

# “The Human Document”

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## Summary

“The Human Document” examines the representation of reading in Coetzee’s novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) as an amoral “conspiracy” or “breathing together” of reader and fictional character. Reading so conceived erases the difference between real and fictional persons, permitting a fluid and promiscuous interpenetration of experience that a reader, at the moment of reading, is powerless to refuse. This circumstance challenges the premise of recent ethical theories of the novel. These propose that the reader conscientiously agrees to bracket his or her own values or experience while reading so as to allow a full experience of a character’s alterity unconstrained by judgment or other preconceptions. In contrast, *Elizabeth Costello* proposes that the reader’s experience while reading precludes consent or any other exercise of free will essential to an ethical act. Reading amounts instead to the involuntary activation of a synapse between reader and character which challenges the reader’s foundational assumption, as a free agent, of his or her ontological priority over character. Insofar as fictional representation entails a kind of incarnation, it suggests the possibility of a literary ontology which *Elizabeth Costello* enacts through a peculiarly Coetzeean practice of doubling whose structure and significance are examined in this article.

## Opsomming

“The Human Document” ondersoek die voorstelling van lees in Coetzee se roman *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) as ’n amorele “sameswering” of “saam asemhaal” van leser en fiktiewe karakter. In hierdie lig gesien, vee lees die onderskeid tussen werklike en fiktiewe persone uit, en baan dit die weg vir ’n promiskue wedersydse deurdringing van ondervinding wat ’n leser, terwyl sy lees, magteloos is om van die hand te wys. Hierdie omstandigheid betwis onlangse etiese teorieë van die roman. Dié teorieë voer aan dat die leser pligsgetrou toelaat dat sy of haar eie waardes of ondervinding opsy gesit word gedurende die lees van ’n roman sodat die volle ervaring van ’n karakter se andersheid ongedwonge deur oordele of vooroordele moontlik word. Hierteenoor stel *Elizabeth Costello* voor dat ’n leser se ervaring terwyl sy lees enige toestemming of ander beoefening van vrye wil wat essensieel is tot etiese handeling, uitsluit. Lees kom dus neer op die onwillige aktivering van ’n sinaps tussen leser en karakter wat die leser se grondopvatting, as vrye agent, van haar ontologiese voorrang bo karakter uitdaag. Vir sover fiktiewe afbeelding ’n soort beliggaming meebring, suggereer dit die moontlikheid van ’n literêre ontologie wat *Elizabeth Costello* vertolk deur die besondere Coetzeeaanse praktyk van verdubbeling, waarvan die struktuur en beduidenis in hierdie artikel ondersoek word.

“Just a closer walk with Thee ...”  
 Traditional hymn  
 (Author unknown)

In the sixth chapter of J.M. Coetzee’s novel, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), the eponymous character, a well-known Australian novelist in late middle age, presents a paper at a conference in Amsterdam on “the problem of evil”.<sup>1</sup> The paper itself takes up a good part of the sixth Lesson (as the chapters are called), as is also the case in five of the novel’s eight Lessons, each of which features some form of lecture or conference presentation that the elderly Costello, inevitably “tired to the bone” by her trip from the antipodes, finds herself giving before an increasingly estranged audience (Coetzee 2003: 117). In the third and fourth chapters or Lessons, for example, Costello lectures at an American college which has awarded her a prestigious literary prize, and uses the occasion to argue that the torture and slaughter of animals in abattoirs and laboratories is “no different in scale or horror or moral import” (her words) from what occurred in the Nazi extermination camps (Coetzee 2003: 156). A significant portion of her real-world audience has taken her argument quite seriously: the two Lessons, presented by Coetzee speaking as Costello at Princeton’s Tanner Lectures in 1997-1998, were published separately in a 1999 volume to which learned interdisciplinary commentary is appended; and more recently a group of philosophers including Cora Diamond and Stanley Cavell has debated them.<sup>2</sup> Within the novel, much of her audience finds her position morally abhorrent. Her host is embarrassed; one distinguished invitee to her post-talk dinner boycotts it after sending her a quiet and damning letter of protest; the students at Hillel demand an apology from both her and the college for giving her a platform; and afterwards, back home in Australia, she is hounded by protesters and, more distressingly, supported by “covert anti-Semites” and “animal-rights sentimentalists” (Coetzee 2003: 156). But

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1. I first presented this work at Princeton University in November 2006 as a participant in “Passions and New Ethics: A Symposium on Novel Studies” sponsored by the Center for Human Values, the Council of the Humanities, and the Department of English. I am very grateful for audience feedback on that occasion and subsequently, at New York University’s conference on “J.M. Coetzee and His Doubles” in April 2007, which was generously funded by the Department of Comparative Literature, Africana Studies, and the NYU Humanities Council.
  2. See Gutmann (1999) and Cavell et al. (2008). For accounts of Costello’s emergence in the course of other Coetzee lectures beginning in 1996, many of which received separate publication, and which subsequently appeared in the several Lessons of the 2003 novel, see Cornwell (2002); Wood (2003); and Attridge (2004a: 192-205).

the sixth Lesson, whose occasion is a conference on the problem of evil, is the most gruelling of her public appearances.

