Coetzee's Queer Body*

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Summary

The first half of this essay explores the lineaments of dissident or queer desire which Coetzee's work traces post-1989, almost as if in response to the "liberation" of the discourse of love that was meant to follow the fall of apartheid. In its second half the essay suggests that, far from being liberatory, queer desire in the later Coetzee, and especially in *Elizabeth Costello* (2004), baulks from an identification with otherness, especially where that otherness takes on womanly form, instead collaborating with misogyny.

Opsomming

Die eerste helfte van hierdie opstel ondersoek die wesenstrekke van dissidente of vreemde begeerte wat Coetzee sedert 1989 in sy werk naspoor – bykans as 'n reaksie op die "bevryding" van die diskoers van liefde wat veronderstel was om op die val van apartheid te volg.

In die tweede helfte van die opstel word daar gesuggereer dat die vreemde begeerte by die latere Coetzee hoegenaamd nie bevrydend werk nie, maar in werklikheid wegskram van identifisering met die ander/andersheid, veral in die geval waar hierdie ander/andersheid die vorm van 'n vrou aanneem, in welke geval daar eerder oorgehel word na misoginie. Dit is veral die geval in *Elizabeth Costello* (2004).

This essay begins with what might be termed Coetzee's signature synecdoche – the memorably smooth and slim legs of Afrikaans/Coloured boys featured towards the start of *Boyhood: A Memoir* (1997). The reader might not at first notice how very attractive and smooth these legs are to the young John were it not that within a few pages of describing their fascination he returns to the experience. He returns to go over the legs again, as if to enjoy and to perfect them further. The first occurrence is worth quoting in full because it draws out a number of key elements that this essay will further explore. First and foremost, it is noteworthy that the legs are represented as disassociated, even disembodied, signifiers of an almost ineffable erotic beauty. Putting aside the oblique reference to John's feelings of exultation following the wrestling matches with his friends Greenberg and Goldstein in the park, this reflection on legs represents, significantly, the narrator's first open acknowledgement of desire.

> He likes to gaze at slim, smooth, brown legs in tight shorts. Best of all he loves the honey-tanned legs of boys with blond hair. The most beautiful boys, he is surprised to find, are in the Afrikaans classes, as are the ugliest ... Afrikaans children are almost like Coloured children, he finds, unspoilt and thoughtless, running wild ....
>
> Beauty and desire: he is disturbed by the feelings that the legs of these boys, blank and perfect and inexpressive, create in him. What is there that can be done with legs beyond devouring them with one's eyes? What is desire *for*?
>
> The naked sculptures in the *Children's Encyclopedia* affect him in the same way: Daphne pursued by Apollo; Persephone ravished by Dis. It is a matter of shape, of perfection of shape. He has an idea of the perfect human body. When he sees that perfection manifested in white marble, something thrills inside him; a gulf opens up; he is on the edge of falling.
>
> (Coetzee 1997: 56-57)[1]

As is clear from this quotation, when the lean, tanned legs of the boys are first introduced they are androgynously coded, even if quickly resolved into young male form. Conversely, when human bodily perfection is granted female identity, it is the nonhuman identity of Greek goddesses carved in stone. It remains consistent in Coetzee that women, too, may be the bearers of lean sculpted legs, their single most eroticised feature in his work, but that women's bodies normally tend to an unattractive, un-Grecian softness, floppiness, and mess, also associated with spillage, leakage, and waste. The tendency equates with that which, with reference to his teacher Mrs Oosthuizen, John calls "outpourings" (*B* 9). In Lesson 5 of *Elizabeth Costello* (2004), a novel that underscores the link between the Greeks, well-formed male limbs, and the study of pure form, the term is "exuding": "The Greeks do not exude. The one who exudes is Mary of Nazareth" (*EC* 140, 149).

