

Chapter 1

Positioning Elizabeth Costello in the animal rights debate: J.M. Coetzee's (non-)use of the philosophers and poets in *The Lives of Animals*

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

In his thoughts, Herman spoke a eulogy for the mouse who had shared a portion of her life with him and who, because of him, had left this earth. “What do they know—all those scholars, all those philosophers, all the leaders of the world—about such as you? They have convinced themselves that man, the worst transgressor of all the species, is the crown of creation. All other creatures were created merely to provide him with food, pelts, to

be tormented, exterminated. In relation to them, all people are Nazis; for the animals it is an eternal Treblinka. And yet man demands compassion from heaven.” (Singer, 1984b, 271)

This chapter aims to position J.M. Coetzee in the animal rights debate, adopting more an ecocritical approach, as outlined by Graham Huggan (Huggan, 2004), than a purely postcolonial one, as exemplified by Attwell’s work (Attwell, 1993). In order to do so, it will have to consider the most relevant modern philosophers (and philosophies) and the poets whose work Coetzee does not explicitly acknowledge in *The Lives of Animals* (Coetzee, 1999b). The discussion will begin with the influential works of the leading animal rights philosophers. Peter Singer’s utilitarian and Tom Regan’s rights-based approaches to animal rights will initially be examined in relation to *The Lives of Animals*. This will be followed by an exploration of approaches that share with Coetzee (and Costello, apparently his fictional persona) a rejection of appeals to ethical principles, namely the approaches of Mary Midgley and of ecofeminism.

The apparent inadequacies of the utilitarian and rights-based approaches will necessitate a look at one of the other major modern ethical schools of thought, namely virtue ethics, represented in this chapter by Anette Baier and Alasdair MacIntyre. While MacIntyre does not say much about animals in his important work, *After Virtue* (MacIntyre, 2007), it will be argued that this work is crucial to Coetzee’s rejection of Enlightenment rationalism and of its rights-based and utilitarian philosophies. Furthermore, MacIntyre’s alternative philosophy of virtue ethics may help to solve some other problems raised in *The Lives of Animals*, since Coetzee’s work is by no means *merely* about animal rights, nor should the work be read *merely* as an argument and its dramatic structure be ignored. However, this chapter will focus on positioning Coetzee intellectually, reserving a literary analysis for later chapters.

This chapter will also attempt to assess Coetzee’s contribution to the animal rights debate, in particular, his controversial and paradoxical attack on the rationalist tradition in Western philosophy and his pitting poetic “sympathetic imagination” against reason. This opposition between philosophy and poetry will be problematised by showing how dependent philosophers sometimes are on images and imagination,

and by demonstrating how reasonable the poetic mode can be.

Positioning Coetzee in the animal rights debate is complicated by the fact that he expresses his views through what appears to be his controversial persona and alter-ego, Elizabeth Costello. Some reviewers are hesitant to identify her views with those of Coetzee (Kunkel, 1999) (Webb, May 19, 1999),¹ believing that Coetzee uses the fictional mode of the philosophical dialogue in order to express more extreme views than he himself would be prepared to admit to. Peter Singer expresses just such an opinion in his essay in the “Reflections” section of *The Lives of Animals* (Coetzee, 1999b, 91). Yet many of the attacks on Costello’s arguments are *ad hominem* and deliberately misinterpret her or make no sympathetic attempt to understand what she is trying to communicate. She faces not so much rational, intelligent criticism—although she faces that too—as hostile, wilful incomprehension or mere indifference. Furthermore, her own approach is excessively hostile toward the philosophical tradition of rationality, and Coetzee makes no attempt to use the intellectual and moral authority of those philosophers and poets whose ideas and words could have strengthened Costello’s case.

Furthermore, it will be argued that even though Coetzee maintains an ironic distance between himself and his persona Elizabeth Costello, even though she is far more outspoken and blatant than Coetzee when making public statements on important issues, and despite the numerous critics cautioning against attempts to ascertain Coetzee’s own views on animal rights, his views do seem to coincide quite closely with those of Costello. The views expressed by Coetzee in an interview with him after he received the Nobel Prize in 2003 and a speech of his that was read at the opening of an art exhibition in Sydney, Australia, in early 2007 will be provided as evidence for this. Finally, it will be argued that, in testing the limits of rationality, Coetzee can be perceived, perhaps paradoxically, as contributing to the self-critical rationalist tradition. In exploring our treatment of nonhuman animals, Coetzee goes to the heart of what it means to be human, critiquing our identity as the rational animal.

¹Since these are web pages, no page references can be provided.

In preparation for a more detailed textual analysis of Coetzee's use of his sources in *The Lives of Animals* in Chapters 3 and 4, it will be necessary to outline very briefly the positions of the animal rights philosophers whom Coetzee ostensibly fails to use, namely Peter Singer and Tom Regan, and to suggest reasons why he may have done so.

Peter Singer is not referred to in the text of *The Lives of Animals*, but has an essay in the "Reflections" section of *The Lives of Animals* and is the co-editor, with Tom Regan, of a collection of essays on animals, that is frequently cited in the footnotes of the novel (Regan & Singer, 1976). Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975) has been called "the Bible of animal liberation" (Singer, 2002) and if one reads *The Lives of Animals* after having read this seminal work in the animal liberation movement, one will see that Costello's views are neither extreme nor idiosyncratic, but rather are shared by animal activists throughout the world. Coetzee could have found a powerful ally in Peter Singer. Indeed, it will be argued that the profound influence of *Animal Liberation* can be perceived throughout *The Lives of Animals*.

For instance, just as Costello dedicates a large section of her speech to attack the tradition of western philosophers for their speciesism² (although she does not herself use this term) and for their use of the criterion of rationality to exclude nonhuman animals from moral consideration, so does Singer spend an entire chapter criticising the western thinkers for the same speciesism. In criticising the western philosophical tradition, Singer writes:

Philosophy ought to question the basic assumptions of the age. Thinking through, critically and carefully, what most of us take for granted is, I believe, the chief task of philosophy, and the task that makes philosophy a worthwhile activity. Regrettably, philosophy does not always live up to its historic role. Aristotle's defense of slavery will always stand as a reminder that philosophers are human beings and are subject to all the preconceptions of the society to which they belong. Sometimes they

²A term coined by Richard Ryder in 1970 referring to (human) prejudice against animals of other species.

succeed in breaking free of the prevailing ideology: more often they become its most sophisticated defenders. (Singer, 2002, 236)

His insight that speciesism is an ideology helps to explain why Costello struggles to communicate with her audience and to persuade them of the existence—let alone the injustice—of their speciesism. In *The Lives of Animals* Coetzee shows how a novelist—primarily himself but also his fictional creation, Elizabeth Costello—can—indeed, should—also powerfully challenge the preconceptions of a society.

Yet, whereas Singer insists on using reason to convince people of the wrongness of speciesism, Costello appears, controversially, to reject reason, relying instead on the sympathetic imagination. She explicitly rejects philosophical discourse even though she simultaneously expresses her need for it:

“I want to find a way of speaking to fellow human beings that will be cool rather than heated, philosophical rather than polemical Such a language is available to me, I know. It is the language of Aristotle and Porphyry, of Augustine and Aquinas, of Descartes and Bentham, of, in our day, Mary Midgley and Tom Regan. It is a philosophical language I could fall back on that language, as I have said, in the unoriginal, secondhand manner which is the best I can manage [However, b]oth reason and seven decades of life experiences tell me that reason is neither the being of the universe nor the being of God And if this is so, if that is what I believe, then why should I bow to reason this afternoon and content myself with embroidering on the discourse of the old philosophers?”
(Coetzee, 1999b, 22-23)

Costello’s inconsistent use of the philosophical and argumentative mode—her use of reason to attack reason—has been much criticized both within the novel, not least by her daughter-in-law, Norma, and by reviewers and critics of the novel, most notably by Peter Singer in an essay attached to the “Reflections” section of *Lives*. Coetzee pre-empted some of these criticisms in the person of Elaine Marx, who addresses Costello after her talk on “The Poets and the Animals”:

“In your lecture [yesterday] you argued that various criteria—Does this creature have reason? Does this creature have speech?—have been used in bad faith to justify distinctions that have no real basis, between Homo and other primates, for example, and thus to justify exploitation.

“Yet the very fact that you can be arguing against this reasoning, exposing its falsity, means that you put a certain faith in the power of reason, of true reason as opposed to false reason.” (55)

While Costello’s inconsistency in her use of reason may well be criticised, her rejection of rationality as a criterion justifying the unequal treatment of animals is perfectly justifiable and, indeed, is shared by Peter Singer. Significantly, Elaine Marx’s words also echo very closely those of Jeremy Bentham, Peter Singer’s philosophical father, so to speak, whom Singer quotes when criticizing the criteria people use to justify, or rationalise, their exploitation of animals: “[t]he question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but Can they suffer?” (Singer, 2002, 8).

Furthermore, while Costello does not use the term “speciesism” at any stage, it is implicit in much of what she says, most clearly when she asserts, during the debate with O’Hearne, that:

“To me, a philosopher who says that the distinction between a human and nonhuman depends on whether you have a white or black skin, and a philosopher who says that the distinction between human and nonhuman depends on whether or not you know the difference between a subject and a predicate, are more alike than they are unlike.” (66)

Thus, it is on rationality where Singer appears to differ most from Costello. He points out:

The core of this book is the claim that to discriminate against beings solely on account of their species is a form of prejudice, immoral and indefensible. I have not been content to put forward this claim as a bare assertion, or as a statement of my own personal view, which others

may or may not choose to accept. I have *argued* for it, appealing to reason rather than to emotion or sentiment. I have chosen this path, not because I am unaware of the importance of kind feelings and sentiments of respect towards other creatures, but because reason is more universal and compelling in its appeal. Greatly as I admire those who have eliminated speciesism from their lives purely because their sympathetic concern for others reaches out to all sentient creatures, I do not think that an appeal to sympathy and good-heartedness alone will convince most people of the wrongness of speciesism. [Singer's emphasis] (Singer, 2002, 243)

This would seem to point out a fatal weakness in Costello's position, her appeals to "sympathetic imagination" and to her audience to "open your heart and listen to what your heart says" (Coetzee, 1999b, 37). However, if Singer's argument is supposed to be so compelling on a rational level, one might ask why so many philosophers resist it and why speciesism is still the dominant attitude in western society.

It is precisely because Coetzee suspects that reason is not compelling that he has Costello try a different approach, using imaginative comparisons rather than arguments. One can intellectually believe that animals suffer and yet not be emotionally moved by it; Coetzee's difficult task is to move his readership. Nonetheless, Costello does not simply use the sympathetic imagination to encourage the audience to enter into the being of a suffering animal,³ as Singer does so well in his chapters on animal experimentation and animal farming. Equally importantly, she uses a controversial and striking analogy to try to convince those in her audience who use animal products that they are as complicit in evil as the Germans who either actively or passively supported the Nazis in their murder of the Jews. It may be that Costello is asking her audience not so much to sympathise with the suffering of animals as to distance themselves from anti-semitism (and racism and sexism), and therefore from speciesism. Nor is Costello's attack on rationalism an attack on reason *per se* but rather an attack on the idea of reason as a morally significant characteristic justifying

³Namely, Red Peter and Sultan, the chimpanzees, the hypothetical cases of the bat and Molly Bloom, the chicken that protests when its throat is cut and the cattle that Costello asks us to walk beside "flank to flank" on the way to be slaughtered.

the different treatment of human and nonhuman animals. Thus, if we accept that Singer's argument is rational, and we accept that Costello is arguing a similar point, but merely using different means, then we must conclude that Costello's views are also rational.