Elizabeth Costello's Amsterdam experience is of particular interest, too, because it illuminates the structure and significance of a peculiarly Coetzeean practice of doubling, as a brief look at recent theoretical reflection on the ethical value of the novel reveals. Consider Derek Attridge's (2004a) concept of the literary "event" for example, or the related notion of literary "experience" which, according to several influential theorists, entails the reader's voluntary – and principled – submission to the ineluctable alterity of novelistic character. As Dorothy J. Hale (2007) has shown, such theories collectively propose that the reader's encounter with novelistic character compels him or her to acknowledge, and therefore honour, the unknowability of the other. If this experience of the other's unassailable integrity disallows the readerly impulse to identify with or project oneself onto character, the restriction nevertheless makes possible a certain readerly initiative. Confronted in the literary event with an alterity that cannot be mastered by means of anything in the reader's arsenal of knowledge, experience, or belief, the reader freely submits, in an act of "self-binding", to the untranslatability of otherness by refraining on ethical grounds from judging it – this "decision" to grant the other autonomy is at the heart of readerly "experience" ethically considered (Hale 2007: 189).<sup>3</sup> In *Elizabeth Costello*, however, Coetzee portrays the literary event – theorised as an encounter of the real with the fictional person that grants the latter autonomy through the former's voluntary "self-binding" – otherwise. One glimpses with particular clarity the nature and extent of his alternative vision of that encounter in the astonishing brazenness of doubling in this novel where on a number of levels the fictional other occupies the ground of selfhood on which the real one thought s/he stood.

As a well-known novelist, Costello is invited to speak at the Amsterdam conference on the topic "Witness, Silence, and Censorship"; she suspects her name came up because of the notoriety of her earlier animal-rights talk, and was tempted to turn down the invitation, except that when it arrived she had been reading a novel whose depiction of human depravity had cast "a malign spell" upon her. The novel, written by one Paul West and entitled *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*, graphically describes the punishment and execution of Hitler's would-be assassins – a group of officers, mostly elderly, in the *Wehrmacht*.

The letter of invitation came while the obscene touch of West's book was still rank upon her. And that, in short, is why she is here in Amsterdam, with

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3. Attridge usefully emphasises the active and even performative nature of the reader's encounter with otherness in which, he suggests, the literariness of the novel inheres and by which its literary power may be gauged (2004a: 95-106).

the word *obscene* still welling up in her throat. 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.

(Coetzee 2003: 159)

Paul West's novelistic re-presentation of the execution has permitted an obscene event to be "obscene again"; Costello finds, somewhat to her surprise, that she would censor such fictional resurrections: "having taken place [such events] ought not to be brought into the light but covered up and hidden for ever in the bowels of the earth ..." (Coetzee 2003: 159). But far from hiding the fruit of his own imagination in the bowels of the earth, this novelist, Paul West, with his rank touch has forced his reader – in this case another novelist, Elizabeth Costello – to take it in by the very act of reading so that she is forced to taste it welling up in her own throat. It is an extreme view, she knows, but she is nevertheless prepared to make the analogy: novelist is to reader as rapist is to victim; to the degree that readers open themselves trustingly to a novel's representations, they risk a violation for which mind and body are inseparable. The shocking analogy is borne out by her explicit recollection in the context of formulating her response to Paul West's novel of her own first experience of evil: at the age of nineteen, she had accepted a date from an older man, a docker, who stripped and then beat her when she refused to have sex with him. I'll return to this memory. Costello accepts the conference invitation because she had already written a review of Paul West's novel, although she then decided against publishing it; but, for whatever reason, the conference strikes her as the place where she might take Paul West as her "principal example" for the wisdom of proposing a soul-saving self-censorship in authorial practice (an authorial self-binding, we might say) based on the thesis "that writing itself, as a form of moral adventurousness, has the potential to be dangerous" (Coetzee 2003: 161, 162).

