

The novelist and the animals

J.M. Coetzee's unsettling literature of animal rights

By Jennifer Schuessler, 10/12/2003

WHEN THE NOVELIST J.M. Coetzee travels to Stockholm in December to accept this year's Nobel Prize for Literature, it should perhaps come as no surprise if the publicity-shy South African sends a drab, middle-aged Australian woman in a faded blue dress onstage to deliver the Nobel address for him. Coetzee's new novel, "Elizabeth Costello," published this week, follows a celebrated but self-doubting novelist as she travels from Amsterdam to South Africa to Massachusetts to the very gates of Heaven for a series of addresses on topics ranging from literary realism to the problem of evil to the fate of the humanities.

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Coetzee has long been hailed as a powerful and controversial, if often oblique, commentator on the ravages of apartheid. But "Elizabeth Costello," which was long-listed for this year's Booker Prize, reveals little of Coetzee's views on South Africa's continued reckoning with its past. It does, however, raise another unsettled and unsettling question that is likely to make some readers deeply uncomfortable, even angry: By raising billions of animals a year in often squalid conditions before brutally slaughtering them for their meat and skin, are we all complicit in a "crime of stupefying proportions"?

Those words are Elizabeth Costello's, whose two lectures on animal rights -- "The Philosophers and the Animals" and "The Poets and the Animals" -- make up the longest section of the book. But the preoccupation is very much Coetzee's own, and one that has moved increasingly close to the moral center of his work. In 1997-98, Coetzee delivered these chapters as the prestigious Tanner Lectures in Human Values at Princeton. (They were published separately in 1999 as "The Lives of Animals.") The curious lecture within a short story within a lecture format insulated Coetzee from the kind of angry response Costello receives from her audience. But it does not blunt his puzzling lesson's power.

The killing floors may be hidden from view, Costello tells her audience. But even in this pleasant college town (identified as "suburban Waltham"), "we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of." The comment raises the expected hackles: The comparison "insults the memories of the dead" and "trades on the horrors of the camp in a cheap way," protests an elderly Jewish poet.

But Costello doesn't stop there. Reason, which allegedly elevates us above the beasts and reflects our creation in God's image, is just a smokescreen to justify our will to domination, she says. When one listener argues that animals do not

understand the concept of death and therefore do not value life, she shoots back that this kind of thinking is little different than efforts to define "humanity" based on the color of a person's skin.

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These are fighting words, especially coming, however indirectly, from a South African. Indeed, some have taken Elizabeth Costello's views to be a direct reflection of Coetzee's own. Michael Pollan, writing last year in *The New York Times Magazine*, stated that Coetzee thinks history will "someday judge us as harshly as it judges the Germans who went about their ordinary lives in the shadow of Treblinka."

Certainly, Coetzee means the comparison to be taken seriously. But pinning such decisive views on such a subtle, ironizing writer is a risky business. While Coetzee (who gives virtually no interviews) is a vegetarian, an earlier essay suggests an ambiguous view of the animal rights question that is more in keeping with the taut balancing of arguments and utter lack of consolation that characterizes his novels.

"Meat Country," which appeared in the Winter 1995 issue of the British literary quarterly *Granta*, begins as an account of his own attempts, during an academic stint in Texas, to stick to an eccentric-seeming regimen that includes "a dislike for cars, a deep affection for the bicycle, and a diet without flesh." But unlike Elizabeth Costello's confrontational explanation for why she will be forgoing the red snapper at dinner, Coetzee does not explain why he declines (apparently politely) to partake of the all-chicken-and-rib feasts of his hosts. In fact, the essay almost reads like an apology for meat-eating.

"The question of whether we should eat meat is not a serious question," he writes. "Should" has nothing to do with it; the taste for flesh is bred into our bones through evolution. "We are born like that: it is a given, it is the human condition. We would not be here, we would not be asking the question, if our forebears had eaten grass: we would be antelopes or horses." History, including the settlement of the New World, he writes (following the anthropologist Marvin Harris), is in large part the story of the drive for steady supplies of high-quality protein.

