A Woman Thinking in Dark Times?: The Absent Presence of Hannah Arendt in J. M. Coetzee's "Elizabeth Costello and The Problem of Evil"

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Summary

This paper approaches Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), in particular the section entitled "Elizabeth Costello and the Problem of Evil" (originally published in *Salmagundi* 2003), as a complex narrative in which intellectual and philosophical ideas merge with storytelling to create an intertextual matrix. By means of a close reading of the aforementioned "lesson", I aim to judge its contextualisation within a realm of intellectual and philosophical debates and thereby to reveal the influence of Hannah Arendt, who, I contend, emerges as one of the less obvious intertexts in a "novel" that is clearly celebrating intertextuality as a self-reflexive, intellectual game. By examining the text as an intertext, I suggest, as one possibility, that Coetzee is presenting Elizabeth Costello as a latter-day Hannah Arendt, a woman "thinking in dark times". If that is perhaps too decisive a reading for a slippery writer like Coetzee, then at the very least, he seems to be in conversation with Arendt on such issues as evil, banality and thinking.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel benader Coetzee se *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), veral die afdeling getiteld "Elizabeth Costello and the Problem of Evil" (oorspronklik gepubliseer in *Salmagundi* 2003), as 'n komplekse narratief waarin intellektuele en filosofiese idees met vertelkuns ineensmelt om 'n intertekstuele matriks te skep. Ek het ten doel om deur middel van 'n noukeurige lees van die voorafgaande "les" die konteks-tualisering daarvan binne die gebied van intellektuele en filosofiese debatte te beoordeel om sodoende die invloed van Hannah Arendt – wat ek aanvoer te voorskyn kom as een van die minder klaarblyklike intertekste in 'n "roman" wat duidelik intertekstualiteit as 'n selfrefleksiewe, intellektuele spel besing – uit te lig. Deur die teks as 'n interteks te ondersoek, suggereer ek, as een moontlikheid, dat Coetzee Elizabeth Costello voorstel as 'n hedendaagse denkende vrou in "donker tye". Indien hierdie interpretasie miskien te beslissend vir 'n ontwykende skrywer soos Coetzee is, dan blyk hy minstens in gesprek te wees met Arendt oor sulke kwessies soos boosheid, banaliteit en denke.

> Exactly because meaning is not present to itself or the reader, because all we have is the signifier, we need to tease out, by detailed attention to the textuality of the text, its nuances, and equivocations, its displacements and evasions, the questions posed there and the anxieties on display about the answers proffered.
>
> (Catherine Belsey 1999: 14)

> Nihilism is of a noble lineage, which does not culminate with the jejune relativism of postmodernists or disingenuous pleas of ideologues. Think of it as the philosophical unconscious of our race. At best, it is a penultimate form of lucidity, the emptiness intellect must traverse but spirit abhors. We are nihilistic thoughts that come into God's head precisely because we introduce human reason into the "mind of God". Reason is corrosive; it reduces the universe to rust; nothing withstands it – nothing except faith.
>
> (Ihab Hassan 2005: 3)

> My case, in short, is this: I have lost completely the ability to think or to speak of anything coherently.
>
> (Hofmannsthal 2004)

In the first quotation, which is an excerpt from *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden* (1999), Catherine Belsey is talking about "making" good cultural history within a context of "close reading" which she regards as a central critical activity in literary analysis, not to arrive at any certainty regarding the text in question (or truths about its cultural context), but more productively, to reveal its uncertainties, its ambivalences, the precariousness of its relation to "the real". *Elizabeth Costello* is a text in which meaning is obliquely present to the reader, a text encumbered, even constituted, by equivocations, evasions and inconsistencies. The intention of this paper is to approach the text, or, more precisely, one of its "lessons", carefully, in order to "read" through its ambiguous signifiers the presence of Hannah Arendt as an intertext in Coetzee's conversation concerning the problem of evil. Also of concern will be to interrogate Coetzee's own encounter with "the real", the "dark times" that form a subtle and pervasive backdrop to many of his novels – what Hassan, in the second quotation, calls the void.