Still working within this visual and erotic economy of desire, the young John after only a couple of paragraphs of the reflection on legs in *Boyhood*, imagines that babies are born from the anus, "neat and clean and white", and not from any other neighbouring orifice as his schoolmates believe. Coming so soon after his remarkable admission to an early adolescent love of Grecian form, with all the homoerotic connotations that he will know this bears, the image forms an extraordinarily open, perhaps even playful, admission of a certain kind of childish solace to be derived from the anus. This is accompanied by an interesting rejection of dark, guttural words to do with the backside, and, simultaneously, as matches a configuration of

1. Due to the multiple references to *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Elizabeth Costello* in this essay, page references will henceforth be cited in the text, alongside the abbreviations *B*, *Y,* and *EC*, respectively. Full bibliographic information appears in the References.

Grecian and anal desire, the cancellation, albeit from the perspective of the child, of the vagina, which in *Youth* (2002) will bring mainly mess and complication. In *Elizabeth Costello*, by contrast, the vagina, from the point of view of a refictionalised Leopold Bloom, is merely a question mark on the body of Artemis, a question which leads on to the perennial question in Coetzee about the relationship of aesthetics to the real world (*EC* 190). There will be occasion later in this essay to return to these figurations of the female body.

Now to the second description of young male legs in *Boyhood*, which here unequivocally belongs to a single Coloured boy. At the beginning of the chapter immediately following the description of clean anal birth, the young John is traversing a strip of public ground with his mother, feeling self-conscious, like a scuttling beetle, when a Coloured boy crosses their path. There is nothing unusual about the boy and yet the sight of him for John is momentous. He experiences feelings of bursting and a loss of control which correspond to the sensation of falling induced by the Afrikaans boys' legs. He is overwhelmed, in other words, by an experience of unquantifiable, irrefutable desire. Again it is the combination of tight shorts and slim, beautiful legs that produces this effect: "There are hundreds of boys like him, thousands, thousands of girls too in short frocks that show off their slim legs. He wishes he had legs as beautiful as theirs. With legs like that he would float across the earth as this boy does, barely touching it" (*B* 60). John becomes lost in a stream of thoughts on innocence and bodily perfection contrasted with the shame and darkness of sexual delight. This then leads to a visceral confrontation with the word "perversion", which he attaches to himself, whereas the Coloured boy's body seems newly sprung from its "shell". Perfection, homoerotic perfection, once again, is not of woman born. The heterosexual body possibly is.

Coetzee's tellingly excessive erotic description of the body, especially the young male body, in his first memoir cannot but strike the reader as provocative. His fascination with those legs, that process of going over them, the open admission of perversion, draws attention to something not much observed in his work, especially his later work, which forms the focus of this essay. There is not only the prominence of the legs – a prominence that suggestively points out the emphasis he places elsewhere on thin, lean, strong (sometimes tanned, sometimes white) legs. There is also the fact that the template for this figure of desire tends to be boys' legs. The handful of exceptions to this includes, in *Boyhood*, his sympathetic cousin Agnes who is seen as soft, yet has slim brown legs, and the woman neighbour in Plumstead newly arrived from England who spends her days tanning her long white legs (*B* 135). In *Youth* there is the blonde girlfriend Caroline from Cape Town, whom he re-encounters in London (and mentions in almost the

same breath as his experience of being picked up by a man) (*Y* 78-79). At the tail end of their affair, they cycle in the country close to Bognor Regis: "Her blonde hair flashes, her long legs gleam as she turns the pedals; she looks like a goddess" (*Y* 109). Again, as in the reference to Artemis and Bloom from *Elizabeth Costello*, we find the association between sculpted legs and deity. In all three cases the female legs arguably spring to notice because of how they conform to a model that is *not* marked for femininity.

As is the case for most instances of bodily synecdoche, a critic is tempted to read such legs as symptoms, fetishes of desire, possibly even, as Coetzee himself suggests, as signifiers of perversion. As early in *Boyhood* as the description of Rob Hart caned by the outpouring Miss Oosthuizen, the young John has prepared the ground for this perception. He has felt attracted to Rob Hart, he observes, to the world of sex and beating that he represents (*B* 9). He is, he reflects when speaking of his unusual affinity for the Russians in the old War, one of those who always inhabit a secret. He compares himself to a trapdoor spider, hiding, living in the dark (*B* 28). Joining together this trail of signifiers to secrecy, holes in the ground, sex, it becomes apparent that Coetzee post-*Age of Iron,* certainly the Coetzee of the two cryptic memoirs, demonstrates a new interest in aspects of the eroticised male body, if of the smoother, lither, more feminine kind. He toys, in other words, though it may only be a toying, with queering, with modes of queering himself. So – to offer another example – he evokes strong memories of the young Coloured boy Eddie who comes to help his mother, who is as old as he is. He speaks of Eddie's wiriness and strength, his smell, his fascinating gyrations in the bath (*B* 74-76). By contrast his father's mature male body is embarrassing and disgusting to him (*B* 109, and elsewhere). The boy John observes that he does not know how to behave towards grown men, whether to court their approval or to offer resistance (*B* 132).