Furthermore, although Singer insists that his approach is to convince people to abandon their speciesist habits by sheer force of reason (or argument), several images (analogies, or similarities) are central to his argument. Most fundamentally, he compares the treatment of animals with the treatment of African slaves, with the subordination of women, and with the genocide against the Jews, namely with racism, sexism and genocidal anti-Semitism. Corresponding to the former two forms of prejudice are the respective liberation movements, namely the abolition of slavery and Civil Rights Movement, and Women's Liberation. Pointing out the fact that many of the original feminists were vegetarians, Singer notes:

Indeed, the overlap between leaders of movements against the oppression of blacks and women, and leaders of movements against cruelty to animals, is extensive; so extensive as to provide an unexpected form of confirmation of the parallel between racism, sexism, and speciesism. (Singer, 2002, 221)

Costello's animal rights activism therefore follows quite naturally from her feminism. Also, on the way to the debate with O'Hearne, Costello and her son discuss different analogies to describe our use of animals: "we treat them like prisoners of war" (Coetzee, 1999b, 58) and "Well, that's what our captive herds are: slave populations" (Coetzee, 1999b, 59). Singer points out what he sees as the moral backwardness of the United States of America concerning animal welfare, making the historical precedent behind the slavery analogy very explicit and pointed:

As the USA lagged behind the civilized world in outlawing human slavery, so the United States now lags behind in softening the unrestrained brutalities of animal slavery. (Singer, 2002, 79)

Coetzee may well have taken the slavery comparison from Singer (although Aristotle also explicitly excludes women, slaves and animals from his moral order). What makes

Singer's slavery analogy particularly powerful is that it is not a 'mere' analogy, but one rooted in American history, which includes brutal oppression and exploitation that Americans would rather forget. It is not just a comparison, but suggests a causal link between contemporary American attitudes to animals today with attitudes towards slaves in their past. It has an emotive force that reinforces the argument against speciesism, although it may alienate readers rather than win them over, since it is such a blunt challenge to their values.

On the one hand some critics have reservations about this analogy. Ian Hacking writes:

I am worried by the analogy with slavery, but not to the same extent as my confusion over comparisons to genocide. It is not to be forgotten that our pets, our dogs 'off lead,' our lap dogs, and our domestic animals have all been created by us, for us, and along with us. ... These animals are part of the human community, to whom we have responsibilities and for whom we must have respect. We are now their stewards, but they are neither our serfs nor our slaves." (Hacking, 2000, 24)

While Hacking may be right about our pets and working animals, he is surely mistaken about farmed animals, which are not merely used, but callously exploited. Nonetheless, his reservations are echoed by another critic:

The work of some animal-rights activists, notably Peter Singer, is marked by a similarly loose—and potentially dangerous—use of anthropomorphic analogy. In his book *Animal Liberation*, for example, Singer sees vivisection in the same perspective as "the atrocities of the Roman gladiatorial arenas or the eighteenth-century slave trade." (Huggan, 2004, 726)

On the other hand, the slavery analogy is taken very seriously by a philosopher like Steven Best (Best, 2006), who compares in detail the domestication of animals to the enslavement of humans, claiming too that there is a causal connection. Being a radical abolitionist, Best, however, may possibly be taking the analogy to extremes.

Costello is criticised both by Norma and by Abraham Stern, an elderly Jewish academic, for evoking the Holocaust analogy, in which she compares the suffering of animals on factory farms and in laboratories to the suffering of Jews in Nazi death camps. Coetzee pointedly chooses to expose her to such criticism, allowing those voices to be heard, rather than indicate that the analogy had been made before, most notably by Peter Singer and Isaac Bashevis Singer, both of whom, having origins in European Jewry, lost family in the Holocaust. Reading Singer's *Animal Liberation* convinces one that Costello is not representing an extreme position, nor are her words meant metaphorically or hyperbolically:

“Let me say it openly: we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed, dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them.” (Coetzee, 1999b, 21)

Coetzee is well aware of the sensitivity of raising the Holocaust analogy. In an essay in *Stranger Shores* (2002), he writes that:

When Aharon Appelfeld began writing in the early 1960s, the Holocaust did not count, in Israel, as a fitting subject for fiction. . . . Combined with this public silence was a feeling that there was something indecent in representing the Holocaust, that the subject ought to be, if not beyond the reach of language, at least out of bounds to anyone who had not lived through it. (Coetzee, 2002a, 212)

Nonetheless, Coetzee once again asserts the power of fiction to attain the truth, to say the unsayable: “Faith in the power of fiction to recover and restore the wounded self—‘to give the tortured person back his human form, which was snatched away from him’—has since been the core of Appelfeld’s work” (Coetzee, 2002a, 214).

In discussing vivisection, Peter Singer claims that after Nazism the experimentation on live subjects was transferred to experiments on animals, and in this context

quotes Isaac Bashevis Singer's controversial words: "In their behavior towards creatures, all men [are] Nazis" (Singer, 2002, 83-84). Singer also mentions Dr Bernhard Grzimek who:

likened the ignorance of Germans about these [factory] farms to the ignorance of an earlier generation of Germans to another atrocity, also hidden away from most eyes; and in most cases, no doubt, it is not the inability to find out what is going on as much as a desire not to know facts that may lie heavily on one's conscience that is responsible for the lack of awareness; as well as, of course, the comforting thought that, after all, it is not members of one's own race (species) that are the victims of whatever it is that goes on in those places. (Singer, 2002, 217)

This is very similar to Costello's discussion of the "willed ignorance" of people during the Holocaust:

"The people who lived in the countryside around Treblinka—Poles, for the most part—said that they did not know what was going on in the camp; said that, while in a general way they might have guessed what was going on, they did not know for sure; said that, while in a sense they might have known, in another sense they did not know, could not afford to know, for their own sake.

...

"It is not because they waged an expansionist war and lost it, that Germans of a certain generation are still regarded as standing a little outside humanity, as having to do or be something special before they can be readmitted to the human fold. They lost their humanity, in our eyes, because of a certain willed ignorance on their part. Under the circumstances of Hitler's kind of war, ignorance may have been a useful survival mechanism, but that is an excuse which, with admirable moral rigor, we refuse to accept." (Coetzee, 1999b, 19-20)

Besides the common idea of “willed ignorance,” the similarity of Singer’s phrase “an earlier generation of Germans” and Costello’s “Germans of a certain generation” suggests a possible influence of Singer on Coetzee. This notion of “willed ignorance” will be explored further in a later chapter. It is sufficient for now to note the link between “willed ignorance” and ideologies such as anti-Semitism, racism and speciesism; and of how ideology and prejudice help people to close their hearts to the persecution and exploitation of others. It is by making analogies between these different types of prejudice that Costello moves her audience most, but moves them more to anger and resentment than to understanding.

In discussing the opposition between a discursive philosophical mode and an imaginative poetic mode, it should be noted that it is on the basis of *similarity* with humans in some significant characteristic that one can justify the fair treatment of animals. In Singer’s view, following Jeremy Bentham, it is the capacity for suffering rather than the ability to reason that is significant (Singer, 2002, 7). Also, animals, as sentient but non-rational beings, are no different from marginal cases of humans, namely infants, the severely retarded and the insane. The similarity of animals with this group of humans justifies treatment equal to that enjoyed by these non-rational human beings. Ultimately, Singer’s position is based on the principle of the equal consideration of interests:

If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering—insofar as rough comparisons can be made—of any other being. (Singer, 2002, 8)

The question is why does Coetzee not permit Costello to make use of the arguments and moral authority of Peter Singer? An obvious reason would be the fact that Singer’s position is based on utilitarianism which is a form of instrumentalist rationalism that Costello is at pains to reject, since the cruel efficiency of the modern factory farm is based precisely on this way of thinking. Furthermore, from a

utilitarian position, the suffering of the animal could be outweighed by the greater happiness the death of the animal will bring to the numerous people who eat it, although Singer argues that the animal's interest in its own life outweighs the relatively trivial aesthetic interests of the people who gain pleasure from eating it. Also, from a utilitarian point of view individuals are replaceable, since it is the sum total of pleasure and pain of all those concerned that is important rather than individual pain and pleasure. Singer emphasizes that suffering and killing are distinct ethical issues and that whereas the ability to reason and the possession of self-consciousness may be irrelevant to the issue of suffering or the inflicting of pain, they are not irrelevant when it comes to the question of killing a being (Singer, 2002, 20-21). Thus Singer argues for the alleviation of suffering of animals rather than against killing them painlessly for food. Coetzee has Costello reject this way of thinking, no doubt, since he values the embodied, individual existence of animals:

“To be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being. Bat-being in the first case, human-being in the second, maybe; but those are secondary considerations. To be full of being is to live as a body-soul. One name for the experience of full being is *joy*.

“To be alive is to be a living soul. An animal—and we are all animals—is an embodied soul.” (Coetzee, 1999b, 33)

However, it will be argued in a later chapter that the main reason for Coetzee's having Costello avoid evoking moral authorities in the animal liberation movement is his general distrust of our need to find authorities and moral principles rather than think through and feel the issues ourselves.

In contrast to Peter Singer's utilitarian approach is the deontological⁴ approach of Tom Regan, put forward in *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983). Tom Regan and Mary Midgley are mentioned by Costello in the text of *The Lives of Animals* (Coetzee,

⁴Deontology is “[t]he ethical theory taking duty as the basis of morality; the view that some acts are morally obligatory regardless of their consequences. . . . deontological ethics can be contrasted with any sort of utilitarianism, which must always be teleological” (Flew, 1979, 88-89).

1999b, 22). However, she does not discuss their work in the body of the text, although she cites an essay by Midgley entitled “Persons and Non-persons” (Coetzee, 1999b, 61). She also frequently cites *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, the collection of animal-related literature that Peter Singer and Tom Regan co-edited, in the footnotes of *The Lives of Animals*.

Regan makes use of a vivid metaphor to explain the difference between the utilitarian and rights-based approaches. One should imagine individuals as receptacles and the pain and pleasure that they experience as the liquid content of the receptacles (Regan, 2004, 205-06). Utilitarians would value the content of the receptacles, believing the receptacles themselves to be replaceable:

Sentient but nonself-conscious beings . . . Singer believes, *are* mere receptacles of what is good (pleasures) and evil (pain). They are “cups” that, from moment to moment, contain either the bitter (pain) or the sweet (pleasure), and to destroy them is merely to destroy something that contains (experiences) what is valuable. (Regan, 2004, 208)

Deontologists, or Kantians, like Regan, would value the receptacles, and thus the individual sentient beings, themselves.

It is interesting, and possibly part of the reflexive play of the literature surrounding *The Lives of Animals*, that in his essay in “Reflections”, Peter Singer uses an image of receptacles, a bottle of soya milk and a bottle of Kahlúa (a type of liqueur), to explain the utilitarian position to his daughter, Naomi, arguing that some experiences, namely human ones (the Kahlúa), are more valuable than others (the animals, or milk). When Naomi tries to defend Costello’s position, that killing a human cannot be worse than killing a bat, Singer argues:

“Yes it can. If I pour the rest of this soymilk down the sink, I’ve emptied the container; and if I do the same to that bottle of Kahlúa you and your friends are fond of drinking when we are out, I’d empty it too. But you’d care more about the loss of the Kahlúa. The value that is lost when something is emptied depends on what was there when it was full, and

there is more to human existence than there is to bat existence.” (Coetzee, 1999b, 90)

This striking use of a comparison both clearly shows the difference between Singer’s and Costello’s views on the value of the lives of animals and indicates how useful images or comparisons can be to philosophers when illustrating important concepts. It also qualifies any simplistic opposition between a discursive philosophical mode and imaginative poetic modes. Indeed, Costello describes herself thus: “. . . like most writers, I have a literal cast of mind” (Coetzee, 1999b, 32).