I approach Coetzee's text as a complex narrative in which intellectual and philosophical ideas merge with storytelling to create an intertextual matrix, one which allows for an exploration of the relationship between the imaginative and the critical registers. The various intertexts in *Elizabeth Costello* include works of political philosophy, other narrative texts, Coetzee's own thoughts on intellectual reasoning and censorship, and works of fiction and nonfiction. In seeking the intertextual moments in the text I hope also to "read" at least one section closely to judge its contextualisation

within a realm of intellectual and philosophical debates. Looking mainly at the essay originally published in *Salmagundi* (2003) as "Elizabeth Costello and the Problem of Evil" and rendered as Lesson 6, "The Problem of Evil" in *Elizabeth Costello*, I hope to reveal what would seem to be the hidden influence of Hannah Arendt, an absence that for me is palpably present, a lacuna throughout the text that draws attention to itself. Or, to put this differently, Hannah Arendt is one of Coetzee's less obvious intertexts in a "novel" that is clearly celebrating intertextuality as a self-conscious, self-reflexive, intellectual game. Since Coetzee is so evidently familiar with the writings of Arendt (he gives this away in the repeated phrase "the banality of evil", possibly the concept most (in)famously attributed to Arendt), I suggest, as a possibility, that Coetzee is presenting Elizabeth Costello as a latter-day Hannah Arendt, a woman "thinking in dark times".[1] Further, through Costello's voice, Coetzee seems to be in conversation with Arendt on the issues of evil, banality and thinking. Finally, I gesture, tentatively, towards the view that Coetzee is in conversation with himself, wearing two faces,[2] using Costello variously as an alter ego or a mouthpiece but also exposing her as a fuzzy, somewhat wayward, thinker.

Thinking about Evil

The central ethical problem facing Elizabeth Costello at the conference on the topic of evil[3] in Amsterdam before, during and after her lecture entitled "Witness, Silence and Censorship" is this: at what point does the novelist/storyteller cross the boundary separating good from evil in his/her obligation to bear witness to history? At what point does bearing witness and telling become *obscene?* Coetzee unpacks this "problem"/moral

1. Arendt wrote extensively on the role of thinking (*The Life of the Mind*), the engaged intellectual and on the dark times of the Holocaust (*Men in Dark Times*). Coetzee has his central character and "mouthpiece" deeply concerned with thinking and in at least two lessons, thinking about the Holocaust. Coetzee, however, also demonstrates his awareness of psychoanalytic theory in exposing Elizabeth to the irruption of the uncanny (the irrational) in the space of thinking.

2. This is a view expressed by Andrew Riemer in his review of *Elizabeth Costello* for the *Sydney Morning Herald* (<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/09/-12/1063341766203.html?from=storyrhs>).

3. Coetzee delivered this story/lecture, entitled "The Quest of Life. Part II. Evil", at the Nexus Conference in The Netherlands, June 2002.

dilemma through his persona/narrator, the elderly, tired Elizabeth. Looking away from the fictional space for a moment, to the original lecture which Coetzee presented in the form of a narrative, it seems possible that he is talking obliquely, through the voice of his fictional persona, about censorship or, using the play on his protagonist's name, asking, "At what *cost* do we *tell*?"

Written in the characteristic present tense and narrated through the third person, this "Lesson" shows Elizabeth deeply unsettled by a book she has been reading (*The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* by Paul West) before receiving an invitation to speak at the conference. Interestingly, Elizabeth does not at first assume any responsibility for her state of abjection, as the phrase "under the malign spell" suggests in the following extract:

> But at the time the invitation came she was under the malign spell of a novel she was reading. The novel was about depravity of the worst kind, and it had sucked her into a mood of bottomless dejection. Why are you doing this to me? she wanted to cry out as she read, to God knows whom.
>
> (Coetzee 2003a: 157)

As the narrative unfolds, however, it reveals the real "cost" of such reading and reiterating to the psyche of the teller. It also shows Elizabeth's attempt to *think,* in the Arendtian sense, through her emotional distress towards some kind of understanding of, some sense of personal responsibility for, her condition of abjection, as well as, more outwardly, "men in dark times". Hannah Arendt was herself centrally concerned with telling and its alternative, silence, in relation, primarily, to the Nazi atrocities during the Holocaust. She says:

> Only the fearful imagination of those who have been *aroused* by [firsthand] reports but have not actually been smitten in their own flesh, of those who are consequently free from the bestial, desperate terror which … inexorably paralyzes everything that is not mere reaction, can afford to keep thinking about horrors.
>
> (Arendt 1977: Epilogue to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*; my italics)

Costello and Paul West, with whom she takes issue over his representation of evil, have been "aroused" (in Elizabeth's case, as we shall see, the word is entirely apposite in its sexual connotations) by the reports of evil, yet have not been victims. It behoves them, in Arendt's terms, "to keep thinking about horrors". But what about "telling"? When is silence a viable and ethical response to evil? In a conversation with Gunter Gaus, broadcast on German television in 1964, Arendt responds to the following question:

> Gaus: "Miss Arendt, do you feel that it is your duty to publish what you learn through political-philosophical speculation or sociological analysis? Or are there reasons to be silent about something you know?"
>
> Arendt: "Yes, that is a very difficult problem. It is at bottom the sole question that interested me in the whole controversy over the Eichmann book. But it is a question that never arose unless I broached it. It is the only serious question – everything else is pure propaganda soup. So, *fiat veritas, et pereat mundus* [let truth be told though the world may perish]?
>
> (Arendt in Baehr 2000: 17)

While Elizabeth takes issue with Paul West over his representation of evil, she does a much better job of telling the story of the execution of Hitler's assassins in the underground cellar, thus doubly indicting herself as an accomplice in evil while using her lecture as a platform from which to *tell* West that he should have censored himself:

> [W]hat I contend, is that we must be wary of horrors such as you describe in your book. We as writers. Not merely for the sake of our readers but out of concern for ourselves. We can put ourselves in peril by what we write, or so I believe. For if what we write has the power to make us better people then surely it has the power to make us worse. I don't know whether you agree.
>
> (Coetzee 2003a: 171)

While this irony is obvious to the careful reader, the author does not allow his protagonist the relief of irony. Elizabeth's reading of West's description of the execution of Hitler's would-be assassins, then retelling it, results in a breakdown (something which was near the surface in *The Lives of Animals)* which is related to an episode of sexual violence experienced when she was a young woman and about which she has kept silent (an ironic echo of the word "silence" in the title of her lecture, perhaps).[4] Coetzee, through

4. Among the many forms of silence in the text, there is a particularly compelling one, that of Paul West himself. The narrative positions him as choosing to remain silent, choosing not to defend himself against the imprecations of this angry woman, electing instead to "gaz[e]into the distance" instead of speaking back to Costello. Given the fact that Paul West is a real person who did indeed write the book in question, Coetzee finds himself in an awkward position at this point in the story where fiction collides with fact. But he has elsewhere defended, somewhat obliquely, West's right to describe atrocity in his declaration that "writing does not flourish under censorship", even self-censorship, one is tempted to add. And, remembering Coetzee's Platonic alternative for censorship ("then surely the appropriate countermeasures are other representations, counter-representations" (1996: 11), perhaps Paul West has every right to write what he likes in the shadowy world of fiction and

Costello, hints at the sexuality of brutal punishment in Paul West's text as well as the episode from Costello's past.[5] Although never explicit, it is possible that it is this, the sexual heart of punishment, violence and execution that causes her such distress (the memory of the brutal attack in her youth is a pointer to the connection) and is suggested by the following extract which is Costello's description of the description (a double description) of the torture of Hitler's assassins:

> … fumbling old men for the most part, stripped of their uniforms, togged out for the final event in prison cast-offs … hands in their pockets to hold up their pants, whimpering with fear, swallowing their tears, having to listen to this coarse creature, this butcher with last week's blood caked under his fingernails, taunt them, telling them what would happen when the rope snapped tight, how the shit would run down their spindly old-man's legs, how their limp old-man's penises would quiver one last time?
>
> (Coetzee 2003a: 158)[6]

Costello is clearly in a state of "shock", brought on by reading West's description of torture and horror, causing her to magnify this experience into a universal picture of evil ("Evil, all of it, an evil universe invented by an evil god" (p. 159)). The extremity of her distress does not make sense to the reader until she divulges her memory of violence, for just as she "allowed" herself to become a participant in the obscenity of Paul West's mind by reading his book, then retelling it, she "allowed" herself at nineteen "to be picked up on Spencer Street Bridge near the Melbourne waterfront, then a rough area" (p. 165). When she changed her mind about sleeping with a much older man, he tried to force her. When his desire had abated, he resorted to violence, leaving her with a broken jaw. Costello realised that she had been in the presence of evil:

Elizabeth, instead of berating him, should write back, as Anne Michaels has done so eloquently in *Fugitive Pieces.* Nevertheless, this is a curious and unsettling moment in the text and one that is not entirely resolved by reference to Coetzee's other writing.

5. While I do not wish to engage in a fully psychoanalytic debate in this paper, the unconscious sexuality of punishment is well documented, particularly by Freud in the well-known "A Child is Being Beaten" and the consequent masturbation fantasies emanating from this (cf. Juliet Mitchell's *Siblings* (2003) for a more detailed discussion).

