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Postcolonial Inheritances Cluster

"A Face without Personality": Coetzee's Swiftian Narrators

Gillian Dooley and Robert Phiddian

Abstract: Much has been written about the complicated intertextual relationships between J. M. Coetzee's novels and previous works by writers such as Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Samuel Beckett, and, especially, Daniel Defoe. Relatively little has been written, in comparison, about any relationship between Coetzee and Defoe's great contemporary, Jonathan Swift. We claim no extensive structural relationship between Coetzee's novels and Swift's works—nothing like the formal interlace between *Robinson Crusoe* and *Foe*, for example. We do claim, however, a strong and explicitly signalled likeness of narrative stance, marked especially by the ironic distance between author and protagonist in *Gulliver's Travels* and *Elizabeth Costello*. We rehearse the extensive evidence of Coetzee's attention to Swift (both in novels and criticism) and suggest that there is a Swiftian dimension to Coetzee's oeuvre that is evident in several books, including *Dusklands*, *Youth*, *Elizabeth Costello*, and *Diary of a Bad Year*.

Keywords: Jonathan Swift, J. M. Coetzee, narrative voice, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Elizabeth Costello*

I. Coetzee and Swift

Linda Colley's *Captives* opens with two parables of British Empire from eighteenth-century literature that are relevant to J. M. Coetzee's postcolonial vision. In the first, "a man sets out on an eventful trading voyage, and is ultimately shipwrecked. He finds himself the lone survivor on a desert island, but despair soon gives way to resolu-

tion, Protestant faith, and busy ingenuity" (1). This is Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and Coetzee has explicitly worried at that novel and its mythic baggage throughout his career, most obviously in *Foe* (1986). We contend that Coetzee's work also contains a more submerged but nonetheless extensive engagement with Colley's second parable, in which a man

> sets sail from Bristol, centre of transatlantic commerce and slaving, bound for successive zones of European imperialism: Spanish America, the West Indies, coastal India. He never reaches them. Instead, his voyages are aborted, time and again, by events and beings beyond his control. . . . For this man, overseas venturing brings no conquests, or riches, or easy complacencies: only terror, vulnerability, and repeated captivities, and in the process an alteration of self and a telling of stories. (Colley 1–2)

This disenchanted parable of colonial endeavour is Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), and it provides Colley with an initial frame for an account of British captivity narratives between 1600–1850. For us it is a window into the condition of narrators and protagonists in Coetzee's texts who encounter the dark works of colonialism, particularly Elizabeth Costello.

Many critics have noted links between Coetzee and Defoe, as well as between Coetzee and authors such as Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Samuel Beckett.[1] On many occasions, Coetzee's works exist within their myths and forms, often explicitly in a critical manner. *Foe* is a postcolonial rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*; *Life & Times of Michael K* (1984) contains many implicit references to Kafka's work (even though Coetzee protested to an interviewer that he does not "believe that Kafka has an exclusive right to the letter K" [Morphet 457]); and *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) uses Dostoevsky as its main character. Swift's influence is less easily tracked through plots or characters and fewer critics have discussed it: a search of the *MLA Bibliography* yields only one article, by Richard A. Barney, and a chapter by Jonathan Lamb titled "Gulliver and the Lives of Animals." Both deal with links between Swift

and the theme of animals in Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello books. This essay gauges the "Swiftian" nature of the voices and thematic preoccupations of *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). We do not allege that the kind of connection Coetzee explicitly makes with Defoe, Kafka, Dostoevsky, and Beckett is made with Swift in *Elizabeth Costello*. We instead suggest that the novel calls up some common thematic interests with *Gulliver's Travels* and, more importantly, deploys strong similarities of voice that are very likely deliberate.