Regan’s position, like Costello’s, is far more egalitarian than Singer’s. For Regan, the rights of animals are based on a principle of justice grounded in the notion of inherent value. What gives animals—and Regan, for argument sake, limits these to healthy mammals of one year and older—inherent value is that they meet the subject-of-a-life criterion which marks a relevant similarity (Regan, 2004, 245). That is, Regan contends that the capacity for subjective experience is the basis of inherent value and that all creatures with this capacity deserve to be treated equally. Thus, for Regan (as for Singer), rationality is not a morally significant criterion, and it cannot therefore justify the unequal treatment of animals and the consequent exploitation of nonhuman animals by humans. He, too, mentions marginal cases of humans to justify equal treatment with animals.

Regan’s rights-based position is a valuable complement to Singer’s utilitarianism and rectifies the latter’s devaluing of the individual animal’s experience. Taken together these two philosophical contributions help significantly to advance the struggle for animal liberation yet Coetzee does not give them due acknowledgement, possibly so that he can advance his case for the sympathetic imagination instead. Yet Regan also discusses the imagination argument (Regan, 2004, 64-67), contending that it is possible to imagine oneself into the experience of an animal, and mentions Nagel’s bat, both of which would endorse Costello’s claims for the sympathetic imagination. Nonetheless, Costello’s suspicion of principles would dissuade her from invoking the authority of Regan even though his position would seem to share so much with hers:

“I was hoping not to have to enunciate principles,” his mother says. “If principles are what you want to take away from this talk, I would have to respond, open your heart and listen to what your heart says.” (Coetzee, 1999b, 37)

Costello also objects to treating animals as equivalent to severely retarded human beings, although she is referring more specifically to behaviourist experiments that conclude that animals are imbeciles (Coetzee, 1999b, 62).

Finally, a central weakness of Regan’s position—and Singer’s—is the fact that the principles they use to argue for animal rights, the deontological and utilitarian principles respectively, have been used by others for exactly the opposite purpose, namely to justify the exploitation of animals. In Regan’s case, his reliance on Kantianism is perhaps fatally hampered by the fact that, for Kant, ultimate value in the universe resides only in the good will of persons—that is, in the autonomous rational individual—and only human beings are capable of personhood (Kant, 1964, 61). For Kant, only persons are capable of making rational, moral choices, thanks to their possession of rationality, and only persons deserve moral consideration. Thus nonhuman animals lie outside of the moral community. At most, we have only indirect duties to animals, namely we should not treat animals cruelly in case this accustoms us to treat humans with cruelty. Furthermore, Regan’s abolitionist approach to the use of animals may well seem too absolutist for someone like Costello.

Mary Midgley is mentioned both in the text of *The Lives of Animals* and is cited in the notes. There is much in the approach that informs Midgley’s *Beast and Man* (first published in 1978) (Midgley, 2002a) with which Coetzee would presumably agree. Like Costello (and Coetzee), Midgley is suspicious of an appeal to fundamental moral principles as a basis for justifying the better treatment of animals. Like Costello, she prefers moral intuitions to moral theories—she calls our natural affection towards animals “sentiment”—although, unlike Costello, she does not reject rationality. Midgley’s approach has a subtlety that undermines binary oppositions. Thus she would reject the simplistic opposition of reason and emotion, or of philosophy and poetry. The following quotation, employing a striking image, illustrates her approach:

I want to get away from the essentially colonial picture (used by Blake) in which an imported governor, named Reason, imposes order on a chaotic tribe of Passions or Instincts. The colonial picture, which is Plato's, was handed down through the Stoics, Descartes and Spinoza, to Kant. (Midgley, 2002a, 250)

It is precisely this idea of reason that Costello attacks. However, it is a stereotyped idea of reason, in contrast to Midgley's more balanced treatment of reason and emotion, an approach which avoids the extremes of Kant's rationalised ethical system and Hume's irrational, emotivist ethics. Nonetheless, it is an influential idea of reason which is perhaps why Coetzee has Costello attack it so vehemently. This stereotyped, ultimately Platonic, idea of reason will be more fully explored in Chapter 2 when Coetzee's use of Platonic texts will be explored in more detail. It should suffice for now to note that what Midgley, and arguably Costello, is attacking is the privileging of reason above all other elements of the human soul, including emotion, will and imagination. It is fair to assume that Midgley is also criticising Aristotle's reductionistic definition of man as the rational animal.

Not being permitted by Coetzee to acknowledge Midgley or to position herself within an accepted tradition of thought, and, instead, by presenting herself as an isolated (hence eccentric) voice, Costello invites incomprehension of her attack on reason, although it is may be that many of those in her audience lack Midgley's subtlety and, instead, hold the stereotyped view of reason that Costello criticises.

In the section of her introduction entitled "Equality is not Sameness" Midgley writes:

That homogenizing approach to equality—so popular in the Enlightenment—flows from an unrealistic attempt to treat people as abstract, standard social entities, divorced from nature. It enforces the sharp division between mind and body, between culture and nature, between thought and feeling, which is the bad side of our inheritance from the Age of Reason. (Midgley, 2002a, xxv)

Both Midgley and Costello attack the privileged position of an abstract idea of reason and of persons as disembodied intellects in modern society and academia. However, they do not exile reason so much as dethrone it in order to make it equal to all the other constituents in a democratic body politic. Nor do Costello and Midgley simply reverse the hierarchical privileging of reason above body or emotion but rather treat these as equals, hence their notions of “embodied intellects” (Midgley, 2002a, xlii) and the “embodied soul” (Coetzee, 1999b, 33).

There is an echo of Costello’s enigmatic comment that her vegetarianism comes not out of moral conviction but “out of a desire to save my soul” (Coetzee, 1999b, 43) in the last sentence of Mary Midgley’s “Introduction to the First Edition” of *Beast and Man*: “I conclude that man can neither be understood nor saved alone” (Midgley, 2002a, xlii). While Midgley is referring to man’s relation to nature, she is also referring to a kind of non-religious salvation in the way that Costello apparently does. Furthermore, the reference to saving one’s own soul is very significant, suggesting a Socratic idea of human salvation through critical self-interrogation.

Midgley also acknowledges the power of the human imagination. She describes the emotional complexity (but not chaos) of conflicting human desires and needs, and adds:

Imagination and conceptual thought intensify all the conflicts by multiplying the options, by letting us form all manner of incompatible schemes and allowing us to know what we are missing, and also by greatly increasing our powers of self-deception. As against that, they can give us self-knowledge, which is our strongest card in the attempt to sort conflicts out. It is to deepen that self-knowledge that I want to use comparison with other species. (Midgley, 2002a, 272)

Midgley’s acknowledgement of the importance of the imagination, no less than that of reason, is also significant, although she would not go so far as to privilege it above reason, as Costello appears to do. Indeed, Costello’s main point is that the faculty of sympathetic imagination, a faculty (good) poets possess in abundance, rather

than reason enables humans to escape their speciesist prejudices and enter into animal experience. On the other hand, Costello's claim that "there are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination" (Coetzee, 1999b, 35) seems extravagant. On one thing they would presumably agree, though, and that is the limitations of a certain narrow form of humanism, insofar as it is merely anthropocentric and pits reason against our "animal passions" (Abrams, 1971, 73-74), to sympathise with other animals. Indeed, Peter Singer notes, in his chapter entitled "Man's Dominion," that with the emergence of humanism during the Renaissance, notwithstanding some compassionate exceptions such as Montaigne, whom Coetzee cites in *The Lives of Animals* (Coetzee, 1999b, 37), "...the absolute nadir was still to come" (Singer, 2002, 200) in terms of the cruel treatment of animals. This low point on the treatment of animals is evident in Descartes who, himself, dissected living animals (Singer, 2002, 201), arguing that they are mere automata. Indeed, Costello is especially scathing towards Descartes and his modern heirs, such as the behaviourists (Coetzee, 1999b, 60-62).

A large part of Midgley's *Beast and Man* concerns the significance of the biological sciences—especially ethology and sociobiology—for a study of humanity and values. It is clear from the citations in *The Lives of Animals* that Coetzee also read widely in the biological literature. Like Costello—and following Darwin—Midgley sees humankind as merely one type of animal amongst many, continuous with them in terms of evolutionary development. Critical of sociobiologists' tendency to reduce human nature to mere animal nature, Midgley nonetheless writes:

Yet of course there are also good things in Sociobiology. It does in principle emphasize our continuity with the rest of nature. It resists the strange segregation of humans from their kindred that has deformed much of Enlightenment thought, a segregation which has indeed terribly delayed our realization of environmental damage itself. It can be linked, too, with increasing public concern about the suffering we inflict on animals. ... It is, then, surely time for the political left, and for intellectuals in the social sciences and humanities, to see that our continuity with nature is an important fact in the world, a fact quite distinct from those objectionable

ideologies—not just the sociobiological one—that have, at one time and another, distorted and exploited it. (Midgley, 2002a, xxiv)

Costello, too, emphasizes humanity’s continuity with the rest of nature when she criticises the limitations of Descartes’s understanding of man’s place in nature:

“Getting back to Descartes, I would only want to say that the discontinuity he saw between animals and human beings was the result of incomplete information. The science of Descartes’s day had no acquaintance with the great apes or with higher marine mammals, and thus little cause to question the assumption that animals cannot think. And of course it had no access to the fossil record that would reveal a graded continuum of anthropoid creatures stretching from the higher primates to *Homo sapiens*—anthropoids, one must point out, who were exterminated by man in the course of his rise to power.” (Coetzee, 1999b, 61)

An important difference between these extracts is that whereas Midgley emphasizes harm to the environment, Costello emphasizes our continuity with animals and barely mentions environmental damage in *The Lives of Animals*. In fact, Costello is very careful to keep the issues of environmentalism, or ecology, and animal rights separate, even though ecological arguments can provide powerful reasons against industrialised agriculture in general, and industrialised meat production in particular. Peter Singer enumerates these reasons in *Animal Liberation* (Singer, 2002, 164-69) but, like Costello, refuses to take them as morally decisive next to the suffering of animals. Indeed, Rosemary Rodd, the writer whom Costello cites in the quotation above in relation to humankind’s extermination of other anthropoids, also criticises in a chapter entitled “Animals as Part of the Environment” the tendency to see animals merely as part of nature (Rodd, 1990). In *The Lives of Animals* when Costello provides a lengthy answer to a question arising from her poetry seminar, her son John notes her “antiecologism” (Coetzee, 1999b, 55) when she criticises, as “Platonic” (Coetzee, 1999b, 54), the abstractness of ecologists’ own ideas of nature which leads them to devalue the individuality of each animal:

“The irony is a terrible one. An ecological philosophy that tells us to live side by side with other creatures justifies itself by appealing to an idea, an idea of a higher order than any living creature. An idea, finally—and this is the crushing twist to the irony—which no creature except Man is capable of comprehending. Every living creature fights for its own, individual life, refuses, by fighting, to accede to the idea that the salmon or the gnat is of a lower order of importance than the idea of the salmon or the idea of the gnat. But when we see the salmon fighting for its life, we say, it is just programmed to fight; we say, with Aquinas, it is locked into natural slavery; we say, it lacks self-consciousness.” (Coetzee, 1999b, 54)

As will be shown below, both Midgley and Costello would have reason to distrust the machismo and patriarchy apparently inherent in deep ecology,⁵ and would appear to have much in common with ecofeminism, although both of them seem to possess an individuality and maturity that cannot be simply equated with any particular movement or school of thought. Coetzee’s use of the word “Man” in the above quotation is especially significant. First, the fact that the “M” is capitalised suggests humankind’s presumption, their arrogant belief that they “stand above” the rest of nature. Second, the word suggests that men, or masculinity, are specifically to blame, an insight that will be further developed later.