For a writer usually assumed to be unquestioningly heterosexual – witness the relative paucity of queer readings of his work – post-1994 Coetzee appears to allow himself considerable leeway in dwelling upon, gentling, fondling in script, if not male bodies, then androgynous parts of male bodies. This while he intermittently associates his understanding of passion with tightness, smoothness, self-containment. If romantic love, as he writes, is soft and soppy, he is "of stone" (*Y* 121, 123). At the same time, especially in *Youth*, he at times quails before, and turns away in guilt and half-disguised revulsion from manifestations of bodily femaleness. If he cannot explicitly locate homosexual desire within himself, or so the incident with the gay man in *Youth* appears to suggest, he does by virtue of omission, by implication, entertain the possibility of a queer eroticism.

By thus surveying the lineaments of queer desire, the always-oblique Coetzee has responded, perhaps ironically, always after his own fashion, to

an edict of his times. That edict was famously framed in Albie Sachs's 1989 ANC in-house paper in which, inter alia, he called for the banning of the phrase "culture is a weapon of struggle" (Sachs 1998: 239-248). Coetzee has responded, that is, dissidently, waywardly, perversely, queerly, experimenting with the conflicted significations of being at once male and "arty" in the South African context (Dollimore 1991). Sachs in the in-house paper also of course controversially suggested that with the demise of apartheid South African writers should write less about apartheid, once a politically "irrelevant" topic, and more about love. Coetzee has taken up Sachs's challenge with characteristic defiance, therefore, responding by seeming not to respond, by opening up the wider, forbidden spectrum of love, specifically if codedly of queer love, till fairly recently virtually taboo in South African fiction and a classic source of "giving offense" (Coetzee 1996). Each one of the 1997-2004 texts – *Boyhood, Youth*, *Disgrace*, *Elizabeth Costello* – make heteronormative assumptions with respect to the main characters, most obviously *Disgrace*, as in Lurie's dumbfounded fascination as to what the lesbian Lucy might do with her lover. Yet even as they do so, each text also admits of the dissident, amorphous, freewheeling, and non-object-directed aspects of desire, including queer desire. This admission, I will later submit, comes to a point of at-once-crisis-and-resolution in the cross-dressing or cross-embodying performed in *Elizabeth Costello*, which is centrally what that essay-as-novel is about.

In the course of my further reading of parts of *Boyhood, Youth*, and, finally, *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee's troubled interest in clean-limbed, sculpted, leggy Grecian bodies will continue to form the focus of the discussion. My concern will be to consider how self-conscious and choreographed the lineaments of (seemingly) queer desire are in this writer who is in general so highly self-conscious and so very aware of form. Essentially my question is: does John Coetzee know how queer he in fact allows himself to appear? Is he aware of how dissident he is? By virtue of his giving away as much as he does in this respect in *Boyhood*, he does not actually seem to notice how much of his queer secret – or queer aesthetic – he is betraying. Indeed, by definition, the queer Coetzee cannot be as self-aware in this respect as he often is in other areas. The queer body, as in Caravaggio interpreted by Bersani, is an enigmatic body; it presents a "provocative unreadability", something like a Grecian statue's utterly desirable yet inaccessible alabaster legs (Bersani & Dutoit 1998: 2, 8, 12). Boys' perfectly honed, parthenogenetically generated legs in *Boyhood*, I want to suggest, possibly expose even more than they conceal. That is to say, there may be an encrypted eroticism – an eroticism blocked by a mystery, an unacknowledged homoeroticism in fact – in Coetzee's trademark willingness to reveal a little, never too much. In Plumstead he makes friends with Theo

Stavropoulos, rumoured to be "a moffie, a queer", his name not by chance I think signifying God. He likes Theo's suavity, his resistance to conformity, his resilience, his, dare I say it, Greek style. Is this simply because Theo's qualities correspond to his own feminine if not effeminising interest in elegance and the arts, or is there something more explicitly if codedly Greek to his attraction? "He would like to do battle for Theo", he archly writes (*B* 150).