But when poor Elizabeth Costello arrives in Amsterdam from Australia and picks up the conference program at the hotel, she discovers that Paul West himself is a fellow conferee. She is horrified at the thought of coming face to face with her fellow novelist:

Paul West: the stranger on the state of whose soul she spends so many pages. Can anyone, she asks in her lecture, wander as deep as Paul West does into the Nazi forest of horrors and emerge unscathed? Have we considered that the explorer enticed into that forest may come out not better and stronger for the experience but worse? How can she give the talk, how can she ask such a question, with Paul West himself sitting in the audience? It will seem like an attack, a presumptuous, unprovoked, and above all personal attack on a fellow writer.

(Coetzee 2003: 161)

Her paper is scheduled for the first morning panel, and there is nothing to do but defy her jet lag and stay up all night and try to rewrite it.

It is in the course of her struggle to forestall the mutual public embarrassment of herself and Paul West and to clarify, in light of his unexpected presence, what precisely she is trying to say about literature and evil, that Elizabeth Costello recalls her own brutal adolescent experience. She had never made literary use of it, she reflects, and so it lay dormant and isolated, barred from reproducing itself in a stranger's mind to well up bitterly in a stranger's throat, safely sterile "inside her like an egg, an egg of stone, one that will never crack open, never give birth" (Coetzee 2003: 166). If it is true that "through the docker, all that time ago, the devil entered her: she can feel him crouched inside, folded up like a bird, waiting his chance to fly", by refraining from writing about it – giving it new flesh – she has kept the devil imprisoned, down in the hole (Coetzee 2003: 167). But Paul West, into whom the devil had entered through Hitler's hangman, "has given that devil his freedom, turned him loose upon the world", hauled him "out of the grave, when we thought he was safely dead" (Coetzee 2003: 168). Admittedly, this is the novelist's "business" – Costello characterises "her own life-time business" as an effort "to bring inert matter to life" (Coetzee 2003: 177). But the *obscene*, as the "contested etymology" of the word suggests to Costello, is that which should be left *off-stage*, unre-enacted, and she finally resolves to stand by that conviction at the conference, come what may (Coetzee 2003: 168).

Thus far, I have described the first of three trials the novelist Elizabeth Costello makes to clarify her views on censorship and self-censorship. This first trial has three parts: her initial thoughts upon reading Paul West's novel, her thoughts upon writing her conference paper, and her thoughts about whether and how to rewrite the paper after learning that Paul West is to be a member of her audience. The second trial occurs when she arrives the next morning at the conference hall and approaches Paul West himself, "the real West", before her panel is scheduled to start so as to introduce and then explain herself (Coetzee 2003: 170). Costello describes him as a stocky man, rather nondescript, sitting alone in the back of the hall, and improbably reading a comic book while he waits for the conference on evil to begin. In her encounter with him, Paul West behaves as the dead are said to behave when they return in the dreams of those they left behind: he is unresponsive to her overtures, does not even look at her, does not bother to respond to the conversational openings she holds out, but does seem to listen.<sup>4</sup> If her fellow

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4. Paul West's behaviour in this scene anticipates that of the gatekeeper in Lesson Eight. His stubborn silence, too, serves in the context of the Sixth Lesson as counterpoint to Costello's own silence about the docker, which she finds "good, it pleases her" and which "she hopes to preserve to the grave" (Coetzee 2003: 166). Her explicit and enduring approval of her own silence, juxtaposed to her frustration with Paul West's in their scene of

novelist is the devil (at one point, she “clasps [her] folder to her bosom as if to shield herself from the flames that flicker around him”), Costello imagines that she appears before him as a “mad old witch” who “wag[s] a bony finger in his face”, although she tries to dredge up her long-defunct feminine wiles in hopes of appeasing him by telling him how powerfully his novel had impressed her – albeit “the way a branding iron does” (Coetzee 2003: 171). His continuing impassivity finally exasperates her into telling him that the risks he took as an author have, predictably enough, produced unpredictable consequences – in the form of her lecture, the final trial.

Elizabeth Costello comes quickly to the point in her presentation: it was not good for Paul West and is not good for his readers to descend imaginatively into the cellar where the July 1944 plotters met their terrible end. She invokes the experience of the good reader not as that principled “act of self-subordination that enables the apprehension of alterity” (Hale 2007: 189), but rather as the involuntary activation of a diabolical synapse which enables the vital afterlife of an evil event:

I read the von Stauffenberg book with sympathy, not excepting ... the execution scenes, to the point that it might as well be I as Mr. West who hold the pen and trace the words. Word by word, step by step, heartbeat by heartbeat, I accompany him into the darkness. No one has been here before, I hear him whisper, and so I whisper too; our breath is as one. *No one has been in this place since the men who died and the man who killed them. Ours is the death that will be died, ours the hand that will knot the rope.*

(Coetzee 2003: 174; my underlined emphasis)