There is little philosophy here. Indeed, there is even a sense that Coetzee thinks reason, in the end, cannot guide us through this territory. He brushes aside the arguments of "rationalist vegetarians" who point to the wastefulness of using valuable grain to fatten livestock, as well as the squeamishness of those who denounce the decadence of gourmards who eat only the flamingo's tongue (as they did in ancient Rome) or the bear's paw (as they still do in China). Appeals to efficiency, in the end, just give us a false comfort. "What a relief," he writes with a

flash of sarcasm, "we have a pet-food industry to grind up all the leftover flesh and put it in cans, so that no death occurs in vain!"

But still, there is a problem that will not go away. We suspect that in tasting the flesh of a living thing, we may also be tasting sin. Hence all the religious taboos on eating various kinds of meat, founded on "a fear that forbidden flesh -- flesh that has not been properly killed and ritually pronounced dead -- will continue to live some kind of malign life in one's belly."

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In his 1999 novel, "Disgrace," Coetzee's ambiguous morality of the table begins to overlap with his larger themes. David Lurie, a white, middle-aged professor of literature who has lost his job in a campus sex scandal, goes to live with his daughter Lucy on her small farm on the Eastern Cape, where she scratches out a living selling produce at the local market and running a small dog kennel. All is well, if a bit awkward, until a trio of local thugs -- black Africans -- ransack the farm and rape Lucy.

When she discovers she is pregnant, Lucy decides to bear the child and align herself with the family of her rapist. ". . . Perhaps that is a good point to start from," she tells her father. "Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. . . . To start again at ground level. . . . With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity. . . . Like a dog."

Professor Lurie is a man of ideas, but to him -- and to Coetzee -- a dog is not just an idea, a metaphor. At Lucy's suggestion, he reluctantly begins volunteering at a local animal shelter, "playing right-hand man to a woman who specializes in sterilization and euthanasia." (*Lsung*, he calls it -- German for "solution.") After the attack, the work at the shelter becomes his own penance, his own ritual, if not his salvation. His job is to bag the corpses and take them to the dump. But when he observes workmen beating the rigid dogs so they can fit in the incinerator, he decides to operate the machine himself. Not, at first, for the sake of the dogs, but for himself: "For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing." Later he calls it by another name: love.

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At the end of her own life, Elizabeth Costello finds herself in a strange unnamed city. She spends her days in barracks reminiscent of a concentration camp, waiting to be called before a tribunal which makes a shadowy demand that she make a statement of "belief." Belief in what? she asks. God? The court functionary just shrugs. "We all believe. We are not cattle." She resists: "It is not my profession to believe, just to write. . . . I change belief as I change my

habitation or my clothes, according to my needs."

She recalls a scene from the "Odyssey" in which Odysseus sacrifices a ram so the seer Tiresias can read its entrails. "The ram is not just an idea, the ram is alive though right now it is dying." Should she just empty herself like a bag of blood as well? "For that, finally, is all it means to be alive: to be able to die."

There are no limits to the human imagination, Costello says in one of her earlier academic lectures, no reason we can't understand animals' pain, no reason we can't produce literature that tries to inhabit the bodies that form the whole of their being: "poetry that does not try to find an idea in the animal . . . but is instead the record of an engagement with him." In his own imaginative engagement with animals, Coetzee has perhaps settled on our ultimate disgrace: that we reason, talk, chase after glimmerings of immortality through sex, or art -- and yet still have to die.

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Animals, Humans, Cruelty and Literature:

**A Rare Interview with J. M.
Coetzee**



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J.M. Coetzee

Only two Swedish papers were allowed to interview the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, J. M. Coetzee. *Djurens Rätt* (Animal Rights) was one of them. The following is a reprint and English translation of the original interview conducted by Henrik Engström.

When the Secretary of the Swedish Academy, Horace Engdahl, announced the recipient of the 2003 Nobel Prize for Literature, he said that the prize had been awarded a writer who might not be undilutedly happy about it. He was probably alluding to the well known unwillingness of Coetzee to be in the public light.

This is confirmed by Dorotea Bromberg at Bromberg's Publishing. She herself had never met Coetzee, who has granted very few interviews since he debuted in 1974. In later years he has requested to be spared all contacts with the press and his publishers.

“It's not that he is a misanthropist or anything like that,” says Dorotea Bromberg. “But he is shy—and very protective of his writer's peace.”

