese, filosofiese en estetiese debatte.

I divined that all was allegory and that each creature was a key to all others.  
Hugo von Hofmannsthal  
“Letter of Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon”

In *Giving Offense* (1996), a book he describes as “dominated by the spirit of Erasmus”, Coetzee relates that Martin Luther bestowed the title of “The King of the Amphibians” on Desirderius Erasmus Roterodamus, who famously refused to choose sides in the increasingly bitter quarrel between the German theologian and the Pope and who once proclaimed that he “would rather die than join a faction” (Coetzee 1996: ix, 83). The derisive appellation, “The King of the Amphibians”, mocks the slipperiness, the in-betweenness, the mutable identity – an amphibian being neither a creature of the land nor of the water – which, at least for Luther, the Dutch humanist, philosopher and theologian embodied. What explains Coetzee’s enthusiasm for the spirit of Erasmus? A grudging respect for the intellectual subtlety and philosophical capaciousness of Christian humanism? Admiration for Erasmus’s spirit of religious tolerance and sympathy for his critical attitude

toward orthodox forms of religious and political authority? A fascination with the theologian's subtle forms of equivocation and evasiveness? An attraction to the multigeneric, self-ironising, and esoteric discourse that characterises *The Praise of Folly*? A belief in the majesty of the amphibious?

Though possessed of a formidable critical intelligence, Coetzee seems content to be more celebrated as a novelist, than as a critic or theorist, modestly allowing that he lacks the qualifications and temperament of a philosopher. But perhaps Coetzee's insistence that he is foremost a creative writer rather than a theorist suggests that his most intrepid thinking is done as a teller of tales, a forger of fables. Never one to reveal himself or his thoughts directly (even assuming such things were possible), Coetzee expresses his subtlest reflections in and through the formal innovations of his fiction. Coetzee's recent experiments with generic form not only breathe life back into the moribund cliché that form and content are one, but also prompt us to attend to the historical birth of the European novel, when the word "novel" connoted a "new" literary form that was experimental and highly variable in form. It is thus to the idiosyncratic and often unclassifiable *forms* of Coetzee's recent fiction that we must turn if we mean to apprehend the most intriguing aspects of Coetzee's thought.

In his review of *Slow Man*, the Irish novelist, John Banville, notes that Coetzee's Tanner lectures "were incorporated into the novel *Elizabeth Costello*, which was in its way as strange a performance as *The Lives of Animals*, and, though certainly fiction, hardly qualified as a novel" (Banville 2005). A hybrid creation, *Elizabeth Costello* consists of eight "lessons" and a postscript that incorporate the two Tanner Lectures Coetzee delivered at Princeton in 1997-1998 (and which also appeared in *The Lives of Animals*, a volume of critical essays devoted to animal rights that includes contributions by several other scholars). *Elizabeth Costello* also revises and expands lectures Coetzee delivered at the University of California at Berkeley in 1999, the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung in Munich in 2001, and the Nexus Institute at Tilburg University in The Netherlands in 2002.

Composed over a more than five-year period, Coetzee's "novel" chronicles the life and post-mortem existence of the Australian writer, Elizabeth Costello. Much of the work consists of Costello's academic lectures and public readings, radio interviews, courtroom testimonials and official statements, and various personal and semi-private conversations embedded in dramatic or narrative settings. These more or less chronologically ordered lessons focus on Elizabeth Costello's public career as a writer, though nearly as frequently they show her in the midst of private and domestic affairs, occasionally of a quite intimate nature. To make matters yet more complicated, her life and times are presented via a bewildering variety of genres including biographical reminiscence, symposium, allegorical fable, exegetical metanarrative, epistle, literary parody, fabliau, romantic myth,

satire, classical legend, parable, and even personal newspaper advertisement. If, like Victor Frankenstein, Coetzee has, in a moment of demonic inspiration, stitched together the tale of his monstrous double and alter ego out of disparate and seemingly ill-matched parts stolen from the dead, we might recall that Frankenstein's creature, whatever his grotesque and unnatural origins, proved a being of mythic stature, at once bestial and godlike, endowed with the most violent passions and refined sentiments, motivated by both creaturely needs and sublime aspirations, equally capable of brutal acts and heroic deeds.