In the novel’s third Lesson, Elizabeth Costello tells her audience, in the course of a post-lecture discussion of the complex relations of human beings to animals, that “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 2003: 80). In the passage above, she suggests how seriously this unbounded capacity challenges the presumption of voluntary self-binding: the “sympathy” which she claims to have felt is an instantaneous merging of herself with Paul West, the erasure of the border between one novelist and another, but also between a novelist and his or her

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confrontation (his “equivalent reticence”, though not in the form she had wanted (Coetzee 2003: 166)), allows her implicitly to align the dangers of reading (which in this scene she is still struggling to comprehend) with those of writing: both contain the same dire risk of “unpredictable consequences” (Coetzee 2003: 172). These juxtaposed silences lend serious support in advance to the faltering statement made in response to her sole post-paper interlocuter and which she immediately attributes in her own mind to the incoherence of fatigue: “The experience that writing offers, or reading – they are the same thing, for my purposes, here, today ...” (Coetzee 2003: 175).

reader as well as between that composite reader and the novel's characters, both its victims and its persecutors.<sup>5</sup> The reader's sympathy is amoral – plural, perverse, polymorphic. S/he experiences the historical event literarily translated from the point of view of all its participants, those who suffered it, those who perpetrated it, and the one who resurrects it in the novel: "[O]ur breath is as one". It is precisely this fluid and promiscuous interpenetration of experience, viscerally figured in what she calls "embodied knowledge", which, Costello suggests, a reader is powerless to refuse at the moment of reading, and which – because there is no question of the reader's free will – militates against the claim for "the ethical value of the readerly self that is produced from 'within' the novel, through the experience of novel reading" (Coetzee 2003: 77; Hale 2007: 189). This is a "self-binding" amounting to madness which nullifies – in the re-presentation – the integrity of ethically incomparable roles, making them interchangeable, a circumstance which leads Costello to raise the absolute moral objection on which her talk falters to its premature end:

What arrogance, to lay claim to the suffering and death of those pitiful men!  
Their last hours belong to them alone, they are not ours to enter and possess.  
If that is not a nice thing to say about a colleague, if it will ease the moment,  
we can pretend the book in question is no longer Mr. West's but mine, made  
mine by the madness of my reading. Whatever pretence we need to adopt, let  
us in heaven's name adopt it and move on.

(Coetzee 2003: 174)<sup>6</sup>

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5. Significantly, when Costello appears before the tribunal in Lesson Eight, she states that she voices not just "the murdered and violated" but, without judgment, "their murderers and violators" as well. When the judges accuse her of being "bankrupt of conscience", she replies: "Do you think the guilty do not suffer too? Do you think they do not call out from their flames? *Do not forget me!* – that is what they cry. What kind of conscience is it that will disregard a cry of such moral agony?" (Coetzee 2003: 204). Perhaps the difference is that Paul West re-enacts a crime unrepented, in all the pleasure of its commission (quite specifically, the Nazis' crime of "refus[ing] to think themselves into the place of their victims" (Coetzee 2003: 79)), whereas Costello imputes moral suffering to her violators.
  6. Stimulated by the questions posed to her by her judges in Lesson Eight, Costello claims that nothing and no one is off-limits to the writer, but she reverses the direction of access: it is not she who enters and possesses her subjects, but rather they who "summon" her and for whom, as "secretary of the invisible", she takes dictation: "[T]he word which it is her function to conduct passes through her" (Coetzee 2003: 203, 199, 200). Not only does this retrospectively exonerate Paul West, but it allies Costello with a theory of artistic production she had rejected and which, in Lesson Seven, her sister Blanche had claimed for the native artist Joseph, who carved the same crucifix over and over "without varying it, without importing new fashions

“[T]hey are not ours to enter and possess” – if the outrage is palpable, it is difficult to distinguish whether it protests a violated ethics of novel-writing or the violations of novel-reading in which a reader may be entered and possessed by character.<sup>7</sup>

No conference paper is complete without a question-and-answer period, and especially with a question the speaker feels unprepared or unwilling to answer. Elizabeth Costello’s sole questioner asks if some readers made from “sterner stuff” than she might not emerge from reading West’s novel stronger rather than weaker, prepared by their reading to resist such evil rather than to succumb to it as victim or voyeur, should it ever again materialise (Coetzee 2003: 175). In effect, the question is: Why shouldn’t a reader have faith in his inviolability, in her integrity, even when encountering radical alterity? Here is the premise in which current thought on novelistic ethics anchors its paired expectations of the reader who must be ready and willing “to believe in the possibility of alterity”, and thus prepared freely to choose “the act of self-subordination that enables [its] apprehension” (Hale 2007: 189). Costello’s response to the question is to her own ears incoherent and abstract: the novelist engages the reader with something far more primitive, as antediluvian as the concept of evil itself, “a shock”, like “electricity”, to which the reader never consents and is powerless to repel (Coetzee 2003: 176). Here there is no question of the will to limit the illimitable potentiality of alterity. The conference organiser, an unusually compassionate member of that species, brings the session to an