It is important to discuss deep ecology in a bit more detail, because despite Costello’s criticism of it, there is much in it that coincides with her position:

... Devall and Sessions [important figures in the deep ecology movement] argue that the concept of the isolated, atomistic individual, which arises out of the anthropocentric traditions of Western philosophy, is false to the facts of all life’s embeddedness in the larger life community. People are not independent bits of mind existing by themselves; they are enmeshed in

⁵Deep ecology is an eco-centric intellectual movement opposed to the anthropocentrism and instrumentalism inherent in modern Western society and to industrialism’s exploitative and destructive relation to nature.

networks of relationships that bind them both to their evolutionary past and to their ecological present. . . . Moreover, the natural world does not exist “for us,” as a storehouse of renewable human resources (a view that is symptomatic of a “shallow” view of humanity’s relationship to nature); we are inseparable from the natural environment (a view that indicates a “deeper” understanding of what it means to be human). (Regan, 2001, 20)

Costello would agree with deep ecology’s rejection of the instrumentalist attitude towards nature, with their rejection of the concept of the atomistic individual (as will be shown later) and with their concern with what it means to be human. However, she has been shown (above) to expose the abstractness of their own ideas of nature which leads them to devaluing the individuality of each animal. Her discussion of the value of bat-being above shows why she would reject this devaluing of animal experience. She would agree, however, that individuals are embedded, but not completely submerged, in their environment.

The apparent inconsistency of Costello’s views—she condemns the exploitation of animals (Coetzee, 1999b, 21) yet uses leather shoes and purse (Coetzee, 1999b, 43); she criticises deep ecology (Coetzee, 1999b, 61) yet seems to approve of the pro-hunting stance that some deep ecologists would endorse (Coetzee, 1999b, 52)—suggests that it will not be easy to position her ideologically. Nonetheless, as will be seen, Costello’s position (and Coetzee’s and Midgley’s) has much affinity with ecofeminism, a form of feminism that radically challenges the basis of liberalism, in particular the masculine “myth of the isolated individual,” and which deplores all forms of oppression and exploitation:

... Like other “isms,” ecofeminism is not a monolithic position . . . ; instead, it represents a number of defining tendencies, including in particular a principled stance that puts its advocates on the side of those who historically have been victims of oppression. For obvious reasons, women are pictured as among the oppressed, but the scope of ecofeminism’s concern

is not limited to women by any means. Ecofeminists maintain that the same ideology that sanctions oppression based on gender also sanctions oppression based on race, class, and physical abilities, among other things. Moreover, they believe that this same ideology sanctions the oppression of nature in general and of nonhuman animals in particular. (Regan, 2001, 21)

Presumably, there is little here that either Costello or Coetzee would disagree with. Indeed, in many of his novels Coetzee sides with the oppressed, the voiceless and the marginalised, often the victims of patriarchy and colonialism. Costello's concern for animals clearly shows that she identifies with the victims of oppression. The extract continues:

... As does deep ecology, ecofeminism challenges the myth of the isolated individual existing apart from the world and instead affirms the interconnectedness of all life. Moreover, no less than deep ecologists, ecofeminists abjure the overintellectualization of the moral life characteristic of traditional moral theories, with their abstract, universal, and impartial fundamental principles. But whereas deep ecologists locate the fundamental cause of moral theory's misstep in anthropomorphism (human-centeredness), ecofeminists argue that its real cause is androcentricism (male-centeredness). (Regan, 2001, 21-22)

While Costello does not emphasise the interconnectedness of all life and values the individual, she certainly rejects the idea of a disembodied intellect and the intellectualisation of morals in the form of abstract principles. Furthermore, as an important (fictional) feminist writer, she can be expected to spurn androcentricism, although her views turn out to be more complex than that.

Concerning the disembodied intellect:

Ecofeminists believe they offer a deeper account of the moral life than do deep ecologists, one that goes to the very foundations of Western moral theorizing. The idea of "the rights of the individual" is diagnosed as a

symptom of patriarchal thought, rooted as it is in the (male) myth of the isolated individual. A moral paradigm shift occurs when, instead of asserting rights, we freely and lovingly choose to take care of and assume responsibility for victims of oppression, both within and beyond the extended human family, other animals included. (Regan, 2001, 22)

Much of Costello's criticism is directed at this ideal of the disembodied intellect, of the isolated individual, which can be traced back to Descartes. According to Costello:

“To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being—not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly thinking machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the sensation—a heavily affective sensation—of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world. This fullness contrasts starkly with Descartes' key state, which has an empty feel to it: the feel of a pea rattling around in a shell.” (Coetzee, 1999b, 33)

Concerning ecofeminism's claim that the mistake in moral theory is androcentricism, rather than deep ecology's anthropomorphism:

Nowhere is this difference clearer than in the case of sport or recreational hunting. Devall and Sessions celebrate the value of this practice as a means of bonding ever closer with the natural world, of discovering “self in Self”; ecofeminists, by contrast, detect in the hunt the vestiges of patriarchy—the male's need to dominate and subdue. More fundamentally, there is the lingering suspicion that deep ecologists continue to view the value of the natural world instrumentally, as a means to greater self-awareness and self-knowledge. In this respect, and despite appearances to the contrary, deep ecology does not represent a “paradigm shift” away from the anthropocentric worldview it aspires to replace. (Regan, 2001, 22)

Even Costello's qualified endorsement of hunting and bullfighting should be seen in relation to the bigger evil of factory farming. Concerning hunting and bullfighting, Costello notes that:

“We call this primitivism. It is an attitude that is easy to criticize, to mock. It is deeply masculine, masculinist. Its ramifications into politics are to be mistrusted. But when all is said and done, there remains something attractive about it at an ethical level.” (Coetzee, 1999b, 52)

Her openness to bullfighting and hunting cautions a too hasty positioning of Costello no matter how close she may seem to be to a position, such as ecofeminism. In saying that “[i]ts ramifications into politics are to be mistrusted,” Costello is no doubt hinting at the links between this masculinist and anti-intellectualist primitivist “philosophy” and fascism and Nazism. A less generous reading would point out the apparent contradiction in Costello’s views, since she clearly and repeatedly draws the analogy between Nazism and speciesism with the strongest condemnation of both. On the other hand, it says much for the openness of Coetzee to opposing ideas and suggests a generosity of spirit that is willing seriously to consider the perspective even of those considered the enemy. There are other aspects, too, in her character that resist any simple positioning of her in terms of the animal rights debate, in particular her vegetarianism being linked to her concern with her own salvation, a problem that will be dealt with in a later chapter. While this concern with her own salvation may seem selfish and her qualified endorsement of bullfighting and hunting may seem retrogressive, these may actually be related to a third major modern ethical school of thought, namely virtue ethics (of which ecofeminism is a form), a major contender to the schools of utilitarian and deontological ethics discussed earlier in this chapter.

The work of the feminist philosopher Anette Baier can be characterised as a form of virtue ethics (Hursthouse, 2008)⁶. Following the research of the psychologist Carol Gilligan, Baier proposes a feminine ethic of care as an alternative to the masculine ethic of justice which is the predominant ethic in modern, western societies and which, according to feminists, favours adult, white, westernised men. This Kantian liberal ethic of justice is based on the respect for persons, a person being defined as a rational autonomous will. Since only persons are capable of moral agency, only persons deserve respect; namely, deserve to be treated as ends and not merely as means. Baier argues

⁶This reference is taken from a website, and thus no page reference can be provided.

that it will not be sufficient to supplement the ethic of justice with the ethic of care, or for the ethic of justice merely to tolerate the ethic of care, because then the relations of inequality and male domination will merely persist:

So far I have discussed three reasons women have not to be content to pursue their own values within the framework of the liberal morality. The first was its dubious record. The second was its inattention to relations of inequality or its pretence to equality. The third reason is its exaggeration of the scope of choice, or its inattention to unchosen relations... The fourth feature of the Gilligan challenge to liberal orthodoxy is a challenge to its typical *rationalism*, or intellectualism, to its assumption that we need not worry what passions persons have, as long as their rational wills can control them. (Olen & Barry, 1992, 45)

This is a profound critique of the Western liberal ethic and, it will be argued, close to Costello's (and Midgley's) position on animal rights, especially her rejection of rationality as a decisive moral criterion, namely the Kantian definition of a person as a rational, autonomous will. It is the problem of the over-intellectualised Western ideal of personhood that causes Costello's audience, most of them intellectuals themselves, to be so uncomprehending of her views.

Slow Man (Coetzee, 2005) can also be considered a critique of the Kantian ethics of justice since we see in the character of Paul Rayment, an adult white man who has lost a considerable part of his (physical) autonomy due to the accident that led to the loss of one of his legs, and caused him to become dependent on an immigrant, female nurse, a peripheral person in a society ruled by a Kantian ethics of justice. Significantly, however, he has not lost his financial independence, which allows him to retain some degree of autonomy. Paul Rayment is a product of the Kantian ethic, an isolated, lonely and emotionally under-developed intellect, a disembodied being, despite being so tied to his crippled body.

Another powerful (and controversial) critique of the philosophical basis of liberalism and of the impoverished language of analytic philosophy can be found in

Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (first published in 1981), a seminal work of virtue ethics that Coetzee quotes and discusses in the essay "Taking Offense" in his collection of essays on censorship, *Giving Offense* (Coetzee, 2006). While Coetzee makes use of *After Virtue* in relation to the issue of pornography, he also takes it as a more general critique of liberal ethics and Enlightenment rationalism. It will be argued that MacIntyre's ideas are central to Costello's argument in *The Lives of Animals*, not only negatively in offering a profound critique of liberal rationalism, but also positively in offering an alternative to liberal ethics, namely a form of virtue ethics that makes ample use of aesthetic concepts. MacIntyre argues that we are living in the Weberian age, the age of the Protestant work ethic, namely of managerialism and economic rationalisation, and proposes a return to an Aristotelian-type virtue ethics. Coetzee disapproves of the deleterious effects of bureaucratic rationalisation on universities — "Classics and Modern Languages were closed down as part of the great rationalization" (Coetzee, 1999a, 3)—and Midgley dismisses this ethic as the "present battery-egg system of academic production" (Midgley, 2002a, xxx). Since Coetzee's collection of essays was published in 1996, *After Virtue* may well have had a significant influence on him while he was writing *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace*, both of which were published in 1999.