Coetzee's engagement with Swift is signalled early in *Youth* (2002), which, despite its unstable relationship between author and character, remains the best guide we have to the young John Coetzee's intellectual development: "He has begun to prefer Pope to Shakespeare, and Swift to Pope. Despite the cruel precision of his phrasing, of which he approves, Pope strikes him as still too much at home among petticoats and periwigs, whereas Swift remains a wild man, a solitary" (Coetzee 21). It seems possible that Coetzee might have found a conscious model in Swift's ruthless irony and alienation. We start by gathering empirical evidence, which, though not overwhelming, is plausible. As a critic, Coetzee studied Swift's rhetoric in several essays, including "The Rhetoric of the Passive in English" (1980), which discusses "A Modest Proposal" and "An Argument against Abolishing Christianity," and "The Agentless Sentence as Rhetorical Device" (1980), which compares Swift's irony in "An Argument against Abolishing Christianity" with Edward Gibbon's attack on "the intolerance and superstitiousness of early Christianity" in *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Coetzee, "Agentless" 177). Coetzee finds that "Swift's vertiginously ironic argument is deployed behind a mask" (175), with the effect that "the text is not finally ambiguous, though it is cryptic and an inexperienced reader may quite possibly misread it" (177). In "The Manuscript Revisions of Beckett's *Watt*" (1972), he notes that "the formal and narrative indecisiveness of its ending" has "echoes of Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*" (39). As a visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Buffalo in the late 1960s, he included *Gulliver's Travels* on the reading list for his "Great Writers" course. He set his students the following assignment on *Robinson Crusoe:*

> Write a five-page fragment of an imaginary longer work entitled *Robinson Crusoe in Houyhnhnm Land*, a work which opens with Crusoe swimming ashore from yet another wreck and finding himself in the land which Swift describes in Part IV of *Gulliver's Travels*. . . . It would do you no end of good to make a conscious attempt to imitate the manner of either Defoe or Swift, depending on your point of view, in the fragment. Without trying to force you into a stylistic straightjacket, let me remind you that it is not for nothing that the word "realism" is so often associated with Defoe and the word "irony" so often with Swift. (Qtd. in Kannemeyer 175)

Swift, then, is well known to Coetzee in his capacity as a scholar and teacher of language, rhetoric, and irony. Coetzee went on to imitate and parody Defoe's manner, but this exercise also points to a stylistic engagement with Swiftian irony that has not yet been explored by critics.

In an interview in *Doubling the Point* (1992), Coetzee gives a hint as to why, despite his admiration for and familiarity with Swift (and his recommendation to his students), he has never attempted to use him in a directly intertextual way:

> What I like about eighteenth-century English prose is its transparency, particularly the transparency of its syntax, even when the syntax is quite complex. . . . I hope [*Foe*] does not read like pastiche. Perhaps Defoe's prose is bare enough to serve as a model without overwhelming its imitator. I doubt that one could imitate Swift without falling into pastiche. ("Interview [Syntax]" 146)

Literary history tends to bear this judgment out: explicit imitations of Swift are almost uniformly a dire lot, and only a handful of reprises of "A Modest Proposal," with its savage satire, enjoy much success.[2] Nevertheless, even in Coetzee's first novel, *Dusklands* (1974), it is possible to hear echoes of Gulliver's prefatory letter to his cousin Sympson in Eugene Dawn's barely sane account of his dealings with other humans (his wife, son, and employer). Here is Gulliver: "I hope you will be ready

to own publickly, whenever you shall be called to it, that by your great and frequent Urgency you prevailed on me to publish a very loose and uncorrect Account of my Travels. . . . But I do not remember that I gave you Power to consent, that any thing should be omitted, and much less that any thing should be inserted" (6). And here is Eugene Dawn on the first page of *Dusklands*: "Coetzee has asked me to revise my essay. It sticks in my craw: he wants it blander, otherwise he wants it eliminated. He wants me out of the way too, I can see it. I am steeling myself against this powerful, genial, ordinary man, so utterly without vision. I fear him and despise his blindness. I deserved better" (1). Beyond the coincidence that both Gulliver and Dawn are authors who feel their work has been misused and misunderstood, the passages share a tone of injured exceptionalism and second-person aggression. Both narrators assert their special status, Gulliver because of the time he spent with the Houyhnhnms and Dawn because of his artistic nature. Both confront rather than seduce readers. However, the authorial attitude toward the personae in each passage differs. Swift's irony, in this case, appears more complex than Coetzee's: Dawn is revealed to be more or less a psychopath, and the first part of *Dusklands* is a study in the anatomy of a monster (albeit a monster with a pathetic side), while Gulliver's antisocial attitude is for a long time an element of *Gulliver's Travels*' social satire and only blossoms as a psychological disturbance toward the end of Book IV.