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into it, without injecting into it any of his own personality” – and whom Jesus will therefore welcome above all others into the heavenly kingdom (Coetzee 2003: 138). Coetzee’s understanding of the significance of the crucifixion may be relevant to the aesthetic point at issue here: “a refusal and an introversion of retributive violence, a refusal so deliberate, so conscious, and so powerful that it overwhelms any reinterpretation ... that we can give to it” (Coetzee 1992: 337).

7. In his reading of Coetzee’s *Master of Petersburg* as, in part, a meditation on Dostoevsky’s sacrifice of ethical considerations to the imperative of opening oneself to the unexpected when one writes (or reads) fiction, Attridge concedes that “reading, like writing, in full responsiveness to the other is a kind of madness” and notes that Elizabeth Costello makes a similar point in the sixth Lesson (2004a: 134). But in my view, his allegiance to that observation, so fundamental to what he wants to say about the singularity of literature, is tentative; rather than exploring the madness of response, he refers Coetzee’s novel to Derrida’s writings on the *arrivant* and the ethical imperative to await the unexpected without giving in to the temptation to delimit and control it. His insistence on the singularity of literature is more effectively sustained in relation to that point in Attridge 2004b: 83-87, 92-93.



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early close. Costello, overcome with shame, secretes herself in a bathroom stall, where she attempts to recover herself.

She struggles in that bathroom stall to maintain a vision of her own innocence: "She did not want to read but she read; a violence was done to her but she conspired in the violation. *He made me do it*, she says, yet she makes others do it" (Coetzee 2003: 181). And:

Let me not look. That was the plea she breathed to Paul West (except that she did not know Paul West then, he was just a name on the cover of a book). Do not make me go through with it! But Paul West did not relent. He made her read, excited her to read. For that she will not easily forgive him. For that she has pursued him across the seas all the way to Holland.

(Coetzee 2003: 179)

It is not so much that she rejects the earlier analogy of writing to rape ("she makes others do it") as that she supplements that vision with another of reading as a consenting to and then a complicity in the transmission of evil, a *conspiring* – literally, a breathing-together: "[O]ur *breath is as one*".<sup>8</sup> These reflections that follow her talk are, it is worth observing, more consonant with the organisers' request that she speak under the rubric of "Silence, Complicity and Guilt" than her own "negotiated" focus on "Witness, Silence, and Censorship". That she felt the shock of West's representations of torture and murder *first* as pleasure ("excited despite herself"), *then* as disgust, means that the "position projected for [her] by the text" to inhabit and which she does inhabit, if only for a moment, if only *in the act* rather than *after the act* of reading, is anything but an ethical one and its enduring trauma disallows the supersession and nullification of the first response by the second (Coetzee 2003: 178; Hale 2007: 193). At the Lesson's end, she has reached no conclusion. She can only creep back to the conference after the next panel has begun and sit in the back row, Paul West's row, regretting that she had not run into him in the corridor where

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8. There is a more benign figuration of this possibility in the second Lesson when Costello recalls her earlier love affair with her co-lecturer, the African novelist Emmanuel Egudu, whose thesis is that Africa's is an oral poetry, that "[o]n the page it is inert, only half alive; it wakes up when the voice, from deep in the body, breathes life into the words, speaks them aloud". Elizabeth listens critically: "Always, she thinks, the body that is insisted on, pushed forward, and the voice, dark essence of the body, welling up from within it. *Négritude*: she had thought Emmanuel would grow out of that pseudo-philosophy." But the chapter closes with this refiguration through memory: "'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: 45, 46, 58; my italics).

she might have been touched, albeit belatedly, through contact with him, by an illuminating spark that might have led her to “some final word” (Coetzee 2003: 182).