*Elizabeth Costello* is more carefully constructed than might first appear (even if Coetzee assembled it sometime after he had composed many of its individual parts). The work is framed by "Lesson 1: Realism" and "Lesson 8: At the Gate" (we leave aside, for the present, the "Postscript: Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos"). The title of Lesson 1 presumably refers to Elizabeth Costello's lecture at Altona College in Pennsylvania in 1995, "What is Realism?". While Coetzee endeavours to present Costello's appearance at Altona and her lecture and various interviews and conversations in scrupulously realistic detail, the "lesson" begins with and is intermittently punctuated by anti-illusionist asides, self-reflexive discursive remarks on the very devices and techniques by which Coetzee creates the illusion of verisimilitude: "There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank"; and "The blue costume, the greasy hair, are details, signs of a moderate realism. Supply the particulars, allow the significations to emerge of themselves. A procedure pioneered by Daniel Defoe" (Coetzee 2003: 1, 4). We are encouraged to fall under the spell of Coetzee, master illusionist, to assent to the reality of what happens to Elizabeth Costello, her son John, members of the faculty, and visitors attending the awards ceremony at Altona College, but we are also abruptly prodded out of our faith in the conventions of realism by insistent authorial gestures that force us to note just how the author has skilfully performed his magic act. It is tempting to describe this "chapter" not only as a beginner's lesson in realism, but also as an introduction to postmodern fabulation. We move between two different and (only apparently) incompatible perspectives, that of the unselfconscious reader entranced by the story and that of the self-conscious author or knowing critic marvelling at the diegetic construction of the tale. We are at once within and without the "story" and are never allowed to settle comfortably into the conventions of either a purely realist or postmodern fiction.

The final and eighth lesson, "At the Gate", is similarly characterised by an oscillation between realism and postmodernism, but whereas the predominant mode of Lesson 1 is realism (with occasional postmodern asides), that of Lesson 8 is postmodernism or anti-illusionism. "At the Gate" is a self-conscious rewriting of Kafka's "Before the Law" in *The Trial*, and Elizabeth Costello remarks with growing annoyance upon the intertextual

and derivative character of the settings, characters, and action of the episode:

Exactly, she thinks to herself, what one would expect in an obscure Italian or Austro-Italian border town in the year 1912. Out of a book, just as the bunkhouse with its straw mattresses and forty-watt bulb is out of a book, and the whole courtroom business too, down to the dozy bailiff. Is it all being mounted for her sake, because she is a writer? Is it someone's idea of what hell will be like for a writer, or at least a purgatory: a purgatory of clichés? ... It is the same with the Kafka business. The wall, the gate, the sentry, are straight out of Kafka ... Kafka, but only the superficialities of Kafka; Kafka reduced and flattened to a parody.

(Coetzee 2003: 206, 209)

We note that Coetzee not only shuttles us between the fictional idioms of realism and postmodernism, but that he has employed, even in just a few pages of Lessons 1 and 8, multiple genres: the traditional domestic novelistic scene, the academic lecture, the radio and journal interview, the “*symposion*” (an account of an intellectual gathering or drinking party), the courtroom examination and testimonial, the personal statement or manifesto of beliefs, the official governmental interview, allegory, and parody (in fact, a self-conscious and self-ironising parody of an allegorical tale that was embedded in Kafka's seminal expressionist novel).

In between Lessons 1 and 8 we remain largely untroubled by the gestures and tropes of anti-illusionism. In Lessons 2 through 7 Coetzee provides us with a series of scenes in the life and times of Elizabeth Costello, and the scattered details of her career form a mainly coherent if somewhat sketchy whole. If we chart the rough chronology of her life, we find that the “facts” about it are mainly consistent with one another and do not violate the scientific “laws” or empirically verifiable realities of the natural world. (If, when reworking his academic lectures and public readings into a novel, Coetzee appears inadvertently to have allowed a few anomalous details to mar his text – a few of the biographical “facts” about Costello's son, John Bernard, seem incompatible with one another – he would be no less a scrupulous imitator of his predecessor, Defoe, who is well known for the occasional factual inconsistency in his novels.) Though the main narrative details of *Elizabeth Costello* are entirely made up, they are perfectly credible. So completely does Elizabeth Costello inhabit a mimetic space akin to the real world of the reader that she crosses paths not only with such imaginary writers as the Nigerian poet, Emmanuel Egudu in Lesson 2 (“The Novel in Africa”), but also with actual or “historical” figures, such as the novelist Paul West in Lesson 6 (“The Problem of Evil”) and the poets Robert Duncan and Philip Whalen in Lesson 7 (“Eros”).

