

# Literature and Salvation in *Elizabeth Costello* Or How to Refuse to be an Author in Eight or Nine Lessons<sup>1</sup>

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What is an author? “The function of an author,” Michel Foucault famously pronounced in 1969, “is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society” (124). Foucault provides a template for inquiry into a certain period of literature, the age of the idealistic author.<sup>2</sup> To understand that period, and whether or not we have moved on from it, we need to determine what social forms and institutions were necessary for the author-function to operate.

J. M. Coetzee’s fiction and critical writings constitute a critique of what Foucault called the author function. Coetzee’s work, going all the way back to his first book, *Dusklands*, is rich in characters who are author-figures. Apart from Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee in the two linked parts of this work, there is the report-writing magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians*; the letter-writing classicist of *Age of Iron*; Foe and Susan Barton in *Foe*; Dostoyevsky, the eponymous protagonist of *The Master of Petersburg*; and the scholarly author Lurie who, throughout *Disgrace*, works on an opera about Byron’s ex-mistress Teresa, who is haunted by her memories of that paradigmatic Romantic poet. In Coetzee’s 2003 Nobel lecture, “He and his Man,” we even heard the authorial voice of Robinson Crusoe, supposed author of his own story and of *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, both of which, in Coetzee’s fiction, Crusoe published under the pseudonym of Daniel Defoe. Finally, the author as character is Coetzee himself in his volumes of memoirs, *Boyhood* and *Youth*, his own ‘portrait of the artist as a young man.’ Only in *Life & Times of Michael K* is the protagonist not an author, but a gardener. In striving to

characterize the role of the author, and to determine the value of what the author produces, I am going to focus on *Elizabeth Costello*, and on the fictional Australian novelist who is its title character (as well as the main character in “As a Woman Grows Older,” published in January 2004).<sup>3</sup>

Coetzee writes out of and in response to the material history of literature.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore appropriate to begin by looking at the mode of authorizing publications that preceded the rise of the author, the system of lay literary patronage. Even after the spread of printing, writers required literary patrons for three principal reasons: first, to keep themselves from starving (since the laws of copyright,<sup>5</sup> such as they were, protected the incomes of the publisher); secondly, to bring pressure on the censors; thirdly, to enable writers who were not aristocrats or gentlemen to make claims to truth or verisimilitude worthy of respect in their work. As Steven Shapin has recently emphasized in *The Social History of Truth*, only the honourable could put their honour behind the veracity of their written claims. Where the writer was low-born, it was the patron’s honour that authorized the writer’s product.

The system of literary patronage ceased in England around the beginning of the eighteenth century: Defoe was the first writer to make a living by the sale of his books and pamphlets to the public, that is, to book buyers who did not know him, and who bought his books because they wanted to read them, rather than out of social obligation to the patrons he never secured. The very fact that Defoe’s books were sold for a price meant that his stories were a good, in the economic sense, which gave them a *prima facie* claim to be good or valuable in themselves (cf. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 166-7). An author, in the emerging market-based society, was understood to be authorized to speak to the condition of the public by his (or, less often, her) success in creating a public for his books. In the modern era – from about 1640 to 1989 – the public authorized by an author’s creation of an audience was, in the most important cases, the nation, the public of readers as Englishmen and -women, or, more recently, as Irishmen and -women, as Israelis, as South Africans.

What then, to particularize Foucault’s question, is a national author? A national author (or national poet) is one who occupied a certain cultural position within the life of a nation, one who tries to work out the meaning of “we in its exclusive form,” as Coetzee’s character, the Australian novelist Elizabeth Costello, suggests (*Elizabeth Costello* 40-1). The role of national authors is defined by nations in their national struggles. For instance, in *Ulysses*, which the fictional Elizabeth Costello has rewritten in her imaginary novel, *The House on Eccles Street*, even as Coetzee himself had rewritten Defoe in *Foe* and Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg*, Joyce

forces his readers to think through the meaning of being a national author by comparing the Jewish, that is to say Zionist, national struggle as lived by Leopold Bloom, and the Irish national struggle as lived by both Bloom and Stephen Dedalus.