It is time to say explicitly, in case it is not known, that Paul West is a real novelist – quite a prolific one, in fact – and not a novel character who is a novelist, like Elizabeth Costello herself.<sup>9</sup> We can imagine that Paul West was as discomfited by reading the novel of Elizabeth Costello (but written by J.M. Coetzee) as she was by reading his. But the experience of opening a book and finding yourself to be a character within it, and your own novel the subject of critical condemnation in the one you’re reading, doesn’t quite encompass the whole of Paul West’s ordeal. I cite the opening paragraph of a 2003 *Partisan Review* essay entitled “Dostoevsky and Evil” by Joseph Frank:

In the spring of 2002, a colloquium on the problem of evil, sponsored by the Nexus Foundation, was held at the University of Tilburg in Holland. I was a member of a panel assigned to discuss Dostoevsky, certainly the modern writer who has given the theme of evil one of its most powerful expressions. Our keynote speaker was the South African novelist J.M. Coetzee, who, however, sprung a surprise on his fellow-panelists and the audience by not speaking about Dostoevsky at all. Instead, he read a sketch supposedly written by *a fictional personage already familiar from his work, a writer like himself* named Elizabeth Costello, presumably invited to speak at precisely such a conference on precisely such a topic ....

(Frank 2003: 262; my italics)

I don’t know how Frank responded at the time to Coetzee’s surprise – the surprise of leading off a Dostoevsky panel by appearing in the “fictional personage” of his character Elizabeth Costello and giving voice to her condemnation of Paul West and his novel, and never, Frank says, even mentioning Dostoevsky’s name. But in his account of the surprise – after arguing that Dostoevsky’s graphic representations of evil in the great novels, although as unsparing as Paul West’s, are nevertheless counter-balanced by an equally compelling portrait of “the moral conscience” at work in each individual – Frank concludes that in the aftermath of her disastrous presentation, the encounter the shaken Elizabeth Costello really desired in the corridor to “illuminate the landscape for her” was not with Paul West, but with “an incarnation of Dostoevsky”: “Is not such a wished-for illumination typical of *his* poetics, and would it not have flared up again in the scene that so afflicted the distraught Costello? Would he not have

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9. Other real writers are mentioned in the pages of *Elizabeth Costello* – including the poets Susan Mitchell, Czeslaw Milosz, Robert Duncan, and Philip Whalen (who is described as “less interesting” than Duncan) – but only West figures as a character, albeit a peculiarly unengaged one (Coetzee 2003: 183).

found a spark of humanity *somewhere* in the sadistic ghastrliness that West portrays?" he asks. "And is it not possible that Coetzee, with his perfect command of the Dostoevsky corpus – as we know from his *Master of St. Petersburg* – and who likes to play literary games, might have read his story to lead off a Dostoevsky panel precisely for this reason?" (Frank 2003: 272, 273).

Quite plausibly so, but let us return to the discomfiture of the severely tried Paul West who, in Frank's account, finds himself replaced by the titan Dostoevsky as that novelist whom Costello had really hoped to encounter in the corridor as the sole possible source of illumination for the problem of evil – finds himself, that is, figured as the disposable premise of a literary game involving a dizzying series of confrontations of real and fictional novelists initiated by the conflation of the actual Coetzee and the fictional Costello. We will not be surprised that Paul West was not pleased at finding himself, as he expressed it in a *Harper's* article of July 2004, "appropriated, as both author and character, as malefic and real", at finding himself "made mythic" and his novelistic career rendered "entirely imaginary". He comforts himself by noting that, even if "Joseph Frank seems to think I am a wholly fictional novelist trumped up by Costello", still Coetzee "knew I was real ["on the level of real folks", as West awkwardly puts it – they had once run into each other], which I guess meant to him eligible for a manipulation as a walk-on". But at least he was barred legally from writing "that Costello saw me, say, crouching at the urinal troughs in order to lick the bellies of the fruit flies that cluster there" (West 2004: 90, 91). There is some comedy too in the contortions of self-reference to which West is led by his life in another's fiction: he is constrained by Coetzee/-Costello's "startling transgression of literary protocol" (as David Lodge portrayed Coetzee's usage of West [2003: 8]) to refer to himself in the third person (he maintains that Coetzee, if not Costello, is "on the side of West") and even to refer to himself as "West-Stauff", a composite of himself and his first-person narrator, the German count who narrates *The Very Rich Hours*. By finding himself hailed first in a novel, and then at a real conference but by a fictional personage speaking through a fellow fictionist, Paul West demonstrates that alterity may not stay there in its self-enclosed egg waiting for the reader to tap its shell, but may exceed the tacit contract of self-binding by taking an uncanny initiative – reaching out of its enclosure in the novel to call into question the reader's ontological priority, his privilege as the "real" personage.<sup>10</sup> Here is the shocking transgression of literary