The postscript of *Elizabeth Costello*, “The Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos”, is surely the oddest section of the novel. Coetzee's radical

rewriting of "The Letter of Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon" bears roughly the same relationship to Hugo von Hofmannsthal's 1902 work, "Ein Brief", as Coetzee's *Foe* does to *Robinson Crusoe*. It is a sedulously parasitic and intertextual fiction that feminises, updates, subverts, and transforms Hofmannsthal's wildly allegorical "story". Are we to assume that "Lady Elizabeth" is the Elizabeth Costello of the earlier lessons? Could it be that we are reading a work written by Costello who, after all, is famous for *The House on Eccles Street*, a groundbreaking "feminist" revision of *Ulysses* written from the perspective of Molly Bloom? If in Lesson 8 we observe a post-mortem Elizabeth Costello inhabiting a cut-rate Kafkaesque purgatory for writers, and who is forced to make a statement of beliefs before she can pass through the gate, then is Lady Elizabeth's letter a final (and revised) version of Costello's beliefs? Or is it the case that Elizabeth, like Woolf's Orlando, was earlier incarnated in the seventeenth century, that she once inhabited another body? And what are we to make of a seemingly insignificant detail: that whereas "Hofmannsthal's "The Letter of Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon" is "dated" August 22, 1603, that of Lady Elizabeth is dated *September 11, 1603*? Given that Lady Elizabeth "echoes" the words of Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos, "all was allegory", can it be mere coincidence that in a plague year, "a time of affliction", when a lethal contagion has spread terror through the countryside, she signs her missive on 9/11 (Coetzee 2003: 229, 227, 230)?

If in this final postscript, Coetzee seems to have strayed beyond the strict generic limits of either realism or postmodernism and into the realm of the allegorical (which may border on the territories of the former two, but is not entirely coextensive with either), how are we to describe what kind of work *Elizabeth Costello* is? What is this protean thing that is neither a realistic novel nor literary criticism, neither diegesis nor exegesis, a "fiction" that refuses to maintain its shape for very long, that resists our most determined efforts to hold and interrogate it? And what, pray tell, might its elusive allegorical meaning or theoretical significance be?

We might get a grip on *Elizabeth Costello* by taking hold of one of its thematic preoccupations: the body. Midway through Lesson 1, Coetzee offers a lesson that will turn out to be of critical importance to our understanding of *Elizabeth Costello* as a whole:

Realism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things. So when it needs to debate ideas, as here, realism is driven to invent situations – walks in the countryside, conversations – in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them. The notion of *embodying* turns out to be pivotal ... ideas do not and indeed cannot float free: they are ... generated from the matrix of individual interests out of which their speakers act in the world.

(Coetzee 2003: 9)

Each lesson in Coetzee's work features one or more scenes in which the body, whether that of a god, a human, or an animal, and not infrequently the body of Elizabeth Costello herself, becomes, however briefly, the focus of the reader's attention.

One might say that the sentient body, and more particularly the body that speaks and hears (and that also sees or experiences "visions"), provides a dramatic centre, a philosophical pivot, or thematic node for all eight lessons and the postscript of *Elizabeth Costello*. Lesson 1 ends with a masterful employment of free indirect discourse in which Elizabeth's sleeping body is described in intimate detail from her son John's perspective:

He can see up her nostrils, into her mouth, down the back of her throat. And what he cannot see he can imagine: the gullet, pink and ugly, contracting as it swallows, like a python, drawing things down to the pear-shaped belly-sac. He draws away, tightens his own belt, sits up, facing forward. No, he tells himself, that is not where I come from, that is not it.