6. All page references are to the Secker and Warburg edition of *Elizabeth Costello*, 2003.

> It was her first brush with evil. She had realised it was nothing less than that, evil, when the man's affront subsided and a steady glee in hurting her took its place. He liked hurting her, she could see that; probably liked it more than he would have liked sex.
>
> (Coetzee 2003a: 165)

Costello analyses why this memory should surface now and concludes that it forms a perfect parallel to West's description. Both are evil acts, yet Costello kept silent about her experience, censored the act and the telling, while West chose to tell. Hers rested like an "egg of stone", destined never to give birth, a silence she would carry to the grave. Not, however, with Coetzee as controlling author[7] – Costello's memory is displayed, an intertextual echo, perhaps, of the scene in *Youth* where John has sex with Marianne who bleeds copiously afterwards, and who John tries to wipe from his mind, receiving a letter of rebuke from his cousin in reply (Coetzee 2002: 128-131).

Thinking about Thinking

Elizabeth sees herself as being in the grip of "an obsession that is hers alone and that she clearly does not understand" (p. 177). Stopping abruptly near

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7. The relationship between Coetzee and Costello is an unusually complex one which cannot be understood in the New Critical sense, that is, that since the one is the author, the other a character in a fiction, they should be strictly demarcated. As several commentators have pointed out, since Coetzee has chosen to present his public lectures within the frame of narrative, speaking through a fictional persona, and since the "lessons" in *Elizabeth Costello* are often direct incorporations of these lectures-in-the-form-of-stories, the obvious connection between the two voices must be acknowledged in *Elizabeth Costello*. As David Attwell says:

   > Costello enables Coetzee to fictionalize the writer-as-public-intellectual. It is difficult not to see her as a compromise and a surrogate: a compromise because through her Coetzee goes some way (with the emphasis on some) to meeting the demands placed on him to step into the public limelight; a surrogate, because she does, to some degree, speak for him. To some degree, because she clearly does not carry her author's whole-hearted endorsement: part of the point of situating her within the logic of narrative is that this enables a play of positions; whilst she usually has our sympathy, she can be extreme while others mediate and qualify her – a role played frequently by the son, John Bernard.
   >
   > (Attwell 2004: n.p.)

the close of her lecture, she walks off the stage and enters a cubicle in the ladies' washroom, locking herself in. Here, she forces herself to *think*, to go back to the experience. (The phrase is repeated like a refrain from this point on in the story.) She enters into a deeply upsetting interrogation of herself, something Arendt, in discussing the Socratic condition, describes as a kind of paralysis:

> Hence, the paralysis induced by thinking is twofold: it is inherent in the *stop* and think, the interruption of all other activities … and it may also have a dazing after-effect, when you come out of it, feeling unsure of what seemed to you beyond doubt while you were unthinkingly engaged in whatever you were doing. If what you were doing consisted in applying general rules of conduct to particular cases as they arise in ordinary life, you will find yourself paralysed because no such rules can withstand the wind of thought.
>
> (Arendt quoted by Baehr 2000: 404)

This passage accurately comments on Elizabeth's rite of passage in Coetzee's text. She has felt sure of her ground prior to arriving in the Netherlands as she was "applying general rules of conduct" to the case in point. However, possibly as a result of becoming radically unsettled by Paul West's silence and his refusal to respond to her words, Elizabeth enters a state of paralysis and interruption, in which she experiences Arendt's "dazing after-effect" of the lack of certainty in her thinking. Her unsettling introspection continues in Coetzee's text for the next six pages. It begins with a contemplation on the banality of evil. This phrase is the subtitle of Arendt's report on the Eichmann trial, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, which caused a public outcry and offended a large section of the Jewish populace, just as Costello offends many Jews by equating the death of the Jews in the Holocaust with the death of cattle in abattoirs (in "The Lives of Animals"). In her early writings, Arendt sees evil as radical. After the Eichmann trial, she changes her mind, calling evil "banal", laughing at the "undeniable ludicrousness" of the "butcher" Eichmann:

> Despite all the efforts of the prosecution, everybody could see that this man was not a monster, but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown.
>
> (Arendt quoted by Baehr 2000: 328)

Eichmann, according to Arendt, was no Iago – he "*never realised what he was doing"* (Arendt quoted by Baehr 2000: 379). Arendt is careful to point out that it is a particular lack of engagement in thinking that produced Eichmann's banality:

> He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. And if this is "banal" and even funny, if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, that is still far from calling it commonplace .... That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man – that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem.
>
> (Arendt quoted by Baehr 2000: 379)