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10. Coetzee explicitly stages this reversal in *The Master of Petersburg* when the character of the novelist Dostoevsky wonders, with reference to the spectral appearance in his room of what may become a future character in a future novel, "Is the thing before him the one that does the fathering, and must he give himself to being fathered by it?" (Coetzee 1994: 240-241). Here too he fears, as does Elizabeth Costello, "a descent into representations that have no

protocol, which – to employ a concept I adapt from the Russian critic Lydia Ia. Ginsburg (1985) – makes of authors and readers “human documents”, not securely differentiated from characters because word has become flesh and flesh word. Here we begin to comprehend that which Jacques Rancière invokes as “the suspensive existence of literature”, a concept that exceeds our apprehension of the infinite plasticity of language to gesture toward some form of literary ontology, the result of what Elizabeth Costello herself refers to as “congress across a gap in being” (Rancière 2004: 86; Coetzee 2003: 184).<sup>11</sup>

It would seem, then, that what Frank calls Coetzee’s literary game – his repeat performance of the conflation of real with fictional novelist (various of the novel’s lectures were staged not just in Amsterdam but at Bennington, Berkeley, Princeton, the New York Public Library, and Munich) – is more than that. But what, precisely? In order to answer the question, let’s follow Elizabeth Costello’s lead as she cowers in that bathroom stall. In the midst of her post-paper panic, as she struggles to judge her judgment of Paul West – and not just Paul West but herself and Coetzee too – she returns to the necessity of “go[ing] back to beginnings”, by which she means that she must recover the shock of that first searing impress of the brand which sent her a year later across the sea in pursuit of the author (Coetzee 2003: 166). “What was it inside her that rose in revolt against West and his book when she first read it?” (Coetzee 2003: 166). And: “What was her experience? What was it that happened as she sat

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place in the world” (Coetzee 2003: 241). *Elizabeth Costello*’s final word is given to “Elizabeth, Lady Chandos”, writing in an appended letter to Francis Bacon, “I yield myself to the figures, do you see, Sir, how I am taken over?” (Coetzee 2003: 229).

11. In *Elizabeth Costello*, aside from human relations, congress occurs or is contemplated between humans and animals, humans and gods pagan and Christian, the fictional and the real, and the living and the dead. Although in the first Lesson, a narrator (a “neutral” in Blanchot’s sense) opens the novel with the explicit assumption “that the bridge is built and crossed”, Costello herself becomes increasingly preoccupied with the “mechanics”, as opposed to the “metaphysics”, of congress as a form of “extraordinary intercourse” (Coetzee 2003: 1, 187). In the seventh Lesson, for example, she wonders how “the human body accommodate[s] itself” to “consummation” with such unlikely partners as gods in the form of swans or bulls (p. 184). Wood has characterised *Elizabeth Costello* as a “highly religious book” (2003: 5), and Spivak has described “the impossible status of being figured as object in the web of the other” entailed by reading in terms of the sacred (2002: 18). Costello, it seems to me, takes the metaphysical question further in her increasing preoccupation with the bodily mechanics of congress. Her stance is congruent with Coetzee’s insistence that the “standard” of his fiction “is the body” (1992: 248).

reading the accursed book on the lawn that Saturday morning?" (Coetzee 2003: 177). When she loses her thread in these moments of intense self-scrutiny, the internal imperative repeats itself: "*Go back to the experience*", and "Go back. Go back to Melbourne to that Saturday morning", when the graphic details of torture imprinted themselves on her flesh as she read, their mental sufferings on her mind, and with these, in an unholy *mélange*, the sadistic pleasure of West's fictional officers' torturers: the executioner, the one who filmed the proceedings, and Hitler himself who later watched the film with delectation (Coetzee 2003: 178, 179).

This is explicitly what Costello confesses to when she states that she read the novel with sympathy, not excepting the execution scenes. All its participants, she feels it, became flesh of her flesh: incarnation unaccompanied, at least for a time whose specific extent must vary from reader to reader, by the ethical law meant to govern and limit it. The androgynous composite Coetzee-Costello embodies, in her/his appearances, precisely the *literal* truth of the claim that fictional representation is a species of incarnation – that the fictional human being can in some literal fashion touch (and touch searingly, brand), then penetrate and become one with the real human being, not as allegory but as actual experience. This is the "startling transgression of literary protocol", which has only incidentally to do with the niceties of civility in professional conduct. Instead, the transgression comes when the priority of the reader and even the author cedes to that of their fictional counterparts, an unlimited and unlimitable population, who break free to "colonise" the reader for their own eschatology.<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Costello might say that we have no choice but to take seriously as an "absolute" that interpenetration of consciousnesses which is the activity of imaginative reading, and whose ethical import must be that, although it can be and has been described phenomenologically, it feels like an ontology, "as if" our very being is in some way fundamentally literary (Coetzee 2003: 176).<sup>13</sup>

To sum up: we might justifiably see the novelist Elizabeth Costello, in the sixth Lesson, as having unwittingly tested out, through her traumatic experience of reading, the plausibility and the efficacy of recent theories of ethical self-binding in the writing and reading of novels. In that case, we

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12. I adapt this formulation to my own purposes from Tompkins (1986: 139).