(Coetzee 2003: 34)

Lesson 2 similarly ends with an evocation of Elizabeth Costello's body as she recalls a sexual encounter with the Nigerian poet Emmanuel Egudu: "The oral poet", she said to him teasingly. 'Show me what an oral poet can do.' And he laid her out, lay upon her, put his lips to her ears, opened them, breathed his breath into her, showed her" (Coetzee 2003: 58). The passage echoes the words of Genesis, in which God breathes life into Adam, as well as those of Luke 1: 26-38, wherein the Angel Gabriel announces to the Virgin Mary that she will bear the son of God and that her relative Elizabeth, who was barren, shall bear a child in her old age. (It is a scene traditionally represented in the Catholic iconographic tradition by the archangel whispering in or the Holy Ghost entering the ear of the Mother of God). Lessons 3 and 4, "The Lives of Animals", shift our attention to "the living flesh" of animals, but like the first two lessons conclude with an evocation of Elizabeth Costello's aging body: "He pulls the car over, switches off the engine, takes his mother in his arms. He inhales the smell of cold cream, of old flesh. 'There, there', he whispers in her ear. 'There, there. It will soon be over'" (Coetzee 2003: 110, 115).

Lesson 5, "The Humanities in Africa", pivots upon a scene in which Elizabeth Costello sees the Karee woodcarvings of Joseph, a humble African craftsman, each and every one of which is a crucifix depicting the stylised face – "the mouth heavy and drooping" – and the "quite naturalistic" emaciated body "of the tortured man" on the cross (Coetzee 2003: 135). The chapter includes a scene in which Costello's own body is suddenly overcome by heat, jet lag, fatigue, and stomach upset; she wakes up from her fainting spell with the thought that she is an avatar of Forster's Adele Quested in *A Passage to India* (Coetzee 2003: 144). The lesson ends with Elizabeth recalling in graphic detail a sexual encounter she had many years

earlier with Mr Aidan Phillips, confined to a hospital bed and in the final days of terminal cancer. His surgically perforated throat decently covered with gauze, Elizabeth’s one-time admirer can no longer speak and communicates with her by writing on a pad. The forty-year-old Elizabeth, who once served as a muse and model for the old man’s painting, on her own initiative grants Mr Phillips a final erotic “blessing”, placing her mouth upon “his nearly extinct organ of generation” while he lies in the hospital bed in which he will soon die (Coetzee 2003: 154).

We note that these episodes, reminiscent of the final mesmerising scene of *Foe*, focus upon the mouth and the ear (and also on the womb), those fleshly matrices out of which “the word” issues and into which it enters. The lessons of *Elizabeth Costello* thus dilate around a series of scenes representing the body in agony or in ecstasy, and more specifically the body at the moment that it literally opens up to the material world, when it is in communion with other bodies by virtue of acts of speech or sex, or when its physical boundaries are “transgressed” by the immaterial or sacred word. The motif of the body that feels pain or pleasure, and more particularly, the body from which the word is generated and by which it is impregnated, thus provides a thematic bridge that helps to link the various episodes of Coetzee’s strange fiction. The narrative arc of *Elizabeth Costello* fittingly concludes with Lady Chandos’s letter in which she describes a mystical synthesis of the word and the body, a rapturous experience wherein oral discourse and sexual congress become indistinguishable:

I too have moments when soul and body are one, when I am ready to burst out in the tongues of angels. *My raptures* I call these spells. They come to me – I write without blushing, this is no time for blushing – in my husband’s arms .... Soul and body he speaks to me, in a speaking without speech; into me, soul and body, he presses what are no longer words but flaming swords.

(Coetzee 2003: 228)

Given that both Lord Chandos and Lady Elizabeth (to say nothing of Elizabeth Costello herself) may be mad, and that the striking image of the flaming sword, for all of its potent sexual and linguistic connotations, is associated with the angelic weapon that barred Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden, it is tempting to surmise that Coetzee, ever cognisant of the philosophic insights of Derrida and other postmodern thinkers, is here being ironic, that he is satirising Lady Elizabeth’s fall into the “metaphysics of presence”. I want to suggest, however, that Coetzee wishes us to consider seriously the merits of Lady Elizabeth’s raptures. In one of his interviews with David Attwell in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee offers an insight into one of his most characteristically postmodern works, *Foe*:

Friday is mute, but Friday does not disappear, because Friday is body. If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard

erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not “that which is not”, and the proof that it *is* is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt. (One can get away with such crudeness in fiction; one can’t in philosophy, I’m sure.)