Irony is, of course, a notoriously slippery form of rhetoric. In "The Agentless Sentence," Coetzee notes:

> The agentless sentence, as a form that says much by saying little, is wide open to misunderstanding by an audience not attuned to its nuances. Irony is by nature an aristocratic mode: it asserts a bond among the elite who can decode its inverted operations. Its spirit is foreign to the mode of political debate that prevails in modern democracies. Bearing this in mind, we cannot find it surprising that the agentless sentence as an ironic device is most thoroughly exploited by such conservative neoclassical writers as Swift and Gibbon. (180)

Present day authors who write ironic texts, whether or not they use the agentless passive, must be aware that their work, similarly, "is wide open to misunderstanding by an audience not attuned to its nuances." An author who has a global profile, as Coetzee does, will inevitably be encountered by many readers who do not share his or her frames of reference. This writing environment is a little different than Swift's. He was addressing a smaller and more clearly divided group of people since he routinely published work simultaneously in London and Dublin.[3] Yet there is a similarity between them; Coetzee writes from a dubious, South African edge of civilisation, just as Swift writes from the Irish frontier. Both write as members of a settler class who are guiltily (if differently) aware of the arbitrariness of their tribe's local supremacy. The Anglo-Irish and the Afrikaner have ample historical cause to be connoisseurs of rhetorical bad faith.

If Coetzee is learning from Swift, however, the lesson is not about the comic arts that normally attend satire. Coetzee's work tends not to match the eye for verbal and situational hilarity that leavens the harshness of Swift's vision. Coetzee's fiction, unlike Swift's, is relatively uncomic. Much of *Gulliver's Travels* (especially the first two books) is playfully, comically ridiculous, while Coetzee's ironies tend toward bleakness (certainly it is hard to imagine any of his works being successfully abridged into a children's classic). His parody is a process of psychological exploration that traces the mismatch between the discourses on our lips or in our heads and the unruly human passions they seek to shape or at least contain. Yet Swift and Coetzee share a fascination with tracing the mental tricks of bad faith. Gulliver is an ironic device that allows Swift to animate foolishness and knavery in a lucid prose that traps readers into recognizing their complicity in the madness of the human condition; the same can be said of the narrators of *A Tale of a Tub*, "The Argument against Abolishing Christianity," and "A Modest Proposal"—all of his great parodic satires. Coetzee often does something similar. Consider Elizabeth Curren's melodramatic but ineffectual behaviour in *Age of Iron* (1990), or Fyodor's self-tormenting contortions in *Master of Petersburg*[4]—or indeed the John Coetzee of *Summertime* (2009), one of the most caustically ambivalent "self-portraits" in all of literature. In

creating these characters, Coetzee plunges us into a complex mix of selfishness, sanity, guilt, and altruism. He does not have to have learned this from Swift, but it is a technique and a way of understanding that was plausibly refined by his reading of Swift's work. The two sorts of writing certainly illuminate each other, particularly in the relationship between Gulliver and Elizabeth Costello.

II. Elizabeth Costello and Gulliver

At the heart of *Elizabeth Costello* is the title character's speech condemning the killing of animals for meat. Near the end of the novel, she discusses Swift's work—first "A Modest Proposal" and then *Gulliver's Travels*. Her criticism of *Gulliver's Travels* is acerbic in a postcolonial sort of way:

> What has always puzzled me about *Gulliver's Travels*—and this is a perspective you might expect from an ex-colonial—is that Gulliver always travels alone. Gulliver goes on voyages of exploration to unknown lands, but does not come ashore with an armed party, *as happened in reality*, and Swift's book says nothing about what would normally have come after Gulliver's pioneering efforts: follow-up expeditions, expeditions to colonize Lilliput or the island of the Houyhnhnms. (Coetzee, *Elizabeth* 102–03; emphasis in original)

Her statement is a mixture of partial truth and outright error. Gulliver arrives alone in the various lands he describes, but his statement about colonial expansion, which he gives toward the end of Book IV to vindicate his refusal to claim these lands for the British Crown, is as follows:

> I had another Reason, which made me less forward to enlarge his Majesty's Dominions by my Discoveries: To say the Truth, I had conceived a few Scruples with relation to the distributive Justice of Princes upon those Occasions. For Instance, A Crew of Pyrates are driven by a Storm they know not whither; at length a Boy discovers Land from the Top-mast; they go on Shore to rob and plunder; they see an harmless People,

> are entertained with Kindness, they give the Country a new Name, they take formal Possession of it for the King, they set up a rotten Plank, or a Stone for a Memorial, they murder two or three Dozen of the Natives, bring away a Couple more, by Force, for a Sample, return home, and get their Pardon. Here commences a new Dominion acquired with a Title by *Divine Right*. Ships are sent with the first Opportunity; the Natives driven out or destroyed, their Princes tortured to discover their Gold; a free Licence given to all Acts of Inhumanity and Lust; the Earth reeking with the Blood of its Inhabitants: And this execrable Crew of Butchers, employed in so pious an Expedition, is a *modern Colony*, sent to convert and civilize an idolatrous and barbarous People. (Swift, *GT* IV: 12; 258; emphasis in original)