Arendt refers to the "strange interdependence of thoughtlessness and evil" (Arendt quoted by Baehr 2000: 380) and elsewhere provides an alternative explanation for thinking, which is a deep engagement with the self, a dialogue with the self. It is just such a dialogue with self that occupies Elizabeth at this point in the "lesson" when she finds herself "slipping into abstraction" (2000: 177). Methodically, she unpicks her present state of mind, grasping a word, then going to the experience which lies behind it. She begins with the word "obscene", calling it "talismanic", a curious word meaning magical, "a thing capable of working wonders", a charm or amulet (*The Concise Oxford* definition). Perhaps it is "talismanic" because it endows Elizabeth with a concentrated energy which she uses to orientate herself in her state of radical disjuncture. In Elizabeth's mind, the word is linked to evil, not merely to the concept, but to a material form, felt tangibly as she read Paul West's book and further back, when she felt the "brush of Satan's hot leathery wing" in Melbourne (p. 179).

The talismanic properties of the word "obscene" recall Elizabeth's previous thinking about Paul West's willingness to describe the hanging of the old men when she was searching for "similitudes" for the business of storytelling and came up with the image of the "genie". As she thought then, it might be better to keep the genie in the bottle just as she had done with her story of sexual brutality in Melbourne. The genie, by a verbal slippage peculiar to similes but not to reasoning, becomes a devil, and it is Elizabeth's description of the devil "everywhere under the skin of things, searching for a way into the light" (p. 167), an insidious contagion that strongly recalls Arendt's discussion of her shift in perspective in translating evil from radical to banal. Here is Arendt in a letter to Gershom Scholem written in 1963:

> It is indeed my opinion that evil is never "radical", that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is "thought-defying" as I said, because thought tries to reach

> some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its "banality". Only the good has depth and can be radical.
>
> (Arendt quoted by Baehr 2000: 396)

Despite the obvious similarities between Arendt's "fungus" and Elizabeth's "everywhere under the skin of things", there are also tangible differences between Elizabeth's devil and Arendt's invisible fungus. The former has a truly demonic cast ("she felt the brush of his leathery wing, as sure as soap, when she read those dark pages" (p. 168)) and is tied by association ("sure as soap") with the Holocaust, an association that is reinforced, after she has abruptly stopped her lecture and locked herself into the cubicle, by an image of herself crouching naked

> with her sagging breasts and knobbly hips looking little different from the women in those intimate, overintimate photographs from the European war, those glimpses into hell, who knelt naked at the lip of the trench into which they would, in the next minute, the next second, tumble, dead or dying with a bullet to the brain, except that those women were in most cases not as old as she, merely haggard from malnutrition and fright.
>
> (Coetzee 2003a: 178)

Elizabeth identifies herself as a sister to these women and to those men who died in similar fashion or who were hanged as Hitler's would-be assassins. Costello enlarges the scope of Arendt's idea of the banality of evil, its creeping funguslike form, by describing evil in a new century as being an incongruous concept, not at home and so making "new accommodations", taking up residence in unsuspecting hosts like "the liver fluke, like the pinworm" (p. 180) living inside the human body, even the good human, so that we play host to it, unaware that we have been host.

By forcing herself to confront her own demons, by pinning the idea behind the thought, Elizabeth reaches the conclusion that she does not know what she thinks:

> She should never have accepted the invitation. Conferences are for exchanging thoughts, at least that is the idea behind conferences. You cannot exchange thoughts when you do not know what you think.
>
> (Coetzee 2003a: 181)

Far from being vatic, senile or mad (descriptions Elizabeth has fearfully applied to herself), Elizabeth's state of unknowing approaches the description of thinking conveyed by Socrates and quoted approvingly by Arendt in "The Life of the Mind": "It isn't that, knowing the answers myself, I perplex other people. The truth is rather that I infect them also

with the perplexity I feel myself" (Socrates quoted by Arendt in Baehr 2000: 402).

And Arendt concludes this essay with the proposition that "thinking deals with invisibles", not with certainties or particulars, which lie in the realms of judgement. This has a particular resonance with the movement of Elizabeth's consciousness as she tries, unsuccessfully at times, to refrain from judgement, to focus on the particular, to grapple with abstraction:

> Thinking deals with invisibles, with representations of things that are absent; judging always concerns particulars and things close at hand. But the two are interrelated, as are consciousness and conscience. If thinking – the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue – actualizes the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its by-product, then judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always too busy to be able to think. The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this, at the rare moments when the stakes are on the table, may indeed prevent catastrophes, at least for the self.
>
> (Arendt quoted by Baehr 2000: 414)

It is hard to imagine Coetzee not familiar with this passage, making use of it in his evocation of Elizabeth's intellectual and emotional dilemma, her vacillation between thinking and judging, her shifting between conscience and consciousness. The "stakes are on the table" for Elizabeth, but it is not at all clear that her ability "to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly" will prevent a personal catastrophe in her case.