Not grace, then, but at least the body .... And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one *grants* the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable.

(Coetzee 1992: 248)

In another passage from *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee contrasts his own metafictional experiments with those of the late Beckett, implicitly drawing attention to the distinctively embodied nature of his (Coetzee’s) postmodern fabulations:

I should add that Beckett’s later short fictions have never really held my attention. They are, quite literally, disembodied. *Molloy* was still a very embodied work. Beckett’s first after-death book was *The Unnamable*. But the after-death voice there still has body, and in that sense was only halfway to what he must have been feeling his way toward. The late pieces speak in post-mortem voices. I am not there yet. I am still interested in how the voice moves the body, moves in the body.

(Coetzee 1992: 23)

I think it is fair to say that Coetzee is still not there yet, and perhaps will never be. *Elizabeth Costello* begins and ends with scenes in which words literally move the body: in Lesson 1, Elizabeth’s son John attests to the fact that his mother’s writing quite literally “shake[s] him”, just as it shakes other readers; and in the postscript, Lady Elizabeth harkens to the “figures” of her husband’s speech, “shudders” in the presence of the infinite, yields to the power of “speaking without speech” (Coetzee 2003: 5, 228-230). Coetzee focuses our gaze on the unnamable interface between the ineffable word and the material body. How is it, he asks, that mere words *move* or *shake* a body? How is it that a mere physical body can give birth to something as transcendent as the word? How does the word become flesh, the flesh word? Can the body be an essential and stable thing, the ground of being? And what, in God’s name, is the metaphysical or ontological status of *fictional* bodies that exist only in words? Elizabeth Costello’s body is, after all, no more *real* than Friday’s, Red Peter’s or Molly Bloom’s (though decidedly less substantial than Paul West’s). Though fictional bodies possess the same ontological or metaphysical status as all imaginary creations, they *are not nothing*. They are *some kind of thing*. They exist in the imagination, and in many instances possess the power to move or shake the body, to inspire or corrupt, engage and even possess the soul of the reader. We might say *they both are and are not*.



Of course, we must allow that this special class of fictional beings is governed by a different set of laws than those that hold sway over the readers of Coetzee's fictions. Elizabeth Costello is allowed (or is compelled) to inhabit a body even after her death. In "At the Gate" she enjoys the meagre bodily pleasures and endures the physical inconveniences of a post-mortem existence in a simulacrum of a turn-of-the-century Austro-Italian border town translated to the great beyond. In her final incarnation in *Elizabeth Costello* she has "become" Lady Elizabeth, wife of Lord Chandos and correspondent of the seventeenth-century philosopher, Francis Bacon. And in *Slow Man*, she will return one more time from the dead to haunt Paul Rayment and wander the streets of twenty-first-century Adelaide. Like Leopold Bloom, whom she memorably describes as a man "of infirm identity, of many shapes", Costello discovers that she is a plastic, fantastically metamorphic creature (Coetzee 2003: 11). This insight comes to her as a sort of revelation (and mixed blessing) when she enters that country from which no traveller returns. In her statement before the judges in "At the Gate", she states: "You ask if I have changed my plea. But who am I, who is this *I*, this *you*? We change from day to day, and we also stay the same. No *I*, no *you*, is more fundamental than any other" (Coetzee 2003: 221). Costello's fate – to realise that she is and is not the same, that her body (to say nothing of her psyche) is subject to change – is a more radical or extreme version of that ordinary destiny that befalls all readers of Coetzee who grow, age, and perish in time.

But if the lives of fictional characters sometimes mirror those of Coetzee's real readers, these constructed characters also embody what Lady Elizabeth calls "*extreme souls*" (Coetzee 2003: 229): souls monstrously and radically free, chimerical or protean beings whose physical forms may drastically and abruptly change in a way that no real human individual can mimic, creatures who might unaccountably find themselves combined with "other modes of being" or interpenetrated by the forms of radically alien creatures in entirely novel ways (Coetzee 2003: 188). Kafka's Red Peter is an ape that becomes human, or perhaps is a human who masquerades as an ape. Animals change into men; men become gods; gods assume the shape of beasts. In her lecture at Altona College, Costello gives the mutability of identity a postmodern spin: "There used to be a time, we believe, when we could say who we were. Now we are just performers speaking our parts. The bottom has dropped out" (Coetzee 2003: 19). Costello could be describing in general terms and in summary fashion the central insights of anti-foundationalist thought. But her words apply with special relevance to the equivocal status and performative identity of a character in Coetzee's fiction.