Costello has clearly missed this statement, but her next paragraphs make it hard to believe that Coetzee is party to the mistake:

> The question I ask is: What if Gulliver and an armed expedition were to land, shoot a few Yahoos when they become threatening, and then shoot and eat a horse, for food? What would that do to Swift's somewhat too neat, too disembodied, somewhat too unhistorical fable? It would certainly give the Houyhnhnms a rude shock, making it clear that there is a third category besides gods and beasts, namely, man, of whom their ex-client Gulliver is one; furthermore, that if the horses stand for reason, then man stands for physical force.
>
> Taking over the island and slaughtering its inhabitants is, by the way, what Odysseus and his men did on Thrinacia. (Coetzee, *Elizabeth* 294)

Gulliver's "murder" matches Costello's "slaughter"; similarly, "natives" matches "inhabitants." The words appear in the same patterns, with the differences reflecting only subtly different preoccupations. The majesty of Gulliver's sardonic summary of colonialism tracks the bad faith of the enterprise remorselessly and Costello's response reads much more like an

echo than the critique she seems to think it is. Coetzee might be unconsciously channelling a passage he read long ago and forgot, but it seems more likely that, just as Swift marks various sorts of difference between his narrators (especially Gulliver) and himself, Coetzee is playing with readers gullible enough to straightforwardly equate Costello's opinions with his. The Afrikaner in Coetzee is a match for the Anglo-Irishman in Swift; both writers are profoundly unsettled and unsettling in their awareness of their conflicting loyalties. Though Costello is a somewhat more stable moralist than that ethical chameleon, Gulliver, it appears that one narrator's Englishness and the other's Australianness mean that, in comparison to their highly ambivalent authors, they think they can afford some degree of political nonchalance.

Like Swift, Coetzee is uneasy in the national and political identity that fate has chosen for him, and that uneasiness has stylistic consequences. Edward Said's description in "Swift as Intellectual" is also apposite for Coetzee. Said writes that "Swift is invariably attacking what he impersonates. In other words, his technique is to become the thing he attacks, which is normally not a message or a political doctrine but a style or manner of discourse. . . . Swift is always aware—and troubles his reader with the awareness—that what he is doing above all is *writing* in a world of power" (87; emphasis in original). Like Swift, Coetzee infiltrates the style or manner of his targets so that the mutual likeness is in the mode of rhetorical attack and possibly subject matter rather than in specific verbal echoes or distortions. A reader can see the parodied remains of *Robinson Crusoe* and its enthusiastic vision of colonialism lying around in disjointed and disembowelled pieces throughout *Foe*, but the imitated renditions of power and violence derived from Swift are more fully subsumed into Coetzee's intellectual and artistic approach in *Elizabeth Costello*. Because the tides of power and ideology both deform and form identities, Costello, like Gulliver, has only sporadic control of her narrative. We are to be troubled by this, and teased rather than consoled by possible solutions. In particular, the text does not consistently encourage us to suspend our disbelief and identify with narrators or protagonists according to the rules of novelistic realism that were nascent in Swift's time and (arguably) senescent in Coetzee's. It follows that neither book

