

The Challenge of Otherness: J.M. Coetzee, the Sympathetic Imagination, and the Task of Literature

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Abstract—The paper explores the role of literature in generating empathy for those deemed radically other. In *The Lives of Animals* by J.M. Coetzee, the character Elizabeth Costello challenges Thomas Nagel's assertion that human beings will never be able to know what it is like to be another kind of animal because our imagination is limited by our own experience. Costello, an aging fiction writer, counters that there are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination and insists that if we are able to imagine the experience of fictional characters, we can imagine the experience of nonhuman animals. For Costello, literature teaches empathy. Most characters in Coetzee's fiction, however, resist all attempts of identification and what they stage is rather the failure of the project of the sympathetic imagination. Coetzee seems therefore to be suggesting that the task of literature is to inspire attentiveness and respect for the irreducible alterity of other lives.

Keywords—J.M. Coetzee, sympathetic imagination, relation to otherness, task of literature

I. ELIZABETH COSTELLO AND THE TASK OF LITERATURE

J.M. Coetzee's "central and inexhaustible theme" [1] [2] is the human capacity—and, all-too often, the refusal—to identify and empathize with others. This theme is explored and modulated in various ways in Coetzee's oeuvre, but it is explicitly thematized and explored in his famous 1997-1998 Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, which were published in 1999 under the title, *The Lives of Animals* [3]. Here, the main character, an aging fiction writer named Elizabeth Costello, gives two lectures at a fictional North American university about human relationships with nonhuman animals, in which she puts forward the following thesis: whereas philosophers miss a true encounter with nonhuman otherness because they remain confined to the straightjacket of disembodied reason, writers and poets can on occasion manage to inhabit and represent this otherness by conveying the embodied fullness of animal (or human) life. Costello's claim concerns the ethics of human-animal relations as much as the task of literature, the latter of which is perhaps the "central and inexhaustible theme" of Coetzee's fictional and nonfictional work.

Costello mentions and criticizes many philosophers in her

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lectures, but she takes particular issue with Thomas Nagel for his notorious thesis—which he proposed in his 1974 paper "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" [4]—that human beings will never be able to know what it is like to be another kind of animal because of the constraints of our imagination, which is strongly limited by our own experience. Nagel's argument (which admittedly focuses on the nature of consciousness and not on human-animal ethics or literature) follows a "crudely mathematico-physical model" [5]: imagination can only tell me what it would be like *for me* to be a bat, but not what it is like *for a bat* to be a bat. For this task, the resources of our mind are inadequate. Our sense-modalities are vastly different from those of a bat (who spends the day hanging upside down and hunts at night using echolocation instead of sight¹), so it is impossible to capture its experience with any accuracy: "I cannot perform [this identification] either by imagining additions to my present experience, or by imagining segments gradually subtracted from it, or by imagining some combination of additions, subtractions, and modifications" [7].² Nagel's "paralytic perfectionism" [9], which depends entirely on recourse to mathematically precise data, inhibits and ultimately prevents any meaningful investigation of batness (or otherness more generally). For Costello, this approach is "tragically limited" and sends us "down a false trail" [10].

To Nagel's fundamental defeatism Costello opposes the power of imagination: to be a living bat, she argues, is to be full of being, which is also what it is to be a living human: "being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being"; this fullness essentially expresses the embodiedness of living beings, the sensation "of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world" [11]. And it is therefore an experience that the human mind is perfectly able to imagine and understand. To illustrate

¹ The order of Chiroptera is the second largest order of mammals after rodents, including minuscule, nocturnal, insectivores mini-bats as well as giant, diurnal, fruit-eating flying foxes (who do not use echolocation), so that talking about "bats" and their sense-modalities in general makes little sense. However, what Nagel proposed in his essay was a thought experiment, which as such is designed to isolate a specific conceptual issue from the complexity of the real and for which the actual reality (of bat-life, for example) is thus not relevant [6].

² Nagel's unimaginative proposal is restated and confirmed at the conclusion of his essay when he advocates for a future "objective phenomenology not dependent on empathy or the imagination" [8].

her point further, Costello points to the fact that despite being resoundingly alive, she can imagine what it is like to be a corpse. She also notes that, as a fiction writer, she has “thought her way” into the existence of her fictional characters without hindrance³: “If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed,” she says, “then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life.” Therefore, she affirms, “there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination” [13].

In her lecture on the poets and the animals, Costello restates this claim about the power of literature: unlike philosophers, (some) poets (sometimes despite themselves: “writers teach us more than they are aware of” [14]) can teach us “to imagine our way” into another body, to “inhabit” another (animal) body (and, importantly, not only another *mind*). Poetic invention “shows us how to bring the living body into being within ourselves” [15] and thus demonstrates that it is possible, if only fleetingly, to feel and know what it is like to be another being, even one that belongs to another species. Literature seems to present a “passage out of reason” [16], out of the straitjacket of disembodied (and anthropocentric) abstraction and into the sensuous, trans-species embodiment of the material world. Or, better yet, literature offers a passage beyond this very dualism and opposition [17], a passage shot through with tremendous ethical and pedagogical value: as a by-now solid body of works claims (e.g., [18]-[23]), literature enriches and enlarges the power of imagination and consequently our moral capacity.

Literature, Costello declares, teaches empathy and enriches our moral world, and thereby brings us outside ourselves and in contact with other beings—human and nonhuman alike. Despite Costello’s apparent and overstated naiveté, this claim is far from ingenuous: she is simply affirming that nonhuman life is no more (and certainly also no less) resistant to human understanding than human life, and that resistance, contradiction, and paradoxes should not prevent but rather encourage and impel the deployment of our imaginative capacities [24]. Literature—a literature that acknowledges and incorporates resistance, contradiction, and paradoxes—can supplement, correct, and prevent the failures of the imagination *à la* Nagel and support the imaginative, “empathic leap of faith” [25] that is necessary to overcoming our destructive anthropocentrism.

II. J.M. COETZEE AND THE TASK OF LITERATURE

Even the most sympathetic reader must acknowledge that Costello’s arguments do not necessarily hold up to scrutiny. Despite moments of sharp insight, the sympathetic reader is left wishing that Costello’s arguments were “a little better than

³ Indeed, Costello emphasizes that her only position of authority is that of a writer of fiction, of someone “whose sole claim to your attention is to have written stories about made-up people” [12]. This claim of authority is fundamental in her project of the sympathetic imagination.

they are” [26]. Less sympathetic (and more philosophically scrupulous) readers have criticized Costello’s arguments for being sloppy, incomplete, contradictory, and inadequate to the task of teaching empathy and “correct thinking.” Anton Leist and Peter Singer [27], for example, point out that her questioning of rational argumentation forces her to shun the more stable position of sound philosophical argumentation, which, in turn, leaves her with no clear positive ethics. Deprived of the clear light of reason, the poet’s imaginative identification with the Other is “morally blind.” Andy Lamey [28] concurs that it is neither desirable nor possible to fully separate sympathy from reason and argues therefore that Costello falls prey to oversimplification and misconstrues the constitutive role of reason in our acts of sympathetic identification. Her oversimplification is ultimately a “factitious, sentimental caricature” of genuine sympathetic understanding [29].

Moreover, her examples of the sympathetic imagination are extremely problematic and logically weak: does thinking oneself into a corpse or into the life of a fictional character really have anything to do with imagining oneself into the—embodied, corporeal, sensuous—life of a bat or of another nonhuman animal? Early on, Singer [30] deemed the latter comparison simplistic and shallow, and subsequent commentators including Derek Attridge [31] (who is otherwise a sympathetic reader) point out that imagining ourselves into the lives of human (or anthropomorphized) literary characters is one thing, while imagining ourselves into the lives of other species quite another: the literary imagination depends on nothing but the author.

A popular approach to explaining Costello’s philosophical unsoundness is to fit her opinions into a Bakhtinian polyphonic staging of different and contrasting positions: Coetzee, the argument goes, follows Bakhtin’s notions of polyphony and dialogism [32] and lays out many different philosophical options before the readers (many characters in *The Lives of Animals* criticize and question Costello’s arguments), leaving the final choice to them. For philosophers, this “experimental openness” is simply “irritating” [33] [34] since it refuses to take an ethical stand, but even for more indulgent readers the ethical uncertainty and sloppiness are frustrating [35].⁴ The question is, however, whether Coetzee really refuses to take a stand; and, perhaps more importantly, whether the kind of fiction he writes aims at making explicit, ideological statements along the lines of Sartre’s *engagé* literature [38].

Many commentators have noted that what Coetzee’s fiction presents to the reader is less a justification of Costello’s argument than a revelation of the very failure of the project of the sympathetic imagination. As Sam Durrant remarks [39], against Costello’s claim of the unboundedness of the sympathetic imagination, Coetzee’s books usually depict acts of sympathetic imagination that continually encounter their own bounds. And this not only because of the inherent limits

⁴ On Coetzee and Bakhtin see also, e.g., the articles by Michael Kochin [36] and James McAdams [37].

of sympathy as such—which is always directional and constrained by one’s historical position in language and culture [40]⁵—but also, and perhaps most of all, because of the dogged resistance of the Other to the acts of sympathetic attention. A typical Coetzee plot includes characters trying and failing to sympathize with figures of (mostly underprivileged, foreign, even abject) otherness, whereby alterity is systematically pushed beyond the reach of the sympathetic imagination. On the other hand, readers are nonetheless assigned the impossible task of sympathizing, an imperative that the narrative does not foreclose but rather forcefully sustains and pushes forward [41]. Failure and impossibility, Durrant argues, are however the precondition for a “new kind of ethical and literary relation” [42].

The paradigm of this paradoxical ethical and literary stance is *Disgrace* [43], the Booker Prize-winning novel that Coetzee published the same year as *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and that therefore can be and has been read as a sort of companion piece to it. The question of sympathy is also central to this novel, where it is questioned and deconstructed in subtle ways rather than explicitly and overtly analyzed. The main character, David Lurie (perhaps the most unsympathetic and unpleasant of Coetzee’s characters [44]), is a disgraced literature professor who moves to the country with his estranged daughter, where he experiences the racial tensions and violence of a newly post-apartheid South Africa. In one of his last university lectures, Lurie belies Costello’s credo, but by using a language that closely matches it and could be seen as a kind of reply to it: “We are invited to understand and sympathize [with Byron’s Lucifer],” he tells his class. “But there is a limit to sympathy. For though he lives among us, he is not one of us. He is exactly what he calls himself: a *thing*, that is, a monster” [45] [46]. In depicting sympathy at its most troubled [47], *Disgrace* functions as a countermelody to Costello’s contrived theory.

However, Lurie (and sympathy) is granted a sort of “redemption” (if there is such a thing in a Coetzee novel) when, at the end of the book, he starts helping to take care of, and finally euthanizing, unwanted dogs at an animal shelter. Disgraced and even abject, it is in his dismal and stupefying work with animals that Lurie finally manages to forfeit his egocentric and narcissistic tendencies and experience raw, unfiltered sympathy. From Lurie’s transformation we learn that true sympathy is far from an imaginative *projection*; if anything, as Durrant notes, it is a sort of *abjection* in which the subject is thrown outside or beside itself, is divested of all subject positions, and is thus brought into bodily proximity with the Other—especially an Other who has never been granted a subject position, such as an animal [48]. True sympathy is an othering of the self, a loss of the self, a forfeiture of subjectivity, an emptying out of oneself rather than a projection of oneself onto another being [49]–[51]. This is ultimately not so different from what Costello argues:

paradoxically, sympathizing with the embodied fullness of another life means for her feeling a “wound” in oneself [52], a gaping hole that brings one outside the borders of subjectivity.⁶

For Coetzee, therefore, the failure of the sympathetic imagination opens the way to a more attentive and noncoercive relation to the other that, while upholding the ethical imperative of sympathetic attention, also recognizes and respects the other’s fundamental alterity and lets the other be other [54].⁷ This is simultaneously an ethical and literary relation, or rather the coincidence of the two: in a recent exchange with psychologist Arabella Kurtz, Coetzee contends that “our sympathetic identifications have a fiction-like status, and that our sympathetic intuitions can be relied on only to yield fictional truths” [58]. Our sympathetic identifications are always fictional accounts, stories about what it is like to be someone else. This in a sense vindicates and clarifies Costello’s argument (sympathy works the same way in reality and in fiction), though also grants a point to Nagel (sympathy is fiction). A few lines later, however, Coetzee reaffirms his disagreement with Nagel, this time not through an alter ego but as himself and in his own words: though the truth about the Other (human and nonhuman alike⁸) afforded by the sympathetic imagination is indeed a fictional truth, he says, it is the only truth we have [59].

Thus, the gap between the author and his character is perhaps not as wide, or at least not as unbridgeable, as it appeared to be to some critics. Attridge [60] even finds an important moment of identification between Costello and Coetzee, and this moment seems to me to be also a fitting conclusion for this paper. The character of Elizabeth Costello had already appeared in print before the publication of *The Lives of Animals*, and all the Costello stories were then collected and supplemented with new stories (called here “lessons”) in the 2003 book *Elizabeth Costello* [61]. In the first “lesson” (which is also the first story that was published—in 1997) Costello is being interviewed for a radio program and is asked about a novel she wrote from the perspective of a man. When the interviewer asks whether it was easy to write from that point of view, she answers: “No. If it were easy it wouldn’t be worth doing. It is the otherness that is the challenge” [62]. The otherness is the challenge of ethics as much as of literature; taking on this challenge is the task of both.

⁶ This is also what it means to imagine oneself as a corpse, as not full but rather empty of being, that is, entirely outside of subjectivity [53].

⁷ In an interview collected in *Doubling the Point* [55], Coetzee states that the task of literature is that of imagining the unimaginable (the context is the unrepresentable history of colonialism, apartheid, and violence in South Africa). This imagination, however, just like the sympathetic imagination, is already described in *White Writing* (in a similar context) [56] [57] as a humble, lower-case, “listening imagination,” in opposition to a “historical imagination” that is assertive and projective rather than open and hospitable (and as such ultimately fails).

⁸ The context of this exchange between Coetzee and Kurtz is not animal ethics, in fact, but the experiences of human babies and children as discussed in particular by Melanie Klein.

⁵ These inherent limits partially vindicate Nagel’s position, which remains nonetheless defeatist in its implications.

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