In her letter to Lord Bacon, Lady Elizabeth echoes (or perhaps anticipates) the insights of Costello's Altona lecture, expressing herself in a religious or mystical idiom that captures the vertiginous terror and rapturous joy of an existence in which beings have no fixed or discrete identities: "Each creature is key to all other creatures. A dog sitting in a patch of sun

licking itself ... is at one moment a dog and at the next a vessel of revelation” (Coetzee 2003: 229). The revelation to which Lady Elizabeth alludes in her letter: the word and the flesh are one. The fictional body is as mutable, as protean as the word itself. But, as Lady Elizabeth warns us, there are grave dangers inherent in living in such a state of radical linguistic and morphological freedom, where one thing can change place with any other: “It is like a contagion, saying one thing always for another .... *Always it is not what I say but something else*. Hence the words I write above: *We are not meant to live thus*. Only for *extreme souls* may it have been intended to live thus, where words give way beneath your feet like rotting boards” (Coetzee 2003: 228). The “nature” of such metaphoric identities is a subject worthy of “divine” comedy, as when Elizabeth Costello’s judges in “At the Gate” remark, “Yes, you are not confused. But who is it who is not confused?” and then howl with laughter (Coetzee 2003: 221). It may also provide the basis for tragedy, as suggested by Lady Elizabeth’s obscure allusion to the events at the World Trade Centre on September 11: “We cannot live thus,” she says, knowing as we do that at any moment the floorboards beneath our feet may suddenly and unaccountably “give way”, and we find ourselves plunging to our deaths in the chaos below (Coetzee 2003: 228).

We might translate Lady Elizabeth’s revelations into a more traditional aesthetic and philosophic register and say that the mutability of fictional bodies and souls evidences the writer’s powers of sympathetic imagination. As Elizabeth Costello asserts in her lecture at Appleton College in Lesson 4, the craft of poiesis requires the artist, whether Blake, Rilke, or Hughes to “imagine [a] way” into another body, “to inhabit” creatures quite unlike himself (Coetzee 2003: 96). In his poems, “The Jaguar” and “Second Glance at a Jaguar”, Hughes “takes over [another] body”, that of a jaguar, and thereby enables his reader to do the same (Coetzee 2003: 98). Likewise, Costello in her privileged role as a writer, has “been a man .... She has also been a dog. She can think her way into other people, into other existences” (Coetzee 2003: 22).

Costello’s conception of the sympathetic imagination differs in fundamental respects from that more famously described by Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith argues on behalf of an “impartial spectator” who serves as a kind of super-individual or transcendent judge of our moral claims. This impartial spectator is an imaginary creation we invent when we attempt to see ourselves as *others* see us. My claims upon others, my naïve belief in my centrality in the world, my egotism, are all moderated by my learning to evaluate my personal needs and desires from the vantage point of someone who is *not me* (though this someone is a construct of my imagination), and who is thus largely indifferent to what *I* want. Smith’s project to ground ethics in pre-rational or natural human sympathies thus relies upon our uniquely human powers of *rational*