Having posed the question of queerness I am, however, anxious not merely to seek to "out" the author or author-construct, "J.M. Coetzee". As I proceed I want rather to ask what such queerness might mean to this writer. Why should he dabble in queering himself, he who in his two ambiguous memoirs is so very troubled by his closeness to his mother and the many effeminate tendencies which alienate him from the beloved masculine environment of his father's family's farm? Is it the case, as the critic Brenna Munro has asked in a study of the new South Africa's "coming out narratives", that Coetzee in a novel like *Disgrace* is interested along with Gordimer in the "unmaking" and disorientation of whiteness (Munro 2004)? Is he concerned to explore the reinvention of ethnic identities, national/family structures and class alignments, for which process gayness is both a catalyst and a metaphor? Or, given that the queer Lucy is never really centre-stage in his most explicitly post-apartheid novel, *Disgrace*, is Coetzee as ever more interested in the epistemological questions of identity which queerness, amongst other topics, allows him to raise? A queer consciousness occupies that cusp between cold reason, the masculine domain, and embodiment, where femininity resides, which so preoccupies him in *Elizabeth Costello*. Women, says Sister Blanche in that novel, live in proximity to the ground; inhabit fully, entirely, the places of agony and desire. In her unwritten confession to her sister, Elizabeth Costello confirms exactly this judgement.

In her *Epistemology of the Closet* Eve Sedgwick reminds us that queer desire refers to excess, that which transgresses fixed choices and definitions. Queer is the "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically". And: "[q]ueer suggests possibilities for organizing around a fracturing of identity" (Sedgwick 1990: 8, 9, 27). A queer reading, far from being paranoid, ferreting out hole-and-corner implications, is interested therefore in those moments where, turning again to the terms and sight-lines of Leo Bersani, the body at once presents and withdraws itself; where desire involves a continual interplay of self-exposure and self-concealment. A queer reading is not concerned about eviscerating the erotic secret, that which now solicits, now refuses, symbolisation. It is committed rather to collaborating *with* wayward movements of half-expressed desire;

desire which cannot be acknowledged in so many words, or resolved into single object-choices. According to such a reading therefore the boyish legs the young Coetzee lingers over are almost quintessentially queer, do not clearly signify one sex, or resolve into a particular sex act. Instead they suggest interrogative ways of probing, perhaps, new kinds of belief and forms of embodiment. What is by contrast of relatively little interest in terms of my reading is that aforementioned incident in *Youth* where John allows himself to be picked up to find out whether he is homosexual; how he is to be categorised vis-à-vis the sexual divide. The queer Coetzee, I would want to suggest, is not particularly bothered about such categories, even though his refusal of them does not escape gender stereotyping. Indeed it may be that at certain points of tension, as in *Elizabeth Costello*, his subtle queering slides over into a far from subtle misogyny.

I now turn to *Youth*, a self-conscious portrait of the artist or poet as a young man, which is more openly and tenaciously than *Boyhood* preoccupied throughout with desire. John wants to be a poet, the memoir's syllogism runs, and the poet, specifically the male poet, is driven by a transfiguring desire. Therefore he, John, is in quest of desire (*Y* 29, 66). In reality however – and in this lies the unlikely humour of the book, its queer, if not misogynist joke – sex throughout *Youth* is mostly unsatisfactory, degrading, uncomfortable, most obviously so when it involves a direct encounter with the seepages and effluvia of a woman. In general, women in this text, other than Caroline, briefly, on her bicycle, and the remote, ivory-white girl-poet, resist idealisation. Greek self-containment and sculpted inaccessibility are not the properties of woman's body. This is most obviously so at two crucial moments of crisis in John's story, which involve women bleeding as a result of sex, and, in response, his habitual retreat to what he calls "his coldness towards women" (*Y* 95).