The most obvious relevance of *After Virtue* to the argument pursued by Costello and Coetzee in *The Lives of Animals* is MacIntyre's argument that there is no rational way to choose between modern moral positions or principles, and that there is therefore no rational basis for liberalism's claims to moral universality. This, of course, completely undermines Peter Singer's use of utilitarian principles and Tom Regan's use of the Kantian respect for persons in order to provide an ethical basis for animal rights, and can also explain why Coetzee avoids having Costello use these philosophers in her own argument. Of course, Costello does not merely attack Enlightenment rationalism, but the rationalism of the entire Western philosophical tradition. In "Taking Offense," Coetzee considers the possibility of extreme relativism when he quotes Alasdair MacIntyre:

From our rival conclusions we can argue back to our rival premises; but

when we do arrive at our premises argument ceases and the invocation of one premise against another becomes a matter of pure assertion and counter-assertion. (Coetzee, 2006, 22)

Coetzee elaborates:

Another name for MacIntyre's emotivism, the doctrine that moral judgments have no basis save in emotional attitudes, that is, save in the emotional orientation of the subject toward the world, is perspectivism. As a particular form of relativism, perspectivism may be more characteristic of moral discourse today than the pure emotivism Warnock alludes to. . . . But it is also a common feature of post-liberal moral philosophy, with its deep suspicion of foundational principles and in particular the axioms of liberalism. (Coetzee, 2006, 23)

Indeed, MacIntyre's claim to expose 'natural rights' or 'human rights' (MacIntyre, 2007, 69-70) and 'utility' (MacIntyre, 2007, 70) as moral fictions may help to explain why Coetzee avoids appealing to utilitarian and rights-based principles in arguing against the abuse and exploitation of animals. According to MacIntyre, these moral fictions, then, have no basis in rationality, but are merely one more type of manipulative technique to impose one's own personal views and preferences on others:

But if the concept of rights and that of utility are a matching pair of incommensurable fictions, it will be the case that the moral idiom employed can at best provide a semblance of rationality for the modern political process, but not its reality. The mock rationality of the debate conceals the arbitrariness of the will and power at work in its resolution. (MacIntyre, 2007, 71)

Coetzee, as a novelist, may well have found especially interesting MacIntyre's philosophical revisionism, whereby philosophical claims are assessed according to literary standards and terms, an idea which is central to *The Lives of Animals* and which will be returned to later.

It is tempting to transfer these ideas from *Giving Offense* to *The Lives of Animals* and to interpret Coetzee's presentation of Costello to be an emotivist and relativist one, especially in the context of Costello's apparent attack on reason. However, this interpretation will be resisted in this thesis, especially since a purely relativist position would not necessarily require one to take the interests of animals seriously, nor would it permit the condemnation of Nazism, both of which would undermine Costello's argument. Indeed, a purely Nietzschean emotivism in which all that counts is the will to power was used by Nazis to justify the mass murder of Jews. Thus Costello, could not seriously, or consistently, be espousing an emotivist, relativist position. On the other hand, she is certainly suggesting that the justification for our exploitation of animals has no moral basis other than 'might is right.' As a fallible figure she is aware of the uncertainty concerning ethical principles and yet is also profoundly aware of the suffering of animals.

In fact, however, the manner in which Coetzee uses MacIntyre in *Giving Offense* is misleading, since MacIntyre does not himself espouse an emotivist position, but rather presents a Nietzschean-style emotivism as the only alternative to an Aristotelian-type virtue ethics once one accepts that the Enlightenment project of utilitarianism and Kantianism has failed:

For, as I argued earlier, it was because a moral tradition of which Aristotle's thought was the intellectual core was repudiated during the transitions of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries that the Enlightenment project of discovering new rational secular foundations for morality had to be undertaken. And it was because that project failed, because the views advanced by its most intellectually powerful protagonists, and more especially by Kant, could not be sustained in the face of rational criticism that Nietzsche and all his existentialist and emotivist successors were able to mount their apparently successful critique of all previous morality. Hence the defensibility of the Nietzschean position turns *in the end* on the answer to the question: was it right in the first place to reject Aristotle? [MacIntyre's emphasis] (MacIntyre, 2007, 117)

Thus, MacIntyre's position is not actually pluralistic, offering neo-Aristotelianism as merely one more moral framework from which to choose amongst several others, including utilitarianism, Kantianism and contractarianism. *After Virtue* not only provides Coetzee with a negative weapon against liberalism, but also offers a positive alternative in its place, namely an Aristotelian-type virtue ethics. Of course, it seems implausible that Costello would subscribe to any form of Aristotelianism, including Thomism, since she is scathing towards Aristotle's and Thomas Aquinas's views on animals (Coetzee, 1999b, 22). In fact, however, there is nothing essential to Aristotelianism or virtue ethics that precludes the respectful treatment of animals:

There is no reason, according to neo-Aristotelianism, that animals should not be treated as 'ends in themselves,' or as having intrinsic value, just as other human beings, and truth, and knowledge, and virtue itself, are. (Hursthouse, 1987, 244)

Indeed, it will be argued in a later chapter that Costello herself pursues a form of virtue ethics, but a Socratic rather than Aristotelian one. Nonetheless, Hursthouse's suggestion that we adopt 'animal concern' as a new virtue seems somewhat arbitrary. Costello would also presumably find this approach limited, since it is concerned not with the animal's being in itself, but only insofar as it has an impact on our character or virtue.

Returning to MacIntyre's fertile suggestion that liberal moral principles are mere fictions, it is interesting to note that Coetzee, too, presents dignity as an artificial construct or fiction in "Taking Offense":

The fiction of dignity helps to define humanity and the status of humanity helps to define human rights. There is thus a real sense in which an affront to our dignity strikes at our rights. Yet when, outraged at such affront, we stand on our rights and demand redress, we would do well to remember how insubstantial the dignity is on which those rights are based. (Coetzee, 2006, 14)

He intriguingly suggests that the way we insist on our dignity is a means of differentiating ourselves from animals. He also suggests that one day we may accord animals dignity too (Coetzee, 2006, 14).

In this same essay, Coetzee uses the Erasmian image of life as a drama:

Life, says Erasmus's Folly, is theater: we each have lines to say and a part to play. One kind of actor, recognising that he is in a play will go on playing nevertheless; another kind of actor, shocked to find he is participating in an illusion, will try to step off the stage and out of the play. The second actor is mistaken. For there is nothing outside the theater. . . . (Coetzee, 2006, 15)

Coetzee's Erasmian (and Shakespearean) observation resonates strongly with a similar observation by MacIntyre:

In life, as both Aristotle and Engels noted, we are always under certain constraints. We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making. (MacIntyre, 2007, 213)

This is part of MacIntyre's critique of the abstract and impoverished language of behaviourism and analytic philosophy, and their failure to provide an adequate discourse for understanding human action and meaning. In its place MacIntyre offers what is in his view a far richer and more complex Aristotelian, teleological and poetic understanding of human life whereby individual lives gain meaning by being expressed in narratives, embedded in the context of a broader community, with a shared history and *telos* or purpose, and in which virtues and vices help or hinder the individual to achieve *eudamonia* (variously defined as 'flourishing', 'fortune' or 'happiness') (MacIntyre, 2007, 148). The good life consists at least in part of the pursuit of excellence. MacIntyre criticises behaviourism for taking 'intention' out of behaviour and analytic, speech-act philosophy for taking action out of context. For MacIntyre, actions require intentions, contexts and histories, namely narratives (which can be classified under different genres) in order to be meaningful and intelligible. He is partly applying

Aristotelian poetics, but to human life rather than merely to drama and poetry. He continues later, further developing the idea of life as a drama and a narrative:

A central thesis then begins to emerge: man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth. . . . We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters—roles into which we have been drafted—and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed. (MacIntyre, 2007, 216)

All of this powerfully reinforces Elizabeth Costello’s poetic challenge to the philosophers in *The Lives of Animals*. In particular her critique of the Cartesian and Kantian idea of the disembodied intellect, summed up in the abstract idea of ‘personhood,’ is countered by the fully embodied and (socially and historically) embedded concept of ‘character.’ MacIntyre points out how the modern liberal individualist notion of disembodied personhood enables some modern Americans to evade responsibility for their enrichment at the expense of black slaves and of young Germans likewise to evade responsibility for the Holocaust (MacIntyre, 2007, 220-21), since they fail to acknowledge that their identity is at least partly constituted by their history and the narratives that make up their histories. Costello faces a similar difficulty in *The Lives of Animals* when she tries to convince her audience that they are implicated in “an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it . . .” (Coetzee, 1999b, 21).

A further implication of MacIntyre’s claim that one’s life should be construed as a narrative is that one’s life should be accountable, namely that one should be able to provide an account of it and compare it with others’ accounts. This is precisely what Costello does in “At the Gate” in *Elizabeth Costello*, although as is usual in Coetzee’s fictions, this idea is presented with layers of complexity, since not only does it refer to Kafka’s “Before the Law,” but it concerns a writer’s own attempt

to provide an account of her own life, and therefore implicates the author, Coetzee. Thus Coetzee defends his life of creating fictions through his writer-persona, Costello. Furthermore, a narrative must be given of a life of creating narratives, a true account of a life of creating fictions. Even though Costello's account seems inconclusive, merely by producing an account at all, however tentative, she creates a meaningful narrative.

Besides a critique of liberal rationalism and the provision of an alternative virtue ethics for human life in which poetic terms guarantee meaningfulness, MacIntyre's ideas provide a coherent framework for integrating other aspects of *The Lives of Animals*. Not only is *After Virtue* a work of philosophical revisionism often in literary terms, but it begins with the word "Imagine" (MacIntyre, 2007, 1) and then proceeds to provide a narrative of a world in which science has become completely fragmented as a result of a historical catastrophe, and then proceeds to suggest a similar type of disruption and fragmentation has occurred in modern moral discourse and society. As in *The Lives of Animals*, here the imagination is given precedence above discursive philosophical discourse. Furthermore, MacIntyre makes frequent use of striking comparisons and literary references in bolstering his arguments, in contrast to what some may deem the arid style of analytic philosophy. Very important is the fact that MacIntyre repudiates the philosophical tradition (analytic philosophy) within which he was trained, and this is the same tradition that Costello repudiates in *The Lives of Animals*, and from a similar position in which aesthetic concepts are central.

MacIntyre's approach can also help to explain Costello's tendency, in her 'philosophical' lecture, to create narratives rather than merely discuss concepts in an abstract, discursive mode. It may help us understand why Coetzee chooses a narrative mode for his own Tanner lectures (and others) which traditionally are expected to be philosophical. It illuminates Coetzee's operating within—but critically challenging—a tradition of academic discourse, since MacIntyre shows that individuals are always embedded in institutions, traditions, family relationships and histories (MacIntyre, 2007, 222). Of course, it also explains why she is alone, lonely and isolated, since she does not appear to fit easily into any of these traditions or institutions.

Again, it helps to remind the reader of Coetzee's (and Costello's) ethical seriousness, his concern for the question of what constitutes the good life for humankind, not only in relation to questions of fundamental moral principles but also in terms of a *practical* virtue ethics. Indeed, one of MacIntyre's main criticisms of the liberal ethic is that, unlike an Aristotelian ethic, it provides no detailed idea of how one is to live a good or meaningful life. Virtue ethics may thus help to explain both Coetzee's rejection of utilitarian and Kantian arguments for animal rights and the reason he puts in Costello's mouth to explain her vegetarianism, namely that "[i]t comes out of a desire to save my soul" (Coetzee, 1999b, 43). MacIntyre explains the importance of sentiment in virtue ethics:

Virtues are dispositions not only to act in particular ways, but also to feel in particular ways. To act virtuously is not, as Kant was later to think, to act against inclination; it is to act from inclination formed by the cultivation of the virtues. Moral education is an 'éducation sentimentale.'
(MacIntyre, 2007, 149)

Finally, it may also help to explain why she insists that animals, as embodied souls, can experience joy—"One name for the experience of full being is *joy*" (Coetzee, 1999b, 33)—since, if humans possess a *telos* and can experience flourishing, there is no reason why nonhuman animals cannot too. This explains her positive emphasis on animal well-being, rather than merely dwelling negatively on the suffering of animals. She seems to be suggesting a broadening of the moral community to include animals, a community in which both humans and animals can flourish together.