abstraction: it is rationality that enables the individual to distance himself from his subjective feelings and desires. Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* marks a late attempt to salvage the philosophical insights of ancient stoicism for modern moral philosophy and should not be conflated with Elizabeth Costello’s more romantic and Rousseauistic conception of imaginative identification. Smith insists that what allows one human being to identify with another is decidedly *not* the body; in fact, Smith pointedly argues that the body, and most particularly the body in pain, poses an obstacle to the workings of the sympathetic imagination. We don’t wish to, nor can we ever truly identify with the *bodily* desires and discomforts of another. We only identify with others because we *abstract* ourselves from our own personal bodily needs, and thus find a kind of imaginary halfway point between our bodily needs and those of others. By contrast, Elizabeth Costello’s “theory” of imaginative identification with the other turns Smith on his head. Costello insists that “the heart is the seat of a faculty, *sympathy*, that allows us to share at times the being of another”, being itself is “embodiedness”, “the sensation of being – ... – of being a body with limbs that have extension in space” (Coetzee 2003: 78-79). The interconnectedness of beings to which Lady Elizabeth’s letter explicitly alludes depends fundamentally on a comparable sympathetic identification with the *body* of the other; like her double, Elizabeth Costello, Lady Elizabeth insists that what souls have in common is that they all dwell in bodies. Lady Elizabeth in fact incarnates an extreme rapturous form of universal sympathetic identification, a kind of madness in which all bodies become one: “I live with rats and dogs and beetles crawling through me day and night, drowning and gasping, scratching at me, tugging me, urging me deeper and deeper into revelation” (Coetzee 2003: 229); this is not the vision of a rational and impartial spectator, but of one plunged into the poetic madness and mystical ecstasy that is the vortex of forms.

One might say that Smith’s impartial spectator is more a philosopher than a poet, a rational creature who inhabits a material body but whose powers of mental abstraction makes it possible for him to be relatively indifferent to his animal needs. He would have more in common with a Houyhnhnm than a horse or a man. Suggestively, in her two talks at Appleton College, “The Philosophers and the Animals” and “The Poets and the Animals” (Lessons 3 and 4 respectively), Elizabeth Costello not only seems to side with the poets as against the philosophers in their ancient quarrel, she also pointedly offers a gloss on the status of the Houyhnhnms in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*:

*Gulliver’s Travels* seems to me to operate within the three-part Aristotelian division of gods, beasts and men. As long as one tries to fit the three actors into just two categories – which are the beasts, which are the men? – one can’t make sense of the fable. Nor can the Houyhnhnms. The Houyhnhnms are gods of a kind, cold, Apollonian. The test they apply to Gulliver is: Is he a god or a beast? They feel it is the appropriate test. We, instinctively, don’t.  
(Coetzee 2003: 102)

Costello's remarks signal to attentive readers that in *Elizabeth Costello* Coetzee observes and subtly reworks the Aristotelian or Swiftian tripartite division of beings. Most reviewers and readers have remarked that the work is concerned with human beings and animals (and their fraught relations), but fewer have recognised that the work of the rigorously sceptical and secular Coetzee is similarly concerned with the divine; it is a work populated by the gods, who are everywhere present. In Lesson 1, Costello's son John admits to himself that he "worships" his mother, "serves at her shrine", and compares Elizabeth to "a god incarnated in a child, wheeled from village to village to be applauded, venerated" (Coetzee 2003: 31). In Lesson 8, Costello has joined the immortals, albeit in a literal and not terribly edifying way. In Lesson 3, Costello offers her remarks on St. Thomas Aquinas's conception of "the being of God" and on whether Srinivasa Ramanujan, the mathematical genius, was "closer to God" because his mind was at one with "the being of reason" (Coetzee 2003: 67-68). Lesson 5, "The Humanities in Africa", dwells at length on the struggle between classical Greek culture and Christianity, between the pagan gods and Christ, for the soul of Africa. The gods make their most notable and extended appearance in Lesson 7, "Eros". It is in this chapter that the congress between the gods and mortals – Aphrodite and Anchises, Eros and Psyche, the Holy Spirit and Mary – is given Coetzee's own distinctively comic touch: "DWF, 5'8", sixties, runs to death and death meets her as fast, seeks G, immortal, earthly form immaterial, for ends to which no words suffice" (Coetzee 2003: 191).