The first of these incidents, perhaps the more painful one, concerns a Cape Town girlfriend called Sarah, who has an abortion after falling pregnant. John accompanies her through much of the experience, suffering overwhelming feelings of guilt, squeamishness, inadequacy. Then she disappears from the text. She comes to the experience equipped with clean bed linen and hides from him "the evidence of what is going on inside her body: the bloody pads and whatever else there is", yet he clearly cannot put them out of his mind (*Y* 34). He thinks of sewers, tides, pods of flesh, shame. The second incident, in which shame and blood, now visible blood, are associated, is when in London he sleeps with his cousin's friend Marianne and finds she is a virgin. She bleeds, apparently copiously (*Y* 128-130), and stains the bed, which does not belong to John (*Y* 128-130). He is at this point a caretaker-lodger. He is wracked with shame, tries to hide the evidence of what they have done, and, even more suggestively, is appalled at Marianne's

response to the incident, her very able coping, her whispering with the nanny. He is threatened by the fact of the two women conspiring among themselves.

For the rest he describes the women he goes with, no matter how much or how little he wants them, as un-Lawrentian, lacking fire and perfection, in fact lacking anything to distinguish them at all (*Y* 32, 68). Basically such women are "unformed", girls rather than women, who "in their hearts did not want to do it, just as in his heart of hearts he could not have been said to want to do it either". So he feels he fails in sex, he lacks heart, the returns of passion are meagre (*Y* 133). Yet despite this he remains "ready for anything", romance, tragedy, as long as it will "consume" and "remake" him, allow him to transcend sexual categories, to be transfigured (*Y* 111). Significantly in the terms of the reading I am trying to follow through here, his quest to be sexually remade does not have a particular orientation attached to it. It is not explicitly heterosexual. After all, guilt-free love, he cryptically notes in a comment on Pound, may equate with the worship of Greek gods. And the love of like and like, he further observes when fantasising about wrestling with his girl cousins, gives a promise of ease: there are "no introductions needed, no fumbling around" (*Y* 126, 133). Remembering also Cousin Agnes of *Boyhood*, the bodies of such girls have the wiry androgynous attractiveness of Eddie and the anonymous Coloured boy: they are not fully woman, prone to outpourings, awkwardness, filled with the potential to bring shame.

As all Coetzee readers are aware, the writer has long been preoccupied with the epistemological problem of fully comprehending, of identifying with, extreme otherness, especially with the other's suffering body (Spivak 1999: 169-197). Think only of Lurie's self-appointed task of accompanying dead dogs to the incinerator in *Disgrace*. Now, in his novel-in-eight-lessons, *Elizabeth Costello*, his penultimate publication, at what must be a late stage in his career, he has given himself the opportunity at last to reflect self-consciously and openly on this problem. The element that draws together the disparate lecture tableaux that make up this novel-*manqué* is not only that they all involve the female novelist Elizabeth Costello, though that is of course significant, but that they concern "embodying" (Lee 2003: 21). Every episode in the novel dramatises the stand-off between embodiment and reason, whether it is a question of Thomas Nagel imagining himself as a bat, Ted Hughes bodying himself forth as a jaguar, or an African novelist embodying the European novel form. Whether it concerns novelists entering the world of Molly Bloom or imagining themselves in Hitler's death camps, "the notion of embodying turns out to be pivotal" (*EC* 75-76, 97, 12).

How appropriate it is then that in a book centrally preoccupied with both the ethical problem of suffering, especially of others, and the connected

problem of "inhabiting another body" or "the sensation of being" (*EC* 96, 78), "queer" Coetzee has taken it upon himself to impersonate a woman novelist. As with Susan Barton or Elizabeth Curren, but more self-reflexively so, he has consummately, apparently willingly, surrendered to "the challenge of otherness" (*EC* 12). He has chosen to submit to the femaleness, weakness, softness, eternal travail, that, as suggested, he has not only long associated with the body of woman but has also suspected of residing within himself, within his own rigidly controlled and contained, awkward or – in the conventional definition – "queer" body.