Coetzee on Coetzee

I turn now to Coetzee's ideas on what constitutes intellectual thinking, ideas which contrast strongly with Elizabeth's initial response in "The Problem of Evil" but which also echo his protagonist's state of mind. Indeed, the effect of Coetzee's thinking on thinking in *Giving Offense* as well as in the interview with David Attwell, is to suggest both a critique of his own protagonist as well as a close affiliation with her. It will also become evident that Coetzee is himself a thinker of the Foucauldian type, that is, one who writes in order to discover what he thinks, rather than the other way round.

Coetzee says:

> Rational, secular intellectuals [among whom he counts himself] are not notably quick to take offense. Like Karl Popper, they tend to believe that:

> I must teach myself to distrust that dangerous intuitive feeling or conviction that it is I who am right. I must distrust this feeling however strong it may be.
>
> Indeed, the stronger it is, the greater is the danger that I may deceive myself; and, with it, the danger that I may become an intolerant fanatic.
>
> (Coetzee quoted by Mendus 1987: 310)

And in the introduction to *Giving Offense*, Coetzee describes his tendency to trust the intellect and distrust the emotions, because "[a]s the unframed framer, reason is a form of power with no built-in sense of what the experience of powerlessness might be like" (Coetzee 1996: 4).

Well and good, but Elizabeth knows very well what an experience of powerlessness would feel like since she has been at the hands of someone stronger and more powerful than herself. In the light of this, then, Elizabeth's reaction must be "framed" by Coetzee's words, the one operating as a commentary on the other:

> I myself am (and am also, I would hope, to a degree not) an intellectual of this kind [*that is, tolerant*], and my responses to moral outrage or outrage of offended dignity are framed from within (though again, I would hope, not wholly from within) the procedures of thinking and the system of values I have outlined. That is to say, my responses are those of someone whose first reaction to the stirrings of being offended within himself is to subject these incipient feelings to the scrutiny of sceptical rationality ....
>
> (Coetzee 1996: 5)

Subjecting this passage to some close analysis, one is struck by the painful parentheses, the self-conscious to-ing and fro-ing, the effect of which is to gainsay a forceful statement ("I myself am ...") immediately with an apologetic counterstatement ("and am also, I would hope, to a degree not"). This absolves the writer from the outset from a position of certainty regarding his own stance and conveys a tension that is clearly disturbing, one which undermines his own assertions of certainty, yet insists on his right to occupy an ambivalent position, at his right to evasiveness, enacting as it were, the intellectual playing at being the intellectual.

Elizabeth takes offence rather easily in the text on several occasions, or rather is overwhelmed by her experience of reading Paul West, "sick with the spectacle, sick with herself, sick with a world in which such things took place" (p. 158) and fails to follow the advice of Coetzee, her creator, who says:

> If representations, mere shadows, are indeed so dangerous, one reflects, then surely the appropriate countermeasures are other representations, counter representations. If mockery corrodes respect for the State, if blasphemy insults God, if pornography demeans the passions, surely it will suffice if stronger and more convincing countervoices are raised defending the authority of the state, praising God, exalting chaste love.
>
> (Coetzee 1996: 11)

Should we pay attention to those "surely's"? Should we believe that this is Coetzee's considered standpoint? Maybe not, if we listen to another intertext, this time Coetzee in conversation with David Attwell:

> I feel a greater freedom to follow where my thinking takes me when I am writing fiction than when I am writing criticism .... Stories are defined by their irresponsibility: they are, in the judgment of Swift's Houynhnhms "that which is not". The feel of writing fiction is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road. When I am writing criticism, on the other hand, I am always aware of a responsibility toward a goal that has been set for me not by the argument, not only by the whole philosophical tradition into which I am implicitly inserting myself, but also by the rather tight discourse of criticism itself.
>
> (Coetzee 1992: 246)

As suggested earlier, Coetzee sounds very like Foucault here, who explains the reason for his writing thus:

> If I had to write a book to communicate what I have already thought, I'd never have courage to begin it. I write precisely because I don't know yet what to think about a subject that attracts my interest .... As a consequence, each new work profoundly changes the terms of thinking which I had reached with the previous work. In this sense I consider myself more an "experimenter" than a theorist; I don't develop deductive systems to apply uniformly in different fields of research. When I write, I do it above all to change myself and not to think the same thing as before.
>
> (Foucault 1991: 27)

Ann Stoler, who provides this quotation from Foucault, comments:

> It would be to misrecognize how much his recursive style, his serial framings of what something was through concentric negations about what it was not, were part of a "thinking out loud" that not only transformed his books but has allowed his readers a unique sort of engagement with them.
>
> (Stoler 1995: ix)

There are compelling reasons to suppose that Coetzee, like Foucault, is using the space of writing to "think out loud", gesturing towards something uncertain at the time of writing.[8] If so, we should again reconsider the idea that close reading reveals a marked difference between author and protagonist. And Coetzee's comment in *Doubling the Point* is helpful. Coetzee is speaking about the restrictions imposed on critical discourse and seems to be looking to another direction for his writing, perhaps to inaugurate a creative turn:

> If I were a truly creative critic, I would work toward liberating that discourse – making it less monological, for instance. But the candid truth is I don't have enough of an investment in criticism to try. Where I do put my liberating, my playing with possibilities, is in my fiction.
>
> (Coetzee 1992: 245)

There is a sense of *ennui* here, a recognition of the worn-outness of critical thinking, a refusal to revisit areas of thought that have already been explored, rather like that shadowy figure in "Little Gidding" in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* who says:

> I am not eager to rehearse
> My thoughts and theory which you have forgotten.
> These things have served their purpose: let them be.
>
> (Eliot 1963: 217-218)

And a little later in the interview we read the following:

> (Let me add, entirely parenthetically, that I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering. These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defenses against that, being overwhelmed, and to me, transparently so.)
>
> (Coetzee 1992: 248)

The triple emphasis on the self ("that I, as a person, as a personality") provides a forceful declaration of a man whose intellectual detachment is belied by his vulnerability, and supports the view that Coetzee, the author, is

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8. See also Margaret Lenta's argument that Costello's voice, particularly in "The Problem of Evil", has a resemblance to that of her creator "as his own antagonist" (Lenta 2004: 106) and see also her conclusion where she arrives at a viewpoint similar to that suggested in this paper, that *Elizabeth Costello* represents "Coetzee's own learning process, never finalized and never uncontested, even within himself" (p. 118).

closely identified with Costello, the fictional creation, in Lesson 6. It is therefore possible that the essays that make up *Elizabeth Costello* are a nod in the direction of a new fictional form, a metissage of fiction and criticism, short story and lecture, an attempt to avoid the straitjacket of the single genre. Further, in the light of this "creative turning away from literary criticism", there are grounds for presuming that Elizabeth may well be a shadow self for Coetzee, allowing him to feel instead of think, to enter a feminine self, one that feels outrage, that can give voice to the experience of psychic breakdown, escaping through the fictive voice from the constrictions of the intellectual game, the to-ing and fro-ing of the parenthesis.

Redemption and Restoration?

In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1987) Patricia Scarry argues that "intense pain is world-destroying, while language applies itself in an act of restoration and construction" (Scarry 1987: 27) allowing language a restorative healing role. And in a later book, *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999), Scarry proposes that beauty is the necessary counterweight to pain. In an echo of Arendt, Scarry says that when we observe beauty as in a sunset or butterfly wings, we are stopped in our tracks, incapable of thought, "stunned out of ourselves". Our next impulse, says Scarry, is to share the experience of beauty with others, suggesting a world of abundance in contrast to the emptiness, the vacancy of pain. Costello would seem to agree with Scarry when she describes the hangman's verbal torture of the old men as the most evil part of the execution, echoing the opening words of *The Body in Pain*: "Nowhere is the sadistic potential of a language built on agency so visible as in torture" (Scarry 1987: 1), but there is little counterweight in the form of an alleviating vision of beauty in this "lesson". Instead, a relentless, we might say, focus on "the real", representing what Costello calls "the darker territories of the soul", suggests that Elizabeth may be seen as a figure of abjection in the Kristevan[9] sense. Inside the abject space of a lavatory

9. See for instance *Powers of Horror* in which Julia Kristeva describes abjection as, one of those dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (1982: 1). A sense of loathing is directed towards an abject, different from an object, which is "not me. Not that. But not nothing, either" (p. 2).