What are we to make of Coetzee's tripartite division of his fictional universe into gods, men, and animals, and in particular of his unexpected and seemingly anachronistic and unfashionable concern with the divine? Why should a postmodern fabulist and critic with impeccable post-structuralist credentials concern himself with "the illustrious dead" (Coetzee 2003: 26), with the pagan divinities of Greece and Rome, with Jesus, with the being of God? If Auerbach is correct in arguing that the progress of Western literature follows a linear path along which the conventions and devices of realism are gradually developed and perfected, a progress that marks the synchronous narrowing of the cosmic and social sphere that the literary artist represents (first the gods, then semi-divine heroes, then world historical figures of human history, and finally the socially prominent successively withdraw from the world stage), then Coetzee may be said to have attempted either a further refinement of Western European mimesis or a stunning aesthetic volte-face that turns back upon the prior history of literary representation. In *Elizabeth Costello*, he reclaims the mimetic techniques developed for the representation of the European bourgeois world and retrofits them in accordance with the postmodern (Nietzschean) insight that all is permitted. Since all beings in fiction are in any case purely conventional (that is imaginary, constructed, fictive), Coetzee opts to depict them by whatever formal devices and technical means he can bring to hand

(including those that prevailed in the literary epochs before the rise of realism). Not just "real" men and women, but gods and beasts, the living and the dead, those who dwell in this world or an alternative one, can be embodied in his fiction – and their forms may be represented by any and all means at the disposal of his artistic imagination regardless of their "historical" appropriateness. Coetzee thus offers us a novel melding of Defoe and Beckett, Cervantes and Ovid.

*Elizabeth Costello* embodies a protean flux of disparate forms. It momentarily assumes a generic identity only to shift its form and become something else yet again. Like Lady Elizabeth, the reader of *Elizabeth Costello* encounters something that is ever new; *always it is not what it says but something else*. One might say that Coetzee attempts here nothing less than the reinvention of *the novel*. Tellingly, *Elizabeth Costello* explicitly touches upon the historical origins of the European novel and the etymology of the word "novel", which, we are reminded, "meant the form of writing that was formless, that had no rules, that made up its own rules as it went along" (Coetzee 2003: 44-45). Coetzee does not, however, indulge in a mere display of technical virtuosity (a charge that continues to dog his modernist predecessor Joyce). He offers something more than a comprehensive historical catalogue of literary techniques or a soulless postmodern anatomy. In *Elizabeth Costello*, he attempts to capture something of the vertiginous quality of life at a moment in which we no longer can find a solid metaphysical foundation on which to stand. Coetzee endeavours to represent not only the aesthetic consequences of our theoretical breakthrough (or breakdown), but also to dramatise its moral implications. His *novel* asks us to reconsider ancient philosophic questions in the light of our postmodern state: what are the proper – just and ethical – relations among gods, men, and animals? When all is permitted, is there nothing that we will not do, nothing we may not contemplate? Is there nothing too obscene to merit representation? Is nothing sacred? And above all, if we are truly beyond good and evil, then how do we address what Elizabeth Costello calls in Lesson 6 "The Problem of Evil"? For the problem does not disappear with our metaphysical and ontological certainties. On September 11, in a time when a contagion infects the land, Lady Elizabeth hints that the solid floor beneath our feet may literally give way. Our plunge into the vortex of forms may prove more than a literary metaphor. If we take the side of the poets as against the philosophers, we are by no means assured that in the end we shall escape with our sanity or even our lives.

Where does Coetzee stand amidst this flux of forms, this moral vertigo, this political chaos? Eschewing the theological certainties, moral rectitude, and rhetorical clarity of Sister Bridget (Elizabeth Costello's sister, Blanche), who enthusiastically applauds Martin Luther for turning his back on Erasmus (Coetzee 2003: 123), Coetzee refuses to state his views directly; he chooses to equivocate, to emulate the slippery thinker and defender of *studia humanitatis* whom he counts as one of his models and mentors.

Perhaps it would be most fitting to conclude, then, with Coetzee's tribute to the King of the Amphibians and to the imaginative freedom, radical independence, and subversive critical spirit that animates *The Praise of Folly*:

[W]hat I try to bring forward is an extraordinary resistance in the Erasmian text to being read into and made part of another discourse. We are dealing here with a text in confrontation with powers of interpretation that mean to bend it to their own meaning .... The discourse of Erasmus's Protean Folly ("shape-changer", in Stephen Dedalus's phrase) is only by the most strenuous effort wrestled on to the field of politics: Erasmus virtually disarms anyone ... who passionately decides to take up the Erasmian cause by elevating him in advance to the status of *one who knows*. Instead, the power of the text lies in its weakness ... just as its weakness lies in its power to grow, to propagate itself, to beget Erasmians.

(Coetzee 1996: 103)

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