13. See Coetzee's use of the "as if" in Elizabeth Chandos's letter to Lord Bacon, which concludes the novel's final Lesson (Coetzee 2003: 229). The "as if", privileged figure for the necessarily allegorical condition of our being which is and must be "always something else", articulates the paradox of language as that by which we are saved and that which condemns us to madness. The sole alternative to figuration is revelation experienced as a wordless "rapture" in which body and body, soul and body, are indistinguishable and where "we interpenetrate and are interpenetrated by fellow creatures by the thousand" (Coetzee 2003: 228, 229).

would have to conclude that in this instance something has failed, a failure she describes in terms of a conspiracy or breathing together of author, reader, and characters ethical and unethical. But in another sense, the results are inconclusive insofar as we can't say for sure if she's failed the test-text or if the test-text has failed her and, if the latter, whether external limits should not be placed upon the text. Critics have focused on this inconclusive conclusion and tried to discern whether the fictional novelist Costello is articulating the real novelist Coetzee's position, especially in his/her conference performances: is he saying we shouldn't eat meat? Is he saying there is no African novel? Is he saying we should reinstate censorship? We recognise that it is the very seamlessness of Coetzee/Costello that has led some critics, paradoxically, to attempt with these speculations to do away with Costello as mere pretence. In so doing, they lose the opportunity to recognise in *Elizabeth Costello* a special instance of the phenomenon of self-binding.<sup>14</sup>

That is, the more salient critical question to ask of this novel, I would suggest, is the one that takes the questioner back to the time *before* two became one in the process of reading, the question Costello has to remind herself repeatedly to ask in the Dutch bathroom stall: "Can she find her way back?" meaning, who was I *before I read*? Who was I *before literature*? or, as she puts it, What was my experience *as I read*? What happened to me then and there *as I read*? What in reading supercedes or threatens to supercede the will to hold fast to oneself (so as to be more fully open to the other), making of willed self-subordination a fantasy of control akin to slumming it – where one is permitted to experience the impotence of the damned while retaining one's executive powers (Coetzee 2003: 177). Does that mere flirtation with the depths really describe *reading*? Costello seems to ask. Her own experience suggests that readerly "will" is more accurately a species of monkeyrope as Melville describes it in *Moby-Dick*: named after the cord linking the organ-grinder to his monkey, it appears to offer both parties to a transaction – in Melville's novel, the flensing of the dead whale

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14. Cf. Attridge's objections to the critical tendency in Coetzee scholarship which conflates the novelist's opinions with those of Costello: "[I]t omits the crucial fact [that fictional] characters and contexts ... have their being only as events in the process of reading," and that their restriction to the poetic realm salvifically "returns the living human being to language" (2004a: 199). My emphasis here is on what Attridge calls the "even[t] staged within the event of the work" (p. 198) – Elizabeth Costello's experience of reading Paul West, which she afterward describes as a loosening of that restriction, overwhelming the reader in a way that is perhaps analogous to Coetzee's account of the effect of the suffering of others upon him: "I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, ... my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering" (Coetzee 1992: 248 cited in Attridge 2004a: 192).

– the security of their separate integrities. One positions oneself on the deck of the comparatively stable ship as the other descends the blood-slippery slopes of the abyss – the bowels of the dead whale anchored to the ship's side, which must be processed (albeit at one's peril) if it is to be usable. But if the instrument of self-binding honours by protecting the other's alterity, it also proves, in Melville's ([1850]1967) words, "an elongated Siamese ligature" which makes of the separable parties to the transaction of rendering value from the object "inseparable twin brother[s]". It is quite possible that the anchor, the one on the boat, will be unceremoniously jerked off his perch – Elizabeth Costello would say "shocked" or "branded" – and into that other world inhabited by his partner down below. So Ishmael says, "I seemed distinctly to perceive that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two: that my free will had received a mortal wound; and that another's mistake or misfortune might plunge innocent me into unmerited disaster and death." No matter how carefully Ishmael as the controlling, supervisory party (the one on the ship, not on the whale) tries to manage the outcome, he reflects, he could not possibly forget that "do what I would, I only had the management of one end of it" (Melville [1850]1967: 271). What Ishmael is describing is more properly called the sublimity of alterity than the appreciation of alterity, and its point would seem to be that in reading – in crossing the threshold into the novel's world – one doesn't exercise one's will in a vacuum any more than in "the world of real folks". This is why, although it may require literary training to discern what I have been suggesting is the profoundly literary nature of our subjectivity, it requires none whatsoever to suffer it or, alternatively, to revel in it.

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