There are strong critical temptations to read into the character of Elizabeth Costello a representation of Nadine Gordimer: she is small, grey and birdlike; she does not suffer fools gladly. But a strong, even self-evident case could equally be made for the closeness of Coetzee and Costello: both are vegetarians and Antipodeans; both are profoundly jaded by the life of the peripatetic performing writer. Both have had some childhood involvement, however tenuous, with Catholicism. In embodying a woman, Coetzee has as it were met her halfway, making that woman something like him, which obviously means something like a man. In her incarnation as a writer on the international circuit, she then has to probe by way of reasoned arguments women's embodiment as quintessential suffering creatures, and her own embodiment as an object of male lust.

Yet, curiously if predictably, even while so openly embodying a woman, Coetzee has in a sense stripped her of flesh, reduced her centredness as a physical human being. She is often represented from the outside, as elderly, dying, as through the device of her mostly absent son John. This is an odd, if not queer technique, for, by repeatedly describing Elizabeth as tired, greying, shrivelling, and so on, *and* as a reasoning if sympathetic character, what Coetzee the novelist effectively does is to desex her. In her case he does not want to deal with the problem of the flesh, of desire, unless in memory, as in her memory of sitting, aged forty, for Mr Phillips, in which she noticeably pictures herself from the outside, as the ageing male artist's subject. Even if this is the scene where she most exposes herself as a body, we are told almost nothing of what this experience feels like, *from within*, apart from the reference to the sensation of cold air on bare skin.

In short, the elderly woman writer Elizabeth Costello as a character in this text is remarkably bodiless; finds herself disembodied even as she is embodied. She is a grandmother and an Australian, yet she is never represented as physically involved with her grandchildren or as experiencing Australia, its heat, its flies, its frogs, as a living being. Even her memory of lying in the arms of the African novelist Egudu is noticeably if not also egregiously sketchy, almost empty, just as the wind instrument she imagines herself as being for him is in its way an empty vessel, filled with air. To one

who indicts Descartes for privileging reason, she interacts with the world, both the public and the domestic, at a level almost exclusively cerebral, self-contained and masculine. She does not, as does Molly Bloom, leave her smell about; she does not, like Mary of Nazareth, exude (*EC* 13, 149).

It is at this point, I want to suggest, where Elizabeth Costello, the author "John Coetzee" impersonating as a woman, bodies forth as less than a living female being, that the female body in the text becomes somewhat queer. Or should that be, almost queer, just less than queer? It is here, I further want to suggest, that something in the male author baulks at femaleness, at its gross, un-Grecian embodiedness. There is a secret embedded in the characterisation of Costello, a Caravaggio-like secret, that Coetzee cannot make explicit as the ethical framework of the novel would fall apart, but that emerges in the contradictory juxtaposition of different scenes of embodiment in the second half of the text. The secret – or possibly crisis – might be phrased in this way. The queerness of John Coetzee in *Elizabeth Costello* emerges not from the fact that, finally, having stood so often on the side of the silenced other, in *Foe* as in *Disgrace*, he has now spoken from within the very body of the other. That he has impersonated – not merely ventriloquised. No, the queerness of John Coetzee is revealed when he refuses to go through with the masquerade. He cannot do it aesthetically, it offends him; it is, to use his words, literally obscene and should be offstage, no matter how much prompting his ethics might give him to go through with it (*EC* 168-169). Put differently, he cannot at such points prevent his underlying if desexed homoeroticism from sliding into a kind of sexism and thus arguably becoming the more skittishly and provocatively homoerotic. His attraction to honed Hellenic bodies, again referred to in detail in this novel, as in the comparison of the Greeks and Zulu warriors, draws him away from the wracked and guilt-ridden Hebraic body which is coded both animal and female. In fact he does not actually want to *be*, to form part of, the body of a woman.

I will spell out my speculation a little further.