   And see also Kristeva's comment: The significant feature of abjection is that it "draws me to the place where meaning collapses" (1982: 1).

cubicle (an echo of her Melbourne experience, when she escapes to the bathroom) she desperately (the word is used advisedly) tries to understand what was "too much" in Paul West's book, a reason for her own excess, for her own surplus response. For Costello, meaning threatens to collapse, leaving her in a presignificatory condition, a condition of abjection. Significantly, it is a child who breaks the mood by knocking on the door. Rescued from the moment of complete identification with the old men (her brothers) who had planned Hitler's execution, Elizabeth turns her thoughts to the state of the cellar after the hangings, wondering who cleaned up afterwards. In Coetzee's last intertext of this section, Elizabeth imagines an "indefatigable German cleaning woman ... cleaning up the mess, washing the walls, scrubbing the floor, making everything spick and span ..."(p. 181) an echo of the middle section of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* where the cleaning lady comes to the house after Mrs Ramsay's death and restores the place to order. But this potentially epiphanic moment is brief for Costello and the possibilities of the modernist novel are not for her. She ponders her alternatives now that she has been banished from her hiding place: she can go back to her hotel and hide in her room or she can return to the conference and listen to what other people have to say about the problem of evil. She wishes there were a third choice, the choice offered only in realist fiction in which form will give "shape and meaning" to her experience. She might, for instance, bump into Paul West in the corridor:

> Something should pass between them, sudden as lightning that will illuminate the landscape for her, even if afterwards it returns to its native darkness. But the corridor, it seems, is empty.
>
> (Coetzee 2003a: 182)

Glimpses of beauty, brief and tantalising possibilities for an aesthetic shaping of her experience, are hereby denied by both writers, fictional and real, in a world in which realist fiction is no longer valid.[10]

In the most intriguing intertext of all, Coetzee points the reader to Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "Letter of Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon" in which Chandos is explaining his present distress at the impossibility of writing. The quotation facing the Postscript from this Letter is a misleading reference when quoted out of context since it suggests that Hoffmansthal is writing of the plenitude of beauty and love. Read in its entirety, Hoffmanthal's letter is clearly allegorical, using the linguistic paralysis of Lord Chandos to suggest the end of a literary era as well as a personal

10. In *Elizabeth Costello*, Lessons 1 and 8 display Coetzee's postmodernist interrogation of the realist text. Towards the end of the last lesson, Elizabeth, under pressure to state what she believes in, curses literature.

glimpse of the void. It also suggests very obliquely, a parallel for Elizabeth's morbid condition, her descent into "the real":

> For me everything disintegrated into parts, those parts again into parts; no longer would anything let itself be encompassed by one idea. Single words floated round me; they congealed into eyes which stared at me and into which I was forced to stare back – whirlpools which gave me vertigo and, reeling incessantly, led into the void.
>
> (<http://faculty.washington.edu/vienna/documents/Hofmannsthal/Hoffmansthal_Chandos.h...>)

The Postscript and its antecedent (the Letter) are rich in allusion, but discussion must be limited here to the reiteration that Coetzee is claiming a "third space" for his text which is neither realist nor modernist, neither fiction nor polemic.

Hannah Arendt was a woman living in dark times who thought through the darkness to arrive at profound ideas on the nature of evil and the mechanisms of totalitarianism. She believed that "all sorrows can be borne" if like the Chorus in a Greek tragedy, the witness to atrocity distances himself from them, fits them into a story and tells and retells that story. In this way, meaning can be kept alive by capturing the contingency of human events. Under the tutorship of Karl Jaspers, Arendt came to believe in the beauty of the world, about our natural fitness to perceive the beauty of the world's appearances. For Arendt, the modern world requires a different form of thinking, one that can be transformed into storytelling, but in which there can be no narrative completion or closure (Buckler 2001: 616). Thinking in dark times requires a moment of hiatus in which to "stop and think", for "the capacity for thinking represents the possibility of resistance to overwhelming processes" (Arendt in Buckler 2001: 623). Further, thinking in dark times requires solitude in which one can enter into a dialogue with oneself, in which one can be conscious of oneself thinking. Without entering into too simplistic a comparison, it is nevertheless tempting to see Elizabeth Costello as an Arendtian figure, thinking in solitude, interrupting the processlike world.

By speaking her mind in "The Lives of Animals" and in "The Problem of Evil", Elizabeth risks censure, judgement and misinterpretation. Her "stories" and those of her creator Coetzee, are ambiguous, tentative, unresolved attempts to interpret a dark world.

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