Costello's position in the animal rights debate can now be summed up. Her attempts to expose what she sees as the moral and logical bankruptcy of speciesism, in particular the illegitimate use of the criterion of rationality to exclude nonhuman animals from moral consideration, ally her with Singer. Costello's insistence on "embodiedness" shows the continuity between humans and nonhuman animals and aligns her not only with Mary Midgley, but also with Tom Regan and the ecologists. However, she shares with Regan a belief in the value of individual animal subjectivity

and does not follow deep ecologists who value the environment above the individual interests of animals. Nonetheless, in her refusal to espouse principles, in her emphasis on sentiment and intuitions and on animal joy, indeed in her being embodied as an ageing woman, Costello most closely resembles Midgley. Finally, Costello seems closely aligned with ecofeminism and its form of virtue ethics. In the end, however, she cannot be comfortably placed within any single school of thought.

Both Midgley and Costello differ from Singer and Regan in their suspicion of liberalism (that is, its moral philosophy based on utilitarian or Kantian principles), and instead seem to represent a form of ecofeminism, which, while not rejecting reason *per se*, displaces the overintellectualised, disembodied idea of reason originating with Descartes and crystalized in the Enlightenment. Furthermore, aware of the limitations of anthropocentrism in taking animal interests seriously, Costello is also concerned with the impact on our humanity, our humaneness, of our treatment of animals. In a later chapter, this idea of humanity will be traced back to Socrates. In demonstrating the closeness of Costello's views on animal rights with the various philosophers, whose views converge despite differences in principles and approaches, and especially with Midgley, it has been shown how reasonable Costello's position on this issue is, notwithstanding her inconsistencies. It will be argued that Coetzee's views coincide quite closely with Costello's, despite his ironic distancing from his persona and despite her strident public statements that contrast so strikingly with Coetzee's famous elusiveness.

The chapter thus far has broadly covered the arguments of some of the most important pro-animal philosophers. Their arguments have not merely been presented in a purely discursive mode since their literary qualities—in particular their use of important comparisons to further their arguments—have also been discussed. Nonetheless, the embodiedness and embeddedness of these ideas in the characters and dramatic structure of *The Lives of Animals* still need to be explored, although this must wait for the next chapters. In the meantime, however, it should be clear that an initial attempt has been made to characterise the persona of Elizabeth Costello, as is evident from the comparison of her with Mary Midgley. The Socratic characteristics

of these two figures have already been hinted at, and a deeper exploration of this characterisation will form the substance of Chapter 2.

So far the argument has been limited to philosophers, although with the discussion of MacIntyre the transition to the poets had already begun. The chapter now turns to the poets whose authority Costello fails to make use of. The figures of the Roman philosopher Plutarch, and the animal activists and compassionate vegetarians, Tom Regan and Peter Singer, give the lie to Costello's suggestion that poets are more likely to sympathise with animal suffering than philosophers. It is also unlikely that most poets or authors, at least in the West, are compassionate vegetarians. Notable examples are Tolstoy, Franz Kafka and George Bernard Shaw, but they are notable for being exceptions.

It remains to discuss the poets, or writers, Isaac Bashevis Singer and Coetzee himself. Both authors received the Nobel prize for literature, Singer in 1978 and Coetzee in 2003, both admired Dostoevsky's work (a fact which will be illuminated later in relation to Bakhtin's dialogism), and both became passionate and compassionate vegetarians. The epigraphs of this chapter both illustrate the ability of these writers to sympathise with the suffering of animals. The quotation from Coetzee, in the first person and present tense, establishes the immediacy of his moral confusion at his imagining the amount of suffering in the world. Coetzee's words help to convey a truly profound awareness of the suffering of others, an awareness that is heightened by his powerful imaginative sympathy, a moral sympathy that refuses to ignore human complicity in much of this suffering. This emphasis on the awareness of suffering "and not just human suffering" resembles the Buddha's compassion in response to the suffering of others.

The extract from Singer's "The Letter Writer," in the third and second persons, past tense, helps emphasize Herman's sense of desolation at what he mistakenly believes to be the death of a mouse with whom he had shared his home. The quotation from Isaac Bashevis Singer is justly (in)famous. It is so often quoted out of context that it has almost lost its power to shock. Perhaps it is for this reason that Coetzee re-works the Nazi analogy in *The Lives of Animals*, and develops it in detail,

rather than merely quoting Singer and relying on his moral authority. In reworking the analogy, Coetzee revives it so that it regains its power to move and defamiliarise readers, thereby forcing them to think about its lesson anew, forcing them to engage with it once more, hopefully helping them to achieve enlightenment. It is certainly not meant as “cheap point-scoring,” contrary to what Costello says after pointing out that it is as little consolation to animals that their bodies are eaten after they are killed as it is to the dead of Treblinka that their bodies were used to make soap and their hair to stuff mattresses:

“Pardon me, I repeat. That is the last cheap point I will be scoring. I know how talk of this kind polarizes people, and cheap point-scoring only makes it worse. I want to find a way of speaking to fellow human beings that will be cool rather than heated, philosophical rather than polemical, that will bring enlightenment rather than seeking to divide us into the righteous and the sinners, the saved and the damned, the sheep and the goats.” (Coetzee, 1999b, 22)

Ironically, despite this, her audience appears to take offence, to be offended, rather than to take her message to heart, namely to consider the suffering of nonhuman animals. Costello’s use of the word “enlightenment” in this extract appears to be more in line with Buddhism than with European eighteenth century rationalism, Buddhism being a form of oriental virtue ethics.

The fact that Costello chooses to mention Treblinka gives credence to the idea that Coetzee had Singer’s story in mind when he discussed the Holocaust. In Singer’s story, “The Letter Writer,” from *The Seance and Other Stories* (Singer, 1984b), the protagonist is Herman Gombiner, who features in other stories of Singer. He is an ageing, gentle, Jewish man who was born in Kalomin, Poland, but now lives in New York, and whose entire family perished in the Holocaust. He is alone and lonely, working for a Jewish publishing house. His loneliness, due mainly to the loss of his family, is emphasized by constant awareness of the spirits of the dead and his correspondence with strangers, (mainly) women who share his interest in the psychic

and the paranormal: “Now, since Hitler had killed off all of his family, he had no relatives to write letters to. He wrote letters to total strangers” (Singer, 1984a, 253).

It is not surprising, given his loneliness, that Herman befriends a mouse, although for him it is not merely a mouse, but a “she.” Earlier in the story, Herman expresses a concern that the mouse may damage the books that cover the floors of his flat and that she may breed. However, neither fear is realised and she becomes his companion: “Every night Herman set out for her a piece of bread, a small slice of cheese, and a saucer of water to keep her from eating the books” (Singer, 1984a, 251). When he falls ill, he neglects to feed her, and thus, after he recovers, believes, mistakenly, that the mouse has died, hence his eulogy to her. The fact that he is concerned about her even while he is seriously ill and unable to take care of himself emphasizes his respect for the individual existence of the mouse “who had shared a portion of her life with him” (Singer, 1984a, 271).

It is surely no chance that Singer chooses as Herman’s companion a creature usually considered vermin. His fears earlier in the story that she may breed and become a threat to his property, may allude to the Nazis’ and Germans’ similar characterisation of Jews as vermin. It is surely suggested, too, that Herman is more sensitive to the life of another animal because he has lost all his family in the Holocaust. Nonetheless, “The Letter Writer” demonstrates the extent to which an author can sympathise imaginatively with the being of a nonhuman animal, and it is surprising that Coetzee did not refer to Singer’s story in defence of Costello’s “sympathetic imagination.” If one is tempted to trivialise Herman’s feelings for the mouse, then one can arguably be exposing oneself as a speciesist, and as one who holds as cheap the lives of animals other than those like oneself.

Instead, the author and the animal from literature with whom Costello most closely identifies are Kafka—“of all men Kafka is the most insecure in his humanity” (Coetzee, 1999b, 30-31)—and Kafka’s ape, Red Peter, both of whom aptly express Costello’s uncomfortable feelings in front of an audience whose humanity is, for her, in question for their indifference to and willed ignorance of the massive suffering of animals that they tacitly support. However, this will be explored in a later chapter.

Finally, the question of Coetzee's own views on animal rights remains. Against the reviewers and critics who suggest that Coetzee used Costello as a device to express extreme views that he himself does not hold, it will be argued here that Coetzee's and Costello's views on animal rights are virtually identical. The main evidence for this is a speech written by Coetzee, but delivered by Hugo Weaving, entitled "A Word from J.M. Coetzee," at the opening of an art exhibition (Coetzee, 2007b) and an interview with *Satya* (Coetzee, 2004b) one of the two interviews to which Coetzee agreed when he visited Denmark to receive the Nobel Prize in 2003.⁷

In the interview with *Satya*, Coetzee acknowledges the difficulty of representing animal consciousness in literature and points out that animals fulfil only a peripheral role in his literature, except for *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace*, mainly because their role in society is also peripheral. In answer to the question whether he sees connections between different types of oppression, Coetzee answers:

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

In answer to the questions:

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

Coetzee responds:

Strictly speaking, my interest is not in legal rights for animals but in a change of heart towards animals. The most important of all rights is the

⁷Since these extracts are from are web pages, page references cannot be provided.

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

In the speech he wrote for the opening of the *Voicelless* exhibition, Coetzee uses his own voice, even though he adopts the persona of a public intellectual, rather than that of a fictional creation like Costello, and there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of the speech.

In the speech, Coetzee opens by stating that “it is obvious that there is something badly wrong in relations between human beings and other animals.” Although the main thrust of the speech is to criticize the industrialised farming of animals, he mentions other exploitative animal industries “that we might also call cruel and inhuman but for the fact that *inhuman* is the wrong word, such practices are all too human.” This shows his continued interest in humanity, in humaneness, perhaps the main concern of Costello too.

He points out the culpability of all the people who maintain these industries and support them by buying their products, including the people who are sickened by the cruelty of the industry but try to avoid thinking about it and shield their children from the truth, “because as we all know children have tender hearts and are easily moved.”

Coetzee then makes the connection between our treatment of animals and the treatment of Jews by the Nazis, saying that “we have already had one warning on the grandest scale that there is something deeply, cosmically wrong with regarding and treating fellow human beings as mere units of any kind.” He elaborates: “It came when in the middle of the twentieth century a group of powerful men in Germany had the bright idea of adapting the methods of the industrial stockyard, as pioneered and perfected in Chicago, to the slaughter—or what they preferred to call the *processing*—of human beings.” Echoing Costello, Coetzee continues:

Of course we cried out in horror when we found out about this. We cried: *What a terrible crime, to treat human beings like cattle! If only we had known beforehand!* But our cry should more accurately have been: *What a terrible crime, to treat human beings like units in an industrial process!* And that cry should have had a postscript: *What a terrible crime, come to think of it, to treat any living being like a unit in an industrial process!* [Coetzee's emphases]

Coetzee goes on to praise the *Voiceless* organization for working towards the amelioration of animal suffering and exploitation, and raising the consciousness of ordinary people. He expresses hope in the good hearts of children: "Children have tender hearts, that is to say, children have hearts that have not yet been hardened by years of cruel and unnatural battering." Perhaps unexpectedly, Coetzee's words endorse Peter Singer's view that children are reluctant to eat meat when they first encounter it: "[o]ne hopes, as knowledge of nutrition spreads, more parents will realize that on this issue their children may be wiser than they are" (Singer, 2002, 226). Singer relates an account of the son of Lawrence Kohlberg⁸ who initially resisted his father's efforts to convince him to eat meat:

Lawrence Kohlberg, a Harvard psychologist noted for his work on moral development, relates his son, at the age of four, made his first moral commitment, and refused to eat meat because, as he said, "it's bad to kill animals." It took Kohlberg six months to talk his son out of his position, which Kohlberg says was based on a failure to make a proper distinction between justified and unjustified killing, and indicates that his son was only at the most primitive stage of moral development. (Singer, 2002, 226)

In later chapters, Coetzee's concern with children in relation to his fiction will be explored. In his speech, he contends that "[i]n the struggle to rid ourselves of the

⁸His work on the psychology of moral development was famously criticised by the feminist Carol Gilligan, as discussed earlier in this chapter in relation to Anette Baier.

blight of the animal-products industry, the crucial battle is for the hearts and minds of the young, and it is a battle that can easily be won.” Here, as in Coetzee’s interview with *Satya* discussed above, one is reminded of Costello’s plea to her audience “to open your hearts and listen to what your heart says” (Coetzee, 1999b, 37). He mentions the unusual nature of the animal liberation movement, namely that its beneficiaries will remain unaware of their indebtedness to their liberators: “So, even though we may feel very close to our fellow creatures as we act for them, this remains a human enterprise from beginning to end.”