So it came as no surprise that Coetzee was extremely restrictive with interviews on his visit in Stockholm to receive the finest prize in literature. The list of

hopefuls was long, but he chose only two: Dagens Nyheter [The Daily News, the largest daily newspaper in Sweden] and Djurens Rätt (Animal Rights). And there were no interviews face to face; Dagens Nyheter was allowed to publish correspondence between Coetzee and a former university colleague of his, while he was in direct contact with Djurens Rätt by email. Thus, last year's Nobel Prize recipient speaks exclusively to *Djurens Rätt* (Animal Rights).

What are the problems involved in fiction examining the relationship between humans and animals?

The mode of consciousness of nonhuman species is quite different from human consciousness. There is a strong argument to be made that it is impossible for a human being to inhabit the consciousness of an animal, whereas through the faculty of sympathy (fellow-feeling) it is possible for one human being to know quite vividly what it is like to be someone else. Writers are reputed to possess this faculty particularly strongly. If it is indeed impossible—or at least very difficult—to inhabit the consciousness of an animal, then in writing about animals there is a temptation to project upon them feelings and thoughts that may belong only to our own human mind and heart. There is also a temptation to seek in animals what is easiest for human beings to sympathize or empathize with, and consequently to favor those animal species which for one reason or another seem to us to be “almost human” in their mental and emotional processes. So dogs (for example) are treated as “almost human” whereas reptiles are treated as entirely alien.

How have the critics responded to this theme in your books? What do you [personally] think of this response?

The test case is my novel *Disgrace*, in which animals figure quite prominently. Most reviewers have more or less ignored their presence (they mention that the hero of the novel “gets involved with animal rights campaigners” and leave it at that). In this respect they—naturally—mirror the way in which animals are treated in the world we live in, namely as unimportant existences of which we need take notice only when their lives cross ours.

Why have you chosen to highlight the relation between humans and animals in your works?

I have not exactly “highlighted” the relation between humans and animals. Aside from the two chapters in *Elizabeth Costello* which are directly concerned with animals, animals are present in my fiction either not at all or in a merely subsidiary role. Partly this is because the fact is that animals do occupy a subsidiary place in our lives, and partly it is because it is not possible to write about the inner lives of animals in any complex way.

What consequences, if any, do you think receiving the Nobel Prize will have for the animal rights issue?

Some reviewers have made the connection between the chapters of Elizabeth Costello that are concerned with animals and the fact that their author has won this year's Nobel Prize, and have asked the question whether the author believes what his character Elizabeth Costello says about the appalling treatment of animals in our modern world. I do not imagine that a single, rather difficult book will change the world in that respect, but perhaps it will make some small impact.

Do you see connections between different types of oppression?

We are not by nature cruel. In order to be cruel we have to close our hearts to the suffering of the other. It is not inherently easier to close off our sympathies as we wring the neck of the chicken we are going to eat than it is to close off our sympathies to the man we send to the electric chair (I write from the United States, which still punishes some crimes with death), but we have evolved psychic, social and philosophical mechanisms to cope with killing poultry that, for complex reasons, we use to allow ourselves to kill human beings only in time of war.

What is your relation to animal rights philosophy? In what way do you think fiction can contribute to the question?

Strictly speaking, my interest is not in legal rights for animals but in a change of heart towards animals. The most important of all rights is the right to life, and I cannot foresee a day when domesticated animals will be granted that right in law. If you concede that the animal rights movement can never succeed in this primary goal, then it seems that the best we can achieve is to show to as many people as we can what the spiritual and psychic cost is of continuing to treat animals as we do, and thus perhaps to change their hearts.

Have you had any special relation to a specific animal? In this case, has this affected the way you write about animals?

I have no pets. I have what I consider to be personal relations to the birds and frogs that visit or live upon the land I "own," but I do not for a minute believe they have personal relations with me.

Are you a vegetarian? If so, why?

Yes, I am a vegetarian. I find the thought of stuffing fragments of corpses down my throat quite repulsive, and I am amazed that so many people do it every day.

To learn more about Djurens Rätt (Animal Rights) and read the magazine (in Swedish), visit www.djurensratt.se. Reprinted with the kind of permission of J. M. Coetzee and Henrik Engström.