Since the market for an author's products has been coextensive with the world market from its beginning three centuries ago, thanks to the industrial efficiency of printing and the relative ease of translation as against creation, an author successful at creating a national or monolingual public can often call into existence a multinational or multilingual public. An author of world stature, that is to say one with significant international sales, is authorized by this success at creating a world audience to address the condition of that audience, the human condition. Not all authors of international stature are national authors. Some, such as Salman Rushdie and J. M. Coetzee, work within the institutions of global culture. Nevertheless, we should not think of such an author as one who is beyond or has outgrown national cultural institutions, but simply as writing within international or globalized cultural institutions: global media conglomerates, the Swedish Academy with its globalized nomination process, or, with more modest impact, such writers' organizations as PEN International and the Parliament of Writers. All professional writers write primarily for a public, but an international writer is someone who has acquired the habit, as Elizabeth Costello says, of writing for strangers (*Elizabeth Costello* 50-2).

In Alfred Nobel's vision, a prize-worthy author writes for the sake of certain ideals, and gives us lessons in the application of those ideals. Work of "an ideal [idealisk] tendency," to quote Nobel's will, requires the construction of an authorial voice developed across fiction, poetry, interview, and lecture alike, culminating, in Coetzee's words, in "a (rash?) decision to set down the truth, as though after a lifetime of exploring one had acquired the credentials, amassed the authority, to do so" ("Confession" 232).<sup>6</sup> As Mikhail Bakhtin writes:

All idealistic creative work is thought of and perceived as a possible expression of a single consciousness, of a single spirit. . . . All that has significance can be collected in a single consciousness and subordinated to a unified accent; everything which is not amenable to such a reduction is accidental and unessential. In modern times European rationalism with its cult of unified and exclusive reason, and particularly the Enlightenment, during which the basic genres of European prose were formed, abetted the consolidation of the monological principle and its penetration into all spheres of ideological life.

(Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics 66)

Bakhtin's observation is central to the critique of Enlightenment reason (and of its successor, the idealistic spirit), the critique that we have come to call 'postmodernism.'<sup>7</sup> It is not merely that we reject the ideological content of Enlightenment monologues and their Romantic, nationalist, and Socialist successors. The very institutions that constitute the role of the monological author are dead, Bakhtin has made us realize, and yet they go on only with a kind of unlife as authors continue to write idealistic or ideological novels and give us idealistic or ideological lessons in essays, lectures, and interviews. It is not so much that the ideals, whose promulgation Alfred Nobel sought to foster, or which so many of our well-thinking international authors preach, are irrelevant. The existing institutions of authorship are dead because they are no longer capable of teaching us how to live these ideals, that is to say, to live humanely, to live gracefully in the face of and in relation to the disgrace of human suffering, evil, and death. The institutionalized author is no longer capable of teaching us how to respond with grace to the beauty of bodies, or to respond with grace to fundamental needs of the body, to the cry of pain emitted by a body, to illness, injury, aging, and dying.<sup>8</sup> Authors no longer have the lightness, the distance from subjective needs and interests, required for teaching us how to feel, and, in consequence, we no longer have "faith in the artist and his truth" (Coetzee, "As a Woman Grows Older" 7; *Elizabeth Costello* 207).

The efforts of authors to give us lessons, therefore, no longer work to promote those ideals: authors are disgraced, that is to say, are deprived of their expected grace, by the spirit of righteousness (Coetzee, "As a Woman Grows Older" 12-13). The spirit of righteousness, the confidence in one's own righteousness and in the wickedness of those whom one condemns, is equivalent to the belief in innocence, since the righteous person is the one who is not complicit in the suffering of the innocent, or, by taking the proper political stance, has absolved himself or herself of complicity. Innocence regained, the engaged intellectual is saved.

Looking at the sterility of this salvation, it is hard not to agree with Foucault, as he put it in 1969: "the themes destined to replace the privileged position accorded to the author have merely served to arrest the possibility of genuine change" (118). In the three decades and more since Foucault's lecture, J. M. Coetzee has striven in his fiction and memoirs to open up the possibility of genuine change, to move us beyond the death of the author. Coetzee's body of writing can be seen as what the Greeks called an *askēsis*, a series of exercises designed to purge him of the impulse to take idealistic stands in the manner of an author. Consider the following exchange from *Doubling the Point*, a collection of essays and interviews put together by

Coetzee and David Attwell to document Coetzee's progress as writer and critic:

[David Attwell]: Your nonfiction includes essays and reviews on film, the comic strip, advertising, rugby, political journalism, and analyses of cultural stereotypes such as "the white tribe" and "the Afrikaner." Apart from journals covering popular culture in South Africa . . . you have also published in *Vogue*, *Reader's Digest*, and the *New York Times Magazine*. Clearly, although your novels make few compromises in what they require of readers, you have tried to narrow the gap between the lowbrow and the highbrow. But "popular culture" in South Africa is a problematic, and certainly not a unitary concept. How do you envision your work in this area?