is really (or at least comfortably) a novel. As David Lodge observes in an early review of *Elizabeth Costello*, "[t]his novel (as one must call it for want of a better word) remains ambiguous, partly because of the way it mixes and transgresses generic conventions." The same can be said of *Gulliver's Travels*. Indeed, the unsettled relationship between Gulliver and satirical authority, or between what Gulliver says and what Swift seems to mean, is the core reason the text remains difficult to assimilate into the realist novel tradition. Sometimes Gulliver speaks with a gravitas and cogency that seem to mark no meaningful distance from Swift, as in his grand and sardonic attack on colonialism cited above. On other occasions, however, Gulliver is clearly a fool. In Book II, for example, he sounds more like a public relations hack for the British government, spinning the members of the House of Commons as "[g]entlemen, *freely* picked and culled out by the People themselves, for their great Abilities and Love of their Country, to represent the Wisdom of the whole Nation," only to be brought up short by a counter-authority indistinguishable from Swift (Swift, *GT* II: 6; 128 emphasis in original). The King of Brobdingnag witheringly responds: "You have clearly proved that Ignorance, Idleness, and Vice are the proper Ingredients for qualifying a Legislator" (*GT* II: 6; 132). By the end of Book IV, Gulliver is confined to his stables and the company of horses because he cannot bear the stench of humanity, including his long-suffering and sympathetic family. It is a long-established truism of Swift scholarship that his narrators are pathologically unreliable[5] and that satirical authority (where it can be discerned) tends to lie in characters like the King of Brobdingnag (Book II), Lord Munodi (Book III), and, more contestably, the Master Houyhnhnm (Book IV). Coetzee comes after the great nineteenth-century realists and their modernist successors and so he inevitably writes more from within the novel's conventions of narratorial self-disclosure. Once this literary historical placement is accounted for, however, Costello's tenuous and at least sporadic contact with a centring voice of truth seems decidedly Gulliverian. Swift liked horses and Coetzee has crusaded for the rights of animals, but their narrators' anti-human enthusiasms take them to a level of crankiness that occasionally suggests distance from the authors. Costello's emotional blankness in

the text's chapters or "Lessons" about animal rights frustrates the sort of attachment to her that often occurs between readers and the protagonist in realist novels or even other Coetzee works such as *Age of Iron*, *Master of Petersburg*, and *Disgrace* (1999). Although Costello appears, at other points in *Elizabeth Costello*, affected in a more ordinary way by her life experiences and the suffering of other humans, her detachment in the animal rights Lessons links her with the Gulliver she (perhaps sanctimoniously) repudiates. Her animal rights speech, though partly novelised, retains a thesis-like quality not unlike the more open rhetorical opining in *Gulliver's Travels*.

III. The Misidentification of Elizabeth Costello as a Mouthpiece for Coetzee

Although both parts of *Dusklands* are narrated in the first person (Eugene Dawn in the first part and Jacobus Coetzee in the second), no reader could reasonably conflate these characters with Coetzee. *Elizabeth Costello* is told in third-person narration and less than two-thirds of the text is focalised through the title character, so it is something of a puzzle that critics are much more interested in identifying Costello with her creator. The temptation to see her opinions as Coetzee's derives from the fact that some of the public speeches put in her mouth started life as lectures delivered by Coetzee *in propria persona*. We contend that this critical move does not take the problem of voice in fiction (especially in Coetzee's fiction) seriously enough. A successful novel of ideas does not simply become philosophy by other means. To put propositional content into a novel reopens the questions of sincerity and situatedness of voice that philosophy tends to occlude.

Peter L. Shillingsburg, in an otherwise subtle examination of the evolution of the lecture "The Humanities in Africa," published in Munich in 2001, into Lesson 5 of *Elizabeth Costello*, argues that in the later publication "Elizabeth becomes more clearly Coetzee's spokesperson on behalf of compassion, beauty, sexuality, creativity and personal responsibility as the chief counters offered by the Humanities against the agony, suffering, ugliness and self-denial and rigid elements of the Catholic Church" (19). Shillingsburg tempers his conclusion elsewhere

in the essay ("Elizabeth Costello, who probably speaks for Coetzee, though that remains open to question" [16]), but such attempts to read the mind of the author through the words of his characters seem misplaced. Carrol Clarkson, writing about *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), states:

> There is no author-narrator who prescribes a resolution to the collision of voices from a position of anonymous omniscience. Instead, the novel pitches a battle[,] . . . and if the outcome of the battle is to be decided, it will be in the "shaky moral imagination of the reader" (Wood, "In a Cold Country" 7) rather than in any ethical prescriptions on the part of the author. (7)

This is equally true of the several voices that are dramatised in *Elizabeth Costello*. Ethics novelised are not the same as ethics syllogised, unless you are reading a very mechanical novel of ideas. The critical anxiety over identifying the authorial position can also work in the other direction: Laura Wright notes a propensity among critics to "overdetermine the distance between Coetzee and Elizabeth Costello" (197) because of the sentimental nature of Costello's opinions. She writes that

> [t]he third-person narrated *Disgrace* . . . poses an interesting counterpoint because although both Coetzee and protagonist David Lurie are male and both teach university-level literature, critics do not concern themselves with setting up a distinction between these two; we seem to more readily accept that Coetzee and Lurie are distinct personas, and the "laws" that govern readings of fiction forbid us from doing something as reductive as conflating the position of author and protagonist. But it seems more probable that such an option is never considered because Coetzee does not perform Lurie in the way that he performs Costello. (199)

Costello's reappearance in *Slow Man* (2005) as an author trying in vain to animate her protagonist might reinforce the critical tendency to assume that Coetzee intends her as his stand-in, but it also discourages any propensity to conflate the two because she is never a focal character

and Paul Rayment, the sole focaliser, views her in a distinctly unfavourable light.