Towards the end of the pair of lectures first published as "The Lives of Animals", Elizabeth Costello encourages her audience: "I urge you to walk, flank to flank, beside the beast that is prodded down the chute to his executioner" (*EC* 111). This is all very well for the purpose of making her point about attempting to experience animal being as living flesh. Yet, in the next lecture but one, "The Problem of Evil", which follows on from the meditations on the revealed word of God in Africa, she appears to stand appalled at her own invitation. A novelist, Paul West, who has written a book about the punishments Hitler inflicted on those who conspired against him, has in her opinion gone too far. He has brushed against evil and "unveiled horrors" whereas to her mind there are dark territories of the soul

from which the writer cannot return unscathed (*EC* 160, 162). In other words, the imaginative embodiment of some kinds of evil in text must remain taboo. This is a chute down which the writer should not proceed; it is obscene and ought to remain hidden (p. 159).

To provide clarity on what she might mean by such evil, indeed by this volte-face in her thinking, Elizabeth Costello turns half-way through the episode "The Problem of Evil" to a horrifying experience of her own, which we can only read as a correlate for the obscenity of West's novel. It is one of those points in the text where an experience of pure and painful embodiment "irrupts into this book of structured arguments" (Lee 2003: 21). Elizabeth remembers how, when she was a young woman, a man she allowed to pick her up, began to beat her up when she resisted him. (Why, we may well ask, could she not have done the picking up?) His response is out of all proportion, irrational, violent: it is an encounter with evil in so far as her assailant begins to enjoy the experience of hurting her and burning her clothes.

Jacqueline Rose has critiqued this incident-within-an-incident in *Elizabeth Costello* as giving an inadequate ethical response to questions of how and whether to represent the horrors of the Holocaust (Rose 2003). While I would agree that Elizabeth's anxieties about the real-world ethics of storytelling, as opposed to the deferrals which involved the once-poststructuralist Coetzee, are very broadly sketched, I would want to add a further, to-me-more-serious objection. It is that at this point Coetzee's writing as a woman, his device of female embodiment, is unwittingly exposed as a ruse. In fact he does not want to embody, even for the sake of the device, just as Lurie in *Disgrace* at no point enters the scene of Lucy's rape; he will not go there.

It is significant that in the description of the violent incident Elizabeth's memory is represented in a single frame, dissociated from the rest of her life, embedded within her like an "egg of stone" (*EC* 165-166). Consequently the third-person "she" that Coetzee uses throughout for the novelist becomes suddenly both unsatisfactory and yet revealing. It alerts us to the fact that even at this moment of extreme personal crisis Elizabeth is represented strictly from the outside, almost objectively, ostensibly by herself, yet without any sensory evocation of what this extreme experience of pain must have involved. The impersonator Coetzee has refused to accompany his alter-ego Elizabeth, not on ethical grounds, I would venture, but because the embodiment of such humiliation and victimhood profoundly disturbs and unnerves him – or the narrative point of view. There is something so utterly appalling about the experience of being the victim, enduring such punches and blows, in short, about being a womanish "weak vessel", that it causes Coetzee effectively to suspend the representational logic of embodiment that

forms the ethical underpinning to most of Costello's arguments *(EC* 175). He momentarily withdraws from his cross-dressing and resorts instead to a now-compromised pose of queerness which is, however, comfortable and habitual to him – that is, the stony and self-concealing silence of the masculine statue unmoved by Hebraic agonies and viewed from without. The statue may be Apollo or Artemis, but is always more likely to be Apollo than Artemis.

Paul West, Elizabeth's interlocutor, significantly remains silent, as silent as a statue – a statue with a "rather handsome profile", it might be added – throughout her interrogation of his work, even when she addresses him directly. Despite a relatively brief appearance, West, who has allowed himself to burn with the fires of hell, whose name embodies the extremes of experience, Hebraic (Paul) and Hellenic ("the West"), is a figure with whom identification is more possible, more desirable and sexier, than with the aged novelist. Ultimately, then, I would submit, Coetzee would prefer flirting with the Greeks and with Zulu warriors, would prefer provocatively to queer himself, rather than going through with a full embodiment of femaleness with all its outpourings and vulnerability. Finally he elects – in spite of himself, but it is the dilemma he opts for – to resort to queerness. He would rather queer himself than to act female; the queer body is in this sense his refuge.

* This essay collaborates with J.M. Coetzee's recent poetic, in making deliberate segues between the author-construct or -self, and the writer's autobiographical self.

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