He concludes with words that confirm that he—and therefore Costello, too, as has been argued in this chapter—does not reject reason:

It is an enterprise in which we are increasingly making use of the faculty where we have an indubitable advantage over other creatures: the faculty of abstract thought. This age will be looked back on, I am convinced, as one in which huge steps were made in our thinking about relations between human and non-human living beings, in a range of fields from the philosophy of mind to ethics and jurisprudence. With such a flow of intellectual energy joining in with the practical energies of organizations like Voiceless, it is impossible to believe that we cannot effect a change in the present sad, sorry and selfish treatment of animals.

Chapter 2

Elizabeth Costello as a Socratic figure: Eros, Maieusis and Death in *The Lives of Animals*, *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man*

SOCRATES: “But the truth of the matter, gentlemen, is pretty certainly this: that human wisdom has little or no value. It seems to me that he [the oracle at Delphi] is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us ‘the wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless.’ ” (*Apology*: 23b) (Plato, 1959, 52)

This chapter will continue, following from Chapter 1, to problematise the terms of the debate, namely the opposition, taken from Plato, between philosophers and poets, reason and imagination, and reflected in the two-part structure of *The Lives of Animals*. However, whereas Chapter 1 explored contemporary philosophical texts in relation to Coetzee’s fiction, this chapter will focus on the influence of Platonic texts on Coetzee. The chapter will also attempt to explain why Coetzee uses the controversial and apparently counter-productive figure of Elizabeth Costello to express his

views in *The Lives of Animals*. The chapter aims to locate, to a greater degree than has been done before, the problems raised in *The Lives of Animals* as originating more in Costello's audience than in herself. Related to this is the question of the role of the public intellectual, particularly one who, like Costello, seems to stand outside of the establishment.¹ Indeed, Coetzee critiques academia, and in particular the humanities, in the first four "lessons" of *Elizabeth Costello*.

It will be argued that the assumption that Costello is a Socratic figure may help to resolve these problems. Proof that Costello is a Socratic figure will be provided from Coetzee's novels, *The Lives of Animals* (1999), *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and *Slow Man* (2005). Thus, whereas the previous chapter focused on the philosophical positioning of Costello and Coetzee in relation to the animal rights debate, this chapter will be concerned more with the literary questions of genre, the characterisation of Costello, the relation of Coetzee to his persona, Costello, and Coetzee's use of Platonic texts.

Concerning the genre, David Lodge, in a review of *Elizabeth Costello*, describes it as "a cross between a campus novel and a Platonic dialogue" and writes that "In Lessons Three and Four, 'The Lives of Animals,' the novel comes closest to the Platonic dialogue form" (Lodge, 2003).² Marjorie Garber in her essay in the "Reflections" section of *Lives* writes that, "[a]nother familiar genre to which Coetzee's lectures are related is, of course, the philosophical dialogue. It is Plato who most famously invites the comparison of poet and philosopher, and not to the advantage of the poet" (Garber, 1999, 79-80). These insights will be developed in more detail in this chapter.

Elizabeth Costello first made her appearance as a fictional stand-in for Coetzee when he delivered the Ben Belitt lecture at Bennington, entitled "What Is Realism?" (1996), later reprinted as the first chapter/lecture of *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). In the Ben Belitt lecture, Elizabeth Costello delivers the Appleton Award speech at Appleton College in 1995 whereas in *Elizabeth Costello*, she receives the Stowe Award

¹This theme is the subject of a collection of essays edited by Jane Poyner (Poyner, 2006).

²Citations without page numbers refer to web pages.

at Altona College. (Is this carelessness on Coetzee's part, or post-modern inconsistency?) Coetzee adopted this same persona when he delivered the Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, 1997-98, which were later published as *The Lives of Animals* (1998), *The Lives of Animals* (with "Reflections") (1999) and as chapters/lectures 3 and 4 of *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). This time Costello delivers the Gates Lectures at Appleton College, and this time Costello's son, John, does not accompany her as he does in "What Is Realism?", but hosts her because he is employed at the College (although in "What Is Realism?" he is employed at Altona College). In both cases, however, the real narrator of the fictions remains elusive, but is focused through the consciousness of Costello's son, John, whose name is a reflexive reference to the actual author of the fiction and presenter of the speech, J.M. Coetzee. He adopted a similar fictional mode when he delivered his Nobel Prize acceptance speech (2003), except this time his persona was Man Friday from Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

Derek Attridge cautions against a simplistic allegorising of Coetzee's fiction (Attridge, 2005, 34-35), and this may seem to preclude interpreting Costello as a Socratic figure. Nonetheless, it will be argued that the evidence for Costello as a Socratic figure seems very strong. Furthermore, if, as discussed in Chapter 1, MacIntyre is right that every age has its stock characters—and he suggests that the contemporary dominant characters are the bureaucratic manager, the aesthete and the therapist—then perhaps there can be counter-characters too. The Socratic figure would be one such character, set in opposition to the authorities and experts of the modern era.

The figure of Elizabeth Costello, Coetzee's fictional academic persona, has proved to be very controversial. Both her audience in *The Lives of Animals* and reviewers of this work have found her attack on reason to be excessive and her Holocaust analogy offensive. Abraham Stern, a character in *The Lives of Animals*, an ageing Jewish poet and academic, is so offended that he withdraws in protest from the dinner in Costello's honour and leaves a note for Costello which John finds the next day:

If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead. It also trades on the horrors of the camp in a cheap way. (Coetzee, 1999b, 50)

Reviewers and critics like Douglas Cruikshank have considered her case for the sympathetic imagination to be inconclusive or unconvincing (Cruikshank, 1999). Her views have been met with ridicule or indifference, even hostility, both within *The Lives of Animals* and by reviewers of the work. She has been dismissed by some reviewers and critics of *The Lives of Animals*, *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man*, and even by characters within those works, as a mad old woman, irrational, confused, a ranter. In *Slow Man*, the protagonist, Paul Rayment, on meeting her for the first time, thinks to himself: “*Who is this madwoman I have let into my home?* [Coetzee’s italics]” (81). In *The Lives of Animals*, Costello is criticised mainly by her philosophically trained daughter-in-law, Norma, as irrational: “There is no position outside of reason where you can stand and lecture about reason and pass judgment on reason” (48). Even more disturbing is her own son’s lack of imaginative sympathy for her suffering as a result of her beliefs, a suffering heightened by her ability, as a poet, to imagine herself into the being of other suffering animals. The same is true of the reception of *Elizabeth Costello*, where the two parts of *The Lives of Animals* were reprinted, alongside additional “lessons”, as “Lesson 3” and “Lesson 4”. Furthermore, many critics have been unable to clarify Costello’s views in relation to Coetzee’s and have professed an inability to decide whether his adopted fictional mode indicates commitment or confusion.

In contrast to the reviews which immediately followed the publication of *The Lives of Animals* and *Elizabeth Costello*, the critics in *J.M Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual* tend to have a more considered and thoughtful appraisal of Costello. The editor of the collection, Jane Poyner, mentions Socrates as one of the first in the Western tradition of the public intellectual (Poyner, 2006, 8), but no one in the collection pursues this idea much further, despite making occasional Socratic insights, and none explicitly identifies Costello as a Socratic figure. Moreover, most of the critics in this collection still tend to see her as standing outside of reason. Dominic Head argues that “Coetzee seeks to make his readers uneasy about the self-interest implicit in humanist reason and rationality, but, in another unsettling manoeuvre, he takes us beyond a straightforward rational and literal engagement

with the arguments” (110). Rosemary Jolly argues that Coetzee points out that “this cult of instrumental rationalism is neither logical nor ethical and that its consequence is violence” (158). Michael Bell contends that Costello misrepresents her authors, and dismisses some even though she plagiarizes them (176), a contention that will be tested in Chapter 3, and argues that “Costello’s problem is that her conviction must not be understood by others as a possible ‘position’; it must be felt apodictically as a living truth to which there is no alternative” (186).

The feminist vegetarian Laura Wright emphasizes the dramatic context of the speech and Coetzee’s use of a female voice to present his views. She argues that Costello’s speech is a rant (196-7)—linked with emotional excess—that destabilises (205) the patriarchal binary oppositions of the rational, philosophical speeches that public lectures usually are, and points out that Norma also rants, while John’s apparent objectivity as mediator between his mother and his wife is owing to his male abstractness (208). In one of the last essays of the collection, Lucy Graham argues that “by representing the writer as an intermediary, as a ‘medium,’ Coetzee stages an abdication from a position of authorial power” (233). Many of the insights in her essay resonate with ideas from Plato’s *Symposium*, although she does not explicitly acknowledge Plato. Some of these Platonic ideas include: the text as the child of the author in his/her desire for immortality (221, 222), intellectual and biological conception, the intermediary between opposites (225), the medium (223), and possibly even Coetzee as midwife to the birth of ideas.

This chapter intends to show, in a different way from Chapter 1, how reasonable Costello’s position is, despite its apparent rejection of reason, and to show how important imagination and emotion are to the debate, not only for the poets but also for the philosophers. Crucial to this purpose will be the use of Plato’s dialogues, to which Coetzee refers often, both implicitly and explicitly, in his critical writings and his novels. The relation between Plato the author and Socrates his main speaker in the early and middle dialogues will contribute to an understanding of the relation between Coetzee the author and Costello his persona. It will be necessary to distinguish between the unmistakable Socratic figure of the early Platonic dialogues and

the Socrates of the middle Platonic dialogues who becomes Plato's mouthpiece, and who eventually disappears in the late dialogues.³ The opposition between philosophers and poets is complicated by the fact that Plato was not just a great philosopher but also a masterful poet, and it will be argued that Costello strongly resembles a fallible Socratic rather than an infallible Platonic figure, although she differs from Socrates in that she refuses to privilege a philosophical mode above a poetic one. Also, in Coetzee's fictional world, Costello is a writer, whereas Socrates left no writings behind, preferring to engage directly and dialectically with his interlocutors in the pursuit of virtue. On the other hand, both Costello and Socrates survive exclusively in the writings of Coetzee and Plato (and Xenophon), respectively, although Socrates was a historical figure, whereas Costello is purely a fictional creation, despite some similarities to Coetzee.

Besides the early Platonic, or Socratic, dialogues (which will be discussed later), the relevant middle Platonic dialogues are the *Republic*, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. From the *Republic* come the opposition between the philosophers and the poets and the concern with justice that are crucial to *The Lives of Animals*. The Platonic ideas of eros as the desire for immortality and the motive behind human creativity, and of Socrates as midwife to the birth of ideas and virtue, originate in the *Symposium* and are central both to *Elizabeth Costello* and to *Slow Man*. Finally, the *Phaedrus*, to which Coetzee refers explicitly in *Slow Man*, concerns eros, creatively inspired madness and the opposition between philosophy and rhetoric. While this chapter will focus on the *content* of these dialogues, Chapter 3 will focus on Coetzee's choice of the dialogue *form* in *The Lives of Animals*.