In any case, whether or not, or how, Costello's opinions align with Coetzee's is beside the point. The novel of ideas is designed to explore ideas, not promote them. The (disembodied) narrator of *Elizabeth Costello* remarks that

> [r]ealism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things. So when it needs to debate ideas . . . realism is driven to invent situations . . . in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them. The notion of *embodying* turns out to be pivotal. In such debates ideas do not and indeed cannot float free: they are tied to the speakers by whom they are enounced, and generated from the matrix of individual interests out of which their speakers act in the world. (Coetzee 9; emphasis in original)

This embodiment, however, is also somewhat liberating. Like Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*, "A Modest Proposal," and, indeed, all of his prose parodies in which the narrator is entranced by his own eloquence, Coetzee seems to invite readers to consider the ideas seriously as propositional and ethical content (though not as indisputable truths) *despite* the obvious flaws in the narrator. Embodying ideas in fiction, as Coetzee notes in an interview with David Attwell, makes the expression of passion possible within acceptable bounds:

> When a real passion of feeling is let loose in discursive prose, you feel that you are reading the utterances of a madman. . . . The novel, on the other hand, allows the writer to *stage* his passion: Magda, in *In the Heart of the Country*, may be mad[,] . . . but I, behind her, am merely passionate. . . . But in the medium of prose commentary I can't be passionate without being mad. ("Interview [The Poetics of Reciprocity]" 60–61; emphasis in original)

Costello, especially in *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello*, allows Coetzee to be as passionate as he wishes because she, as a fictional character, has a licence to seem—or be—somewhat mad. This is very Swiftian. Moreover, the staging of these debates, with various points of view embodied in various characters, works against the transmission of a clear "message," however hard readers work to extract it. Irony is integral to the texts' argumentation rather than a layer of disguise to be seen through.

Elizabeth Costello contains many signs that undermine propositional clarity. Firstly, Costello cannot decide what she believes. In Lesson 6, "The Problem of Evil," she is deeply troubled by Paul West's depiction of the execution of Hitler's would-be assassins. She says "that she no longer believes that storytelling is good in itself. . . . If she, as she is nowadays, had to choose between telling a story and doing good, she would rather, she thinks, do good" (Coetzee, *Elizabeth* 167). In Lesson 8, "At the Gate," however, she tells her judges that she is "open to all voices, not just the voices of the murdered and violated. . . . If it is their murderers and violators who choose to summon [her] instead, to use [her] and speak through [her], [she] will not close [her] ears to them" (204). Hedges and equivocations surround each statement. Additionally, for the purposes of her trial, she eventually remembers, or manufactures, a belief in frogs that live in a Victorian river, the Dulgannon, which does not actually exist. We can read all of this as Coetzee's anguished personal reflections on the limits of fictional truth, but it is also possible to read it as the work of an author distancing himself from a cipher-like narrator. Those who conflate Costello with Coetzee miss the second, more Swiftian tone of voice.

Each of the Lessons in *Elizabeth Costello* ends inconclusively, clouded by the narrator's faintly ludicrous bewilderment that challenges the clarities of didacticism. There is an ambiguity in the word Lesson that does ironic work for Coetzee; it denotes, among other things, both a musical exercise focused on form and the more content-driven and authoritative "lesson" of the Church of England's liturgy. As with Swift, the didacticism does its work from under the cover of plausible deniability. Neither writer lets his readers rest long on the high plains of

sanctimonious moralism; all of their moralists, and especially their narrators, have feet of clay.