[J. M. Coetzee]: . . . As for the other pieces you mention, pieces on South African society, I think they deserve a quiet death. I am afraid that at a certain stage of my career – the mid 1980's – I slipped a little too easily into the role of commentator on South African affairs. I have no talent for that kind of political/sociological journalism. To be more specific, I am too suspicious of the genre, of the vision it locks its practitioners into, to give myself wholly to it, yet I lack enough zeal to try to turn it upside down or inside out. Anyhow, I am far too bookish, far too ignorant about real people, to set myself up as interpreter, much less a judge, of the lives they live.

(*Doubling the Point* 103, 104)

In writing *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee has taken up the project of turning inside out the manner in which talented authors apply or betray their talents in judging real people and the lives they live.

The "Eight Lessons" that constitute the main part of *Elizabeth Costello* range in style from realism (in "The Lives of Animals" and "The Humanities in Africa") to deconstruction of realism (in "Realism"), and a pastiche of Kafka (in "At the Gate"). Five of the eight lessons in the book are told from the point of view of Costello herself,<sup>9</sup> as is "As a Woman Grows Older," while three of the eight collected in the book are told, mostly, from the point of view of Costello's son John.<sup>10</sup>

Contemporary writers like Coetzee himself often make ends meet by lecturing and especially university teaching. The result is a literature written for professional academic readers, full of scholastic in-jokes and reflective not just of literary traditions but of literary-critical fashions. *Elizabeth Costello* addresses this transformation from the novel to academic *écriture* from the

inside. Coetzee, as was seen on the world stage in his Nobel lecture, frequently has responded to academic invitations by reading a story. The Elizabeth Costello lessons are, in a parody of postmodern reflexivity, mostly stories about academic invitations. Lesson 1, "Realism," is John's account of a campus visit and literary prize lecture by his mother. Costello, whom we are told made her career by telling the story of Joyce's Molly Bloom in *The House on Eccles Street*, speaks about the need to stop retelling the stories we have inherited from the past – she claims that these inherited stories are a dead weight from which we must free ourselves in order to make up our own stories.

Robinson Crusoe, in Coetzee's Nobel lecture, writes of there being only a fixed number of stories in the world, which forces us to retell them in order to go on writing. This plagiarism, like Joyce's repetition of Homer's *Odyssey*, is best understood as an attempt to put the old stories to work in order to free ourselves to make up our own story. Costello's loss of faith in the liberating power of such retellings is an excuse for the exhaustion of her creative powers, powers which she will begin to recover only after her death in the strange limbo of the book's last lesson.

Lesson 2, "The Novel in Africa," takes place on a cruise ship to Antarctica, on which Costello is booked as entertainment along with a Russian band and an ex-Nigerian ex-novelist. The ex-novelist, Emmanuel Egudu, whose name and opinions call to mind Romanus Egudu, a scholar of West African oral poetry, describes himself in the third person: "He teaches in colleges in America, telling the youth of the New World about the exotic subject on which he is an expert in the same way that an elephant is an expert on elephants: the African novel" (42-3) Emmanuel thus recalls linguist Roman Jakobson's legendary grounds for rejecting Vladimir Nabokov (at the time assistant curator of butterflies at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology) for a position in comparative literature: "An elephant is a very fine animal but he should not be confused with a professor of zoology." J. M. Coetzee, of course, can claim to be both elephant and zoologist.

Emmanuel himself is not a good example of either beast or pedagogue. In his sentimental cruise-ship lecture, he claims all of the virtues of the traditional African understanding of life and art, while refusing to come to terms with anything in the reality of present-day Africa, save its inability to offer him the comforts to which he has become accustomed (37, 41-2). In lessons five and six of *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee shows that we today cannot hope to find the basis for a graceful future in Western high culture.<sup>11</sup> But here in lesson 2, he demonstrates that sentimental multiculturalism

offers us no comfort in our suffering and alienation beyond the tired seductions and hack philosophy of an Emmanuel Egudu. With Elizabeth Costello, we recognize that we are no longer naive enough to fall for Emmanuel's line, even though we would still like to believe that we retain the openness to embodied experience that made our seduction by multiculturalism possible.

I should note that, although appearing to be little more than light entertainment, albeit clever enough to be the butt of his own jokes, Emmanuel Egudu is in a way the dark double of Coetzee himself. Through this character, Coetzee is presenting a black African version of his own deracinated condition as an ex-South African critic and writer, Afrikaner by surname and Anglophone by upbringing. Thanks to the banal horror of apartheid, Coetzee has never been able to afford Costello's ease in her Australian identity, an ease which enables her to belittle Emmanuel's (and, indeed, Coetzee's) practice of writing for strangers (51-2).