The origin of the word "academy" is also significant here, since it was the name of the first school of higher learning, established by Plato himself in the grove of Akademos, outside Athens. It can be argued that Plato represents the academic establishment, where reason is a means by which authorities can assert their power, and Socrates, the critical outsider who is not bound to any institution, as seems to be

³This scheme is a product of nineteenth century German scholarship and has been challenged in the twentieth century (Borchert, 2006, Volume 9, 107), although this need not invalidate the Platonic/Socratic distinction.

the case of Costello. This establishment view of the academic that Coetzee appears to be criticising is in stark contrast with the critical, decidedly Socratic, intellectual that he describes in *Giving Offense* (Coetzee, 2006), with reference to the philosopher Sir Karl Popper, whom he quotes:

I must teach myself to distrust the dangerous intuitive feeling or conviction that it is I who am right. I must distrust this feeling however strong it may be. Indeed, the stronger it is, the more I should mistrust it, because the stronger it is, the greater is the danger that I may deceive myself; and, with it, the danger that I may become an intolerant fanatic. (Coetzee, 2006, 3)

Coetzee then provides an ambivalent description of the modern secular rationalist intellectual: “Complacent and yet not complacent, intellectuals of the kind I describe, pointing to the Apollonian ‘Know thyself,’ criticize and encourage criticism of the foundations of their own belief systems” (3). This reference to the Apollonian ‘Know thyself’ makes a clear link to Socrates, as will be shown later. Coetzee then goes on to point out weaknesses of the secular, liberal “tolerance”, namely that it requires that one respects the differences of others’ beliefs without really trying to understand those beliefs, namely, not respecting those beliefs themselves (6):

This tolerance—which, depending on how you look at it, is either deeply civilized or complacent, hypocritical, and patronizing—is a consequence of the security intellectuals feel about rational secularism within whose horizons they live, their confidence that it can provide explanations for most things, and therefore—in its own terms, which can attach ultimate importance to being able to explain things—that it cannot itself be the object of some other method of explanation more all-inclusive than itself. As the unframed framer, reason is a form of power with no in-built sense of what the experience of powerlessness might be like. (4)

It seems to be precisely this lack of an in-built sense of powerlessness that impedes Costello's audience from being able to imagine or sympathise with the almost completely disempowered position of animals in the modern world. It is clear, too, that this assumed position of power is implicit in Kant's definition of persons as rational, autonomous individuals, an assumption which ecofeminism and an ethics of care criticise, as was shown in Chapter 1, although Kant was concerned to show the limits of reason.

Costello, too, criticises this privileged position of reason (in an extract quoted in Chapter 1) when she explains to her audience why she has chosen not to employ the terms of philosophy in her speech (Coetzee, 1999b, 23). She elaborates later:

“Yet, although I see that the best way to win acceptance from this learned gathering would be for me to join myself, like a tributary stream running into a great river, to the great Western discourse of man versus beast, of reason versus unreason, something in me resists, foreseeing in that step the concession of the entire battle.

“For, seen from the outside, from a being who is alien to it, reason is simply a vast tautology. Of course reason will validate reason as the first principle of the universe—what else should it do? Dethrone itself? Reasoning systems, as systems of totality, do not have that power. If there were a position from which reason could attack and dethrone itself, reason would already have occupied that position; otherwise it would not be total.” (25)

It is these pronouncements of Costello that so confound her audience and that lead to Norma's criticisms, quoted earlier in the chapter. What Costello says seems ironical or paradoxical, even self-contradictory, especially since she goes on to provide arguments for her views. It will be argued here, however, that Costello's attack is on a certain conception of absolute reason, which can be described as Platonic, and that her position is aligned more closely with a more humble and modest Socratic rationality, precisely a version of rationalism as promoted by Karl Popper, despite Coetzee's

apparent ambivalence about this philosopher as expressed earlier, that recognises its own limitations, and hence the possibility of powerlessness (Popper, 1966, 132). Indeed, Coetzee could have made use of Popper's distinction between uncritical or comprehensive rationalism and a critical rationalism:

Uncritical or comprehensive rationalism can be described as the attitude of the person who says 'I am not prepared to accept anything that cannot be defended by means of argument or experience.' We can express this also in the form of the principle that any assumption which cannot be supported either by argument or experience is to be discarded. Now it is easy to see that this principle of an uncritical rationalism is inconsistent; for since it cannot, in its turn, be supported by argument or experience, it implies that it should itself be discarded. ... Uncritical rationalism is therefore logically untenable; and since a purely logical argument can show this, uncritical rationalism can be defeated by its own chosen weapon, argument.

This criticism may be generalized. Since all argument must proceed from assumptions, it is plainly impossible to demand that all assumptions should be based on argument. (Popper, 2003, 254-55)

Popper contends that his robust form of critical rationalism, with its rejection of the principle of sufficient reason, avoids such paradoxes. He also claims that his fallibilist⁴ idea of rationality, which admits the inevitability of human error and human fallibility, is Socratic, as opposed to the Platonic privileging of an infallible idea of reason. Popper also explicitly aligns his own critical rationalism with Socrates' fallible approach, and claims that "[t]he spirit of science is that of Socrates" (Popper, 2003, 269). He also aligns rationalism with imagination and humanitarianism (264-65), and opposes it to irrationalism, misanthropy and misogyny (in his special sense of a hatred of reasoning). Of course, the limitations of Popper's emphasis on individualism and rationalism will be clear from the discussion in Chapter 1. Nonetheless, it will be

⁴Popper sees himself as part of a tradition of "fallibilist" philosophers, including Socrates, Kant and Peirce, philosophers who emphasize the essentially tentative, conjectural nature of knowledge.

argued that Costello's critical attitude toward (an unqualified) rationalism has much in common with Popper's and Socrates', especially in their ceaseless attempts to uncover and critique sources of authority.

The Socratic concern for *maieusis*, namely intellectual midwifery, is evident in Frances Moore Lappé's *Diet for a Small Planet* (first published in 1971), a book upon which Peter Singer relies heavily in *Animal Liberation* for his facts on the damage caused to the environment and poor people by modern industrial farming (agribusiness) and for his advice on a healthy vegetarian diet. In the Preface to this book Lappé uses language that alludes to Socrates; the last section of her Preface is entitled "Midwives to the New". She writes that to get to the ideas that have led to world hunger there has to be dialogue:

... But how do we get to these ideas?

My answer in part became: "through talk." We must talk in order to surface underlying assumptions, to nudge ourselves and each other to reflect upon the reasons *why* we think and act as we do. We must talk in order to discover whether our ideas have simply become unexamined habits of mind, habits which thwart instead of aid effective living. [Lappé's emphasis] (Lappé, 1991, xx)

This is clearly an allusion to Socrates, namely the emphasis on dialogue, on Socrates' maieutic technique of people helping each other give birth to new ideas and eliminating the false ones. Lappé writes that "[i]f we are in the midst of an historic shift in understanding, the death of the old worldview and the birth of the new, I believe we can each become conscious midwives to the birth (Lappé, 1991, xxx). This also seems to describe what Coetzee, through his persona of Costello, is doing in *The Lives of Animals*, forcing his readers and audience to question their most deeply buried assumptions and to undergo the uncomfortable process of re-conceiving them, giving birth to new ideas, escaping the anthropocentric worldview.

Finally, there is a strong democratic, anti-authority undercurrent in Lappé's book that suits both Coetzee's and Costello's anti-establishment attitudes. She specifically

criticises the food experts and political advisers who seem to lack an understanding of how food shortages—despite over-production of food—are a result of unequal power relations in the world. Lappé, having researched modern agricultural production independently of any agricultural institution, has been able, as she sees it, to avoid becoming beholden, as the experts apparently are, to any establishment view of food shortage.

A like-minded approach, this time to scientific authority, can be found in Bernard Rollin's *The Unheeded Cry*, a book Coetzee uses in *The Lives of Animals* to criticise psychological experimentation on animals. Rollin approves of a Socratic, common-sensical critique of scientific common-sense:

...I have become convinced on the basis of my own activities that one could elicit acquiescence from scientists to such a theory through rational dialogue, which would help them lay bare their own moral assumptions and what follows from these, something typically unrecognized by most of us, scientists and non-scientists alike, even including philosophers. Thus I have seen my task as Socratic; in Plato's judicious metaphor, as helping people recollect and appropriate in conscious fashion what they already carry within them. (Rollin, 1990, Preface, xi)

Certainly, Lappé and Rollin find the Socratic figure appealing in their battles against the experts and the authority of science, and Coetzee seems to follow a similar approach in the use of his Costello persona.

However, Coetzee's use of his Platonic sources is not merely related to the Socratic figure, but also to more specifically Platonic topics. Before continuing to explore Costello as a Socratic figure, the thesis will briefly discuss the relevance of Platonic texts to Coetzee's work. Coetzee's concern for justice, the main theme of Plato's *Republic*, is evident in much of his fiction, in particular the plight of the powerless and marginalised. It is clear, for instance, in the magistrate's concern for the barbarian slave and prisoners in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, as this quotation from *Doubling the Point* demonstrates:

Why does one choose the side of justice when it is not in one's material interest to? The magistrate gives the rather Platonic answer: because we are born with the idea of justice. (Coetzee, 1992, 395)

In *The Lives of Animals* the marginalised has come to include nonhuman animals. Costello is convinced that a crime of stupefying proportions is being perpetrated against animals. Her challenge is to extend justice to nonhuman animals, at least to those most like humans. Whereas Socrates, Plato's mouthpiece in the *Republic*, spends the entire dialogue arguing for justice, namely that it is better to live justly and appear to be unjust than to be unjust (with all the material rewards that follow) and yet appear to be just, Costello concludes her speech with "The evidence points in the opposite direction: that we can do anything and get away with it; that there is no punishment" (Coetzee, 1999b, 35)

However, as important as the *Republic* may be to *The Lives of Animals*, Coetzee reserves some of his strongest criticism for Platonism. In "The Philosophers and the Animals" Plato's rationalism is subjected to a scathing critique:

"I could ask what Saint Thomas takes to be the being of God, to which he will reply that the being of God is reason. Likewise Plato, likewise Descartes, in their different ways. The universe is built upon reason. God is a God of reason. The fact that through the application of reason we can come to understand the rules by which the universe works proves that reason and the universe are of the same being. And the fact that animals, lacking reason, cannot understand the universe but have simply to follow its rules blindly, proves that, unlike man, they are part of it but not part of its being: that man is godlike, animals thinglike." (Coetzee, 1999b, 22-23)

In "The Poets and the Animals" Costello criticises the ecological approach to animals as thoroughly Platonic, as was discussed in Chapter 1, namely as holistic and abstract, since it assumes only humans can understand the place of living organisms in the whole picture of nature and therefore alone have the right to manage animal

populations, but not the human population. In fact, Plato also reserved the right of the philosopher-rulers to manage human populations, using techniques and institutions such as infanticide, selective breeding and the abolition of the family. These Platonic ideas are in strong contrast to the modest image of Socrates as a midwife, and demonstrate the potential authoritarianism of a utopian society organised according to an unrestrained rationalism. In “The Poets and the Animals”, Elaine Marx implicitly criticises just such a utopian society:

“But which of us would want to live in Houyhnhnm-land, with its rational vegetarianism and its rational government and its rational approach to love, marriage and death? Would even a horse want to live in such a perfectly regulated, totalitarian society? More pertinently for us, what is the track record of totally regulated societies? Is it not a fact that they either collapse or else turn militaristic?” (Coetzee, 1999b, 55)

Despite its Swiftian clothing, this echoes the authoritarian and