In her discussion of "A Modest Proposal," Costello questions its "received" interpretation and suggests that Swift might be inviting his readers to draw an analogy between cannibalism and meat eating. When Costello tries to be didactic, Stephen Mulhall contends, she is a less effective rhetorician than Swift:

> By stressing the possibility of reading Swift otherwise, she invites her audience to see a parallel between his modest proposal and her outrageous analogy between the Holocaust and factory farming. What she does not stress is the disanalogy between their approaches. For whereas her alternative reading of Swift depends upon attributing to him the desire that his readers exercise their imaginations, working out his intended moral for themselves rather than having it served up for them on a plate, Costello explicitly draws the moral she has in mind. . . . One might say: her literal-mindedness is of a rather different, and potentially less effective, cast than that of Swift. (118)

Costello's literal-mindedness is no match for Swift's irony, but the comparison should be drawn with the Modest Proposer rather than Swift. Coetzee positions his narrator to reason outrageously on a problem that remains extremely difficult, even when (or especially when) confidence in the narrator is undermined. As fiction understands better than analytic philosophy, there are no ideal human subjects to make ideal ethical decisions, but decisions must be made nevertheless. To put it mildly, the Proposer is unreliable, and this pair of sentences is gloriously and terribly unhinged:

> Some Persons of a desponding Spirit are in great Concern about that vast Number of poor People, who are Aged, Diseased, or Maimed; and I have been desired to employ my Thoughts what Course may be taken, to ease the Nation of so grievous an Incumbrance. But I am not in the least Pain upon that Matter; because it is very well known, that they are every Day *dying*,

> and *rotting*, by *cold*, and *famine*, and *filth*, and *vermin*, as fast as can be reasonably expected. (Swift, "A Modest Proposal" 114; emphasis in original)

What could possibly constitute a reasonable expectation in such circumstances? The critical point remains, however, that the inhumanity occurs whether or not what the Proposer suggests is a sane way of dealing with it. Similarly, while external evidence shows Coetzee's sympathy with many of Costello's views—his own vegetarianism is a matter of public record[6]—Costello, and the other personae that voice opinions discursively in Coetzee's fictions such as JC in *Diary of a Bad Year*, are not intended to provide a direct exposition of his opinions. Fiction is rarely the best option for an expository enterprise, but it can be very good at provoking thought.

IV. Ireland and England; South Africa and Australia

While it is not central to our argument in this essay, the contrast we note above between Swift and Coetzee, as members of a colonising minority, and the personae they choose in these two fictions, would reward further investigation. Coetzee has never denied his complicity, however involuntary, in the "audacious and well-planned crime against Africa" committed by his forebears and white compatriots ("Interview [South African Writers]" 342). Without for a moment wanting to deny that Coetzee is aware of similar crimes perpetrated by white Australians, one could contend that a reasonably prosperous inhabitant of one of Australia's coastal cities like Costello is more plausibly able to move through life without being dogged by such guilty associations. Coetzee moved to Australia while writing *Elizabeth Costello*. In an interview given in 2001, while still in the planning stages of the move, he observes:

> I have always been impressed by Australian egalitarianism, by the way in which Australians relate to each other, spontaneously as far as I can see, as equals. You might say that anyone from South Africa, with its huge social and racial divisions, would have that reaction. But egalitarianism in Australia is, in my experience, quite unique in the world. Obviously, it is a

> consequence of a particular social history. Nevertheless, I find it profoundly admirable. (Coetzee and Susskind, "Bulletin")

His view is uncharacteristically sunny, and the fact that it has subsequently been complicated by a decade's residence in the country is demonstrated, for example, in the "Opinion" titled "On Apology" in *Diary of a Bad Year*, which ends, tellingly, with the statement "Jonathan Swift, thou shouldst be living at this hour" (9). Indeed, Costello has to be reminded of the fate of the Tasmanian Indigenous people by the Kafkaesque tribunal in Lesson 8, although she then professes herself willing to act as their "secretary" if called upon to do so (Coetzee, *Elizabeth* 203–04). Coetzee would surely be unlikely to describe the peoples of southern Africa as an "invisible" people (203), the term that Costello uses for the Tasmanian Aborigines. In his 2003 interview with Attwell, he compares the successes of the colonial enterprise in various parts of the world:

> Seen from the outside as an historical specimen, I am a late representative of the vast movement of European expansion that took place from the sixteenth century to the mid twentieth century of the Christian era, a movement that more or less achieved its purpose of conquest and settlement in the Americas and Australasia, but failed totally in Asia and almost totally in Africa. (Coetzee and Attwell, "An Exclusive Interview")

The success he refers to in Australia by no means implies approval but does signal a belief that those who, like Costello, have been brought up in Australia have developed a different set of attitudes than white South Africans like him.