Although multiculturalism cannot save us, Western humanism, Coetzee shows, is unlikely to save us either. The humanism of the West, including the humanism of the factual novelist Paul West, is unable to come to terms with the greatest crimes the West has perpetrated – Hitler's murder of the Jews and Stalin's liquidation of untold, literally uncounted, millions. Costello both notes the failure of the West to provide for itself and the world a graceful way of going on in the aftermath of its own atrocities and, indeed, enacts this failure, at different moments with different degrees of self-consciousness, in her own lesson-giving.

The two parts of "The Lives of Animals," lessons 3 and 4, are built around Costello's claim, in her invited lectures at fictional 'Waltham College,' that factory farms, in which millions of our fellow creatures are done to death so that we may make use of the products we derive from them, are like the Nazi death camps, in which the fabled soaps and lampshades were made from Jewish corpses. Costello is preaching not to convince us but to save her own soul (89), in what her son John sees as a refusal to come to terms with a world of suffering and death in which she too will suffer and die. "It will soon be over," he comforts her at the end of "The Lives of Animals" (*Elizabeth Costello* 115). After this consolation there is no further pontificating from Costello on animal rights, as if her sentiments were only the expression of an unconscious wish for a few kind words and a hug.

No doubt Coetzee wants us to recognize that something can be said for animal rights, though he gives the better arguments to Costello's opponents.<sup>12</sup> The philosophers, for their part, have failed to give sufficient moral weight to the writer's ability to make us feel, to move our own animal

bodies sympathetically with the animal suffering or exaltation they depict. Yet Coetzee forces us to recognize that there is a mistake in Costello's attempt to draw lessons, articulate moral conclusions, from the ability of writers such as Ted Hughes to make us feel, to make us embody in ourselves the way a jaguar or a salmon lives its body.<sup>13</sup>

In lesson 6, "The Problem of Evil," the fictional novelist Elizabeth Costello encounters the real novelist Paul West at a conference in Amsterdam and gives a lecture attacking his real book, *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*, for its lush portrayal of the torture-murders of the failed conspirators in the 1944 plot against Hitler. This lesson confronts the peculiar authorial mode of analyzing and representing the possibilities of bodies instantiated in the worst crimes committed by Western civilization: we Westerners continue writing and composing in the face of these phenomena, despite the fact that we cannot find in Western humanist high culture the resources to confront them forthrightly. Costello now appears to be in recoil from her failed attempt in "The Lives of Animals" to appropriate the cruelties of the Holocaust in her depiction of the suffering we inflict on other animals. She charges that Paul West's representation of these worst possibilities of our embodied existence as torturers and victims is not the fulfilment of a moral duty, but an evasion of our obligation to keep the cruellest suffering "obscene," offstage, even as she has kept out of her own writings the brutal beating she once received from a Melbourne dockworker she had picked up and then refused (165-6, 168-9). By presenting us with realities of cruelty that teach us new and perverted possibilities, West's writing, Costello claims, corrupts, rather than saves, our souls.

Lesson 5, "The Humanities in Africa," also centres on an academic lecture, but delivered this time at commencement at a university in Johannesburg by Elizabeth Costello's sister, Blanche, now Sister Bridget, a former classical scholar turned Catholic nun and medical missionary (116). In front of her sister Elizabeth, the celebrated novelist, and the assembled academic dignitaries, Sister Bridget delivers a deliberately provocative commencement address presenting the abyss between the humanist hopes of literary scholarship and the theocentrism of Christianity. As Coetzee shows, a glimpse of this abyss does not so much disturb post-Christian academics, as make them squirm at the faux pas of it being mentioned aloud (123).

Blanche then takes Elizabeth to visit her hospital in rural Zululand, where Elizabeth meets Joseph, a wood-carver of real artistic potential who has spent his entire life carving duplicates, in all sizes, of the same image of Jesus writhing in agony upon the cross. Where Elizabeth sees talent wasted, Sister Blanche sees the sacrifice of personality in adoration of the sacrifice of "Our Saviour" (137-8).



Elizabeth has no counter-argument for her sister in defence of humanism: she admits that humanism promised salvation – in the eighteenth century, through reason; in the twentieth century, in the claim she attributes to D. H. Lawrence, through bodily worship of the pretend dark gods of sexuality – but has failed to deliver (126-7). Western humanist high culture can only survive, Elizabeth acknowledges, in the unlikely event that it can find some new and compelling way to respond to the craving for salvation. Elizabeth's only persuasive response to Blanche's preaching – and it is a response that she refrains from putting to paper (and, indeed, which Coetzee left out of the 2001 pamphlet version of this lesson (*The Humanities in Africa*), much less communicating to her sister – is the prospect of celebrating the moments of bodily pleasure, possible even amidst wretchedness and suffering, when still attractive women, for love, charity, or money, offer themselves sexually to men who are aged and decrepit (147-55). No doubt such moments are hard to take seriously. But it is precisely because they make such marvellous matters for comedy that we should give them their due, for love, comedy, and squalor.

In lesson 7, "Eros," Costello meditates on the myths of communion between women and their divine lovers, while recalling her own failed seduction of the factual American poet Robert Duncan. Back in lesson 1, Costello's son, John, in post-coital conversation with the flexible Susan Moebius, an academic critic of his mother's novels, described the gift of writers and poets as divine (28). We are therefore asked to examine whether the representations of sexual congress between gods and women on which Elizabeth Costello muses are also representations of the poet or writer's possession by a divine talent for using words in ways that go beyond our everyday needs. As a writer, a being possessed of a divine talent, Elizabeth strives to protect herself from us mortal male and female readers, who constantly nibble away bits of her substance in our desperate longing to embody the divinity within her (3, 6, 28, 30-1). Elizabeth fears the fate of the actress Frances Farmer, in the film *Frances*, who, while a mental patient, was raped repeatedly by mortals who want to boast that they fucked a movie star (185).

Do humans continue to have congress with gods? Can we still hear the language of things? Do things still call us to write them? Costello forces us to ask these questions. In Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *The Lord Chandos Letter*, the Elizabethan lyric poet Philip, Lord Chandos, professes to his former master Francis Bacon that he finds himself impotent to write what things speak to him. Coetzee imitates Hofmannsthal in "Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos," which he originally delivered, instead of a lecture, at the University of Texas, and thereafter appended as a postscript to *Elizabeth*

*Costello*. While Lady Chandos refers to her raptures in the arms of her once divinely poetic husband, she, as a woman rather than a semi-divine dryad or nymph, finds herself paralyzed like her husband by her inability to write these raptures in human words made and assembled like the brick wall of a careful mason. Unlike poor Philip Chandos and luckless Elizabeth, the writer is not merely rapt (or raped) by the divine, not simply forced by divine revelation of things to disclose those things to us in turn. The writer is able to transform those raptures into works of craft, materialized writings that are products of human ingenuity and invention.

In lesson 8, “At the Gate,” *Costello* is now dead, but finds herself in a limbo patterned after a fin-du-siècle town somewhere between Kafka’s Prague, Joyce’s Trieste, and Hofmannsthal’s Vienna. *Costello* would pass through the gate into the bright light (a figure of death Coetzee also used in *Waiting for the Barbarians*), but is ordered by those who guard the gate to provide a “statement of her beliefs” (193-4). *Costello* finds herself paralyzed by this request, since she has aspired in her writing to empty herself of her human-all-too-human beliefs, the sort of beliefs she expresses in “The Lives of Animals” or in “As a Woman Grows Older.” If salvation requires faith in propositions, the writer cannot save us because she aims to purge herself of that reassurance that comes from consciousness of one’s own beliefs, from what her son John had called before her death “the spirit of righteousness” (see “As a Woman Grows Older”). In order to leave limbo and die, *Costello* may have to become human again by confessing that she believes in the saving value of her beliefs. Coetzee ends lesson 8 with the alternative that Elizabeth will spend eternity writing and revising her confession. Like Dante’s pagan philosophers of the First Circle, Elizabeth would be passing her afterlife at the margins of divine justice, but her portion in the World-to-Come would be one that no committed writer could disdain (210).

Fortunately or not, what we need, Coetzee shows us in *Elizabeth Costello*, is not salvation but redemption. As Paul West suggests in reply to *Costello*’s attack on him, even the literary elaboration of bodily suffering is a way of making the familiar cruelties of Hitlerism “severer, more arresting.” We need to redeem the sufferings of bodies by acts of grace, as West claims in defence of *The Very Fine Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*, the novel he calls *Stauff*. We need to redeem the suffering of bodies by acts of writing that permit us to recover our horror at the suffering we ignore out of either wilful ignorance or blasé sophistication (West, “When Horror Invades Protocol”). But this need is not a simple matter for the writer to address: Coetzee forces us to confront the possibility that writing dedicated to

recalling suffering can, by making that suffering real for us, deaden our response to it.

In the Elizabeth Costello lessons, as in all of Coetzee's fiction, Coetzee resists taking stands: he refuses to use his fiction to make a statement of what he believes (cf. *Elizabeth Costello* 194). In part, Coetzee performs this refusal by having Elizabeth Costello take stands in her lectures, interviews, or conversations that are either confused or tiresomely disconnected from the way things are. By this repeated refusal, Coetzee is showing us that the authority of the writer is false or phoney: no twenty-first century author can be what Dostoevsky, who Coetzee fictionalises as the 'Master of Petersburg,' aspired to be for the Russians, the Slavs, and the Orthodox Christians.<sup>14</sup>

Coetzee's lesson is not how to begin to live our life without books: that is what Rousseau's tutor preaches to his pupil Emile, preachings which are repeated in book after book by the more or less half-witted romantics who followed Rousseau, including the superannuated Costello of the first lesson. Coetzee wants to remind us that genuine liberation from the authorial function requires us to put these authors' books to work so as to live with them without enslaving ourselves to them. Coetzee has shown us how to live with, that is to say free ourselves from, the colonial literature of self-improvement through labour and racial exploitation in *Dusklands*, *In the Heart of the Country*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, *Foe*, and *Disgrace*. Self-proclaimed 'women's writing' is pulped for fertilizer in *Elizabeth Costello* ("Lesson 1: Realism"), along with sentimental multiculturalism ("The Novel in Africa"), and classicism ("The Humanities in Africa").

Coetzee critiques the psychological novel by excavating the inhumanity of its methods and its results. Thus Costello imagines the defenders of Paul West's *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* saying that "Paul West is not a devil but a hero: he has ventured into the labyrinth of Europe's past and faced down the Minotaur and returned to tell his tale" (168). Costello twice responds to this defence by asserting that the novel cannot explore the depths of human cruelty without desensitizing both the writer and the reader. As Coetzee shows in the concluding passages of *The Master of Petersburg* (249-50), the way the author lives with human suffering in writing swaps the author's human passions for the questionable currency of words on paper. Elizabeth's sister, the Catholic medical missionary Sister Bridget, tells her in "The Humanities in Africa" that the ugly work of the psychological novelist is superfluous: we "do not need to consult novels . . . to know what pettiness, what baseness, what cruelty human beings are capable of" (*Elizabeth Costello* 128).

By showing us the failure of each of these would-be-instructive genres to impart its lesson, Coetzee suggests that we should not enslave ourselves to the well-thinking, all-too-human opinions of authors – to that end, he presents Costello’s own shallow remarks about the United States or “Great Satan” at the end of “As a Woman Grows Older.”<sup>15</sup> What is divine in writing is not what the authors happen to think, but the peculiar product of bodily activity called writing.<sup>16</sup> Writing, when it is graceful, can be an expression of our bodies that uncovers our bodies without saying what they are, uncovers them from the illusions fostered by particular conceptions of embodied life: old, young, beautiful, decrepit, deformed, scarred, wounded, lecturing, listening, reading, rapt by erotic longing or sexual pleasure, wracked by disease or starved by apathy, bodies lived, “embedded in life” (*Elizabeth Costello* 32). Writing is divine because this uncovering of embodied experience goes beyond the limits of the human-all-too-human game of confessing belief or disbelief in a particular idealization of embodied existence.<sup>17</sup> This is not because writing tells more than confession can. Instead, when a story is told for no other purpose but to tell a tale and receive the just reward for having forced what is written on the readers, that which is written is told objectively, transformed into an object appropriable by the reader or listener, and therefore separated from any merely personal motive of the author’s.<sup>18</sup>

In trying to understand writing as a bodily activity, we must be careful to avoid falling into vitalism, whether the heated vitalism of D. H. Lawrence, or the wine-cooled celebration of the “material bodily lower stratum” of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, “grotesque body” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 26, 29, 317-19). Such vitalism celebrates those activities assigned to the body by the metaphysical dualism that separates body and mind. Rather, to write of writing as a bodily activity is to critique that dualism in favour of an immanentist understanding of what embodied minds can do: to attempt to show in writing how bodies write is precisely to follow Barthes in resisting “the reduced conception of the body . . . [as] what is opposed to soul” (*Barthes on Barthes* 80).<sup>19</sup> Just such an immanentist understanding of writing as a bodily activity is expressed in *Elizabeth Costello*: “Only by an ingenious economy, an accident of evolution, does the organ of ingestion sometimes get used for song” (54, 150).<sup>20</sup> The ability to uncover things as we live them in our embodied lives seems superfluous to the basic bodily needs of human beings, and is therefore performed by the writer and received by the reader as an act of grace.

Barthes, Foucault and other once-fashionable postmodern theorists talked about the death of the author. Coetzee shows us the dead idealist author, like

Holbein showing us the dead Christ. Yet, in reading *Elizabeth Costello*, we find that the actual author, Coetzee, has managed once again to elude our grasp. This may mean that the author has died but the author's tomb is empty. Coetzee's only hopeful thought is that, with regard to the fate of Western high culture, it is the third day after the death of the author. It is too late for despair.

#### NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a panel entitled "Can Literature Save Us?" at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, 5 September 2004. Research for this paper was supported by a Dan David Scholarship from the Dan David Prize. Thanks to my APSA discussant, Michael Keren, Simon Stow, Mariah Zeisberg, Anna Kochin, the anonymous referee for *English in Africa*, and Mike Marais for their comments; to Bill Maddex for directing me to the Szalai and West pieces on *Elizabeth Costello*; and to Daniel Doneson for pointing me to Coetzee's work in the first place in 1999, and for numerous helpful conversations since.

2. Foucault is, of course, responding to Barthes' "The Death of the Author." For a more concise statement of the issue see Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text*, 27.

3. *Elizabeth Costello* also appears in *Slow Man*. For two reasons, though, I think it justified to leave her appearance there for another occasion. First, *Slow Man* focuses primarily on the ethics of authorship, the invasion of privacy that authorship requires and the voyeurism it fosters in its subjects, while my concern, here, is with the politics and liturgics of authorship, the author as preacher, moral exemplar, and intermediary between humans and things and between humans and gods. Secondly, the Elizabeth Costello of *Slow Man*, with her mysterious appearances and disappearances and the very thinness of her embodiment, seems to be the Elizabeth-in-limbo of lesson 8, "At the Gate," whom I treat below. Whereas the Elizabeth in *Slow Man* operates with an understanding of writing and its costs equivalent to that which she achieves in the course of lesson 8, my focus is on the lessons that Elizabeth is still learning in trying to teach.

4. Lecture-hall history of literature, "routine, covering familiar ground," albeit with a materialist emphasis, appears in *Elizabeth Costello* at 41-8, 51-2, 119-41, 172.

5. These laws were in any case easily evaded by book piracy, since the copyrights could not be enforced across jurisdictional boundaries.

6. On the meaning of the Swedish word *idealisk*, the range of views applied in more than a century of prize giving by the Swedish Academy is presented on the Nobel Foundation website by Academician (and computational linguist) Sture Allén, "Topping Shakespeare?" The range is broad, but it centers on "idealistic" understood as progressive, internationalist, and humanist.

7. As noted by Coetzee himself in "The Artist at High Tide." Much of Coetzee's work makes conscious use of polyvocality, as described by Bakhtin. See Kossew, and Frank.

8. For a deed to be graceful, it must be beneficial, beautiful, or pleasing, and must display a power in the doer other than, or exceeding, the powers actualized in the doer's pursuit of his or her quotidian ends. One is disgraced when one is deprived of the possibility of graceful action, that is, when one cannot benefit from the grace of others, or cannot act gracefully oneself. Elizabeth herself responds to the needs of the dying Aidan Philips by giving him oral sex (*Elizabeth Costello* 154-55). Coetzee presents us with this act of grace and leaves it to us to make something of it.

9. Lessons 2, 5, 6, 7, 8. These lessons are narrated in the third person, because Elizabeth thinks of herself in the third person: she is "the person whom she, to herself, calls *she*" (207).

10. The lessons seem to appear partly out of narrative order. John is married in lessons 3-4 and "married and unmarried" in lesson 1 (unless he is lying to his paramour, Susan Moebius). To confuse matters further, Elizabeth, in lesson 3, refers to a lecture she gave "two years" before in which she discussed Kafka's "Report to an Academy." This would seem to be the lecture she gives in Lesson 1, which is cited in a footnote in the original publication of "The Lives of Animals" (*The Lives of Animals* 18n1). In "As a Woman Grows Older," published after *Elizabeth Costello* and Coetzee's Nobel Prize, but set at the same moment in the middle of the American Presidential campaign, John is married and living in Baltimore, which he had left for a college town in Massachusetts in lessons 3-4 of the book. Lesson 6, "The Problem of Evil," is explicitly a follow-on to lessons 3-4, and Costello describes herself as having changed between these occasions (156, 179). Even in lesson 4, the poet Stern responds in a letter at the beginning of the lesson to something Costello says only later (cf. 94 with 112). The difficulty of ordering the Costello lessons in narrative time reminds us, as we should have already learned from the self-deconstructing mock realism of Lesson 1, that *Elizabeth Costello* is not bound by the conventions of the realistic novel. I should add that John, like Costello, is yet another double for his author and creator, J[ohn] M[axwell] Coetzee.

11. I have discussed the way *Disgrace* explodes our hopes of Western high culture in "Postmetaphysical Literature," and addressed this theme in Coetzee's work up to 2003 in "For Whom Nobel Tolls."

12. Costello's arguments are thus "tied to the speakers by whom they are enounced" (*Elizabeth Costello* 9), in keeping with the constraints imposed by the literary realism that Coetzee employs in "The Lives of Animals." The weakness of Costello's arguments is highlighted by the response of ethicist Peter Singer, notwithstanding his own radical commitment to freeing animals from suffering (*The Lives of Animals* 90-1).

13. Cf. 75-80, 95-6, 111 with 22-3, 216-20; and Szalai, "Harvest of a Quiet Eye." Clearly, Elizabeth Costello distinguishes herself from the philosophers (66), and Cora Diamond is thus correct in stating that this character "does not engage with others in argument, in the sense in which philosophers do" (8). Yet, in "The Lives of Animals," Costello does try to argue from our capacity to imagine and therefore sympathize with other animals, in the sense that idealistic authors argue. The discussion of *The Lives of Animals* in Diamond's essay is nonetheless the most helpful treatment thus far of any section of *Elizabeth Costello*.

14. Dostoevsky's aspirations for Russia and for himself as her national author are apparent in his one-man periodical, *Diary of a Writer*. For a helpful summary treatment of this vast and motley work, see Frank, "Approaches to the Diary of a Writer." There is little trace of Dostoevsky's aspiration to be a national author in the Dostoevsky of Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*, probably because Coetzee himself is so averse to the notion of the author as "herald of community," to apply his phrase from an interview with David Attwell (*Doubling the Point* 341).

15. Because the lessons appear out of narrative order (see n.12 above), when we first meet Elizabeth in Lessons 1 and 2, she has already done much to purge herself of the temptation to offer opinions of the kind she pronounces in Lessons 3 and 4 and, for that matter, in "As a Woman Grows Older." See *Elizabeth Costello* 10, 39.

16. When Coetzee describes his own experience of writing, he mentions "talk of possession or the Muse," only to put it aside as "sounding silly" (*Doubling the Point* 205). Talk of the writer's divine inspiration is, to use a Derridean phrase, put under erasure. Costello, who is infinitely less self-conscious and self-restrained than her creator, claims openly, if posthumously, to be a "secretary of the invisible" (*Elizabeth Costello* 199-204).

17. On the distinction between opening oneself to embodied life and attempting to comprehend it conceptually, that is to say, ideologically, see Agamben (152-3), and Diamond.

18. "The experience that writing offers, or reading . . . real writing, real reading, is not a relative one, relative to the writer and the writer's capacities, relative to the reader," Costello pronounces toward the end of her lecture on Paul West, though the thoughts that intrude while she is reading these words serve to undermine the authority of this pronouncement on the absolute or impersonal value of writing (175-6). See also Coetzee, "Confession and Double Thoughts." On the way that successful narration produces a commodity, exchangeable for other commodities like cash or commodified sexual relations, see Barthes, *S/Z* (88-90); on objectification as a process, see Latour, *Science in Action*.

19. Following Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*, and Foucault's archaeologies of the clinic and the prison, genealogists of the body such as Judith Butler have explored how discourse gets embodied, elucidating "the terms that establish and sustain bodies that matter" (Butler 240). Here I am concerned with the opposite causal arrow, the way that literary discourse is structured by the embodiment of the human beings or authors who produce it. As Barthes himself writes in the passage cited, in this line of research it has proven extraordinarily difficult to go beyond gnomic statements such as "writing proceeds through the body." The next step seems to be to explore the claim that bodies write as they read, since it is reading that produces writers, as Wright Morris argues (5, 19). I explore Morris's accounts of bodies that read and write in "Life as Literature."

20. Cf. Barthes (*Barthes on Barthes* 140-1): "It was when he could free his upper limbs from the task of locomotion, and, in consequence, his mouth from predation, that man could speak."

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