Costello and Gulliver have, by dint of national circumstance, a more dispassionate attitude toward the colonial enterprise than their respective authors, and less anxiety of a specifically national variety. White Australians like Costello can blithely adopt the role of colonials or rugged egalitarians speaking for the oppressed peoples of the world. Gulliver, who is presented by Swift as coming from Nottinghamshire in the heart of England, wields a rhetoric of good British justice about

which Swift has deep reservations. Both, in other words, can be sanctimonious in ways that are ironically detached from their authors' more consciously conflicted cultural identities. Even in the South African novels, as Clarkson points out,

> Coetzee himself does not offer programmatic ethical imperatives in the way that his characters often do. . . . [E]ven though Mrs Curren's position may be historically untenable [in *Age of Iron*], Coetzee's staging of it in a "contest" does not amount to its dismissal; the actual outcome of the contest is, in fact, irrelevant. What matters is that a countervoice is heard. (160)

Indeed, in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee writes that "there is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them. It is some measure of a writer's seriousness whether he does evoke/invoke those countervoices in himself" ("Interview [The Poetics of Reciprocity]" 65). After all, if voicing opinions is his aim, Coetzee could readily find a publisher for a book of essays conveying the strong opinions that are so ambivalently staged in *Diary.* While not wishing to be reductive, we suggest that at least one of the roles these fictional characters play is to voice passions that Coetzee acknowledges without wishing to defend them as truths. A good novel of ideas is not merely a displaced polemic or work of philosophy.

V. Conclusion

The history of the novel can sometimes look like little more than variations on themes set by Cervantes. Subsequent authors have "written back" to canonical writers such as Shakespeare, Dickens, Milton, the Brontës, Defoe, and Wordsworth. By contrast, there are very few successful imitations or reworkings of Swift's work. In Gulliver and his travels, Swift invented one of the abiding dystopian myths of modernity, but he has perhaps been too intimidating a master of irony and ridicule to be taken on directly by successors. We contend that Coetzee, particularly in *Elizabeth Costello*, is deeply if indirectly engaged by Swift's anatomy of bad faith and alerts his readers to this in Costello's malapert critique

of Gulliverian imperialism. Swift cannot be so easily written off as an imperialist man, and it is probable that Coetzee wants readers to see that in the serious games he plays with his narrator. Both authors deal with ideas in fiction in provocative ways that separate us as readers from the consolation of a narrative voice that can act as "guide, philosopher, and friend" (Pope 279).[7]

In the opening Lesson of *Elizabeth Costello*, Costello's son John describes her in an almost disturbingly detached way: "Already on her face the passive look that, if you saw it in a young girl, you would call withdrawn. A face without personality, the kind that photographers have to work on to lend distinction. Like Keats, he thinks, the great advocate of blank receptiveneness" (4). Gulliver, too, is a cipher, "a face without personality" whose lack of emotional or ethical coherence frustrates readers who desire the sentimental recognitions of either sympathy or moralism. This does not mean that Swift and Coetzee cannot enrage readers with their uncomfortable exposures of human misconduct. They are far from ethically agnostic. What it does mean, however, is that neither Swift nor Coetzee will provide the consolations of identification.

Notes

1 For example, "Person about" searches on the *MLA Bibliography* database in January 2013 yield the following results: 17 for J. M. Coetzee and Kafka (many in European languages); 15 for J. M. Coetzee and Dostoevsky; 49 for J. M. Coetzee and Defoe; 24 for J. M. Coetzee and Beckett.

2 See, for example, Greer's "A Modest Proposal."

3 The significance of the differences between English and Irish publication is enjoying a renaissance among Swift scholars in works like Karian's *Jonathan Swift in Print and Manuscript*, Griffin's *Swift and Pope: Satirists in Dialogue*, and the new multi-volume Cambridge edition of Swift's works.

4 See pages 160–63 of Dooley's *J. M. Coetzee and the Power of Narrative* for a discussion of the two characters' betrayal of parental love while engaged in futile though apparently heroic struggles.

5 See, for example, Rawson's *Gulliver and the Gentle Reader*, Phiddian's *Swift's Parody*, and Boyle's *Swift as Nemesis*.

6 For example, in a 2004 interview, Coetzee said that he gave up meat thirty years earlier: "God knows why it took me so long. I suppose I thought it was normal human behaviour" (Coetzee and Susskind, "Hear Him Roar").

7 Pope used this line as an extravagant and sincere compliment to his and Swift's mutual friend, Lord Bolingbroke. In a small way, this illustrates why Swift and Pope shared one of the most gloriously antagonistic and competitive of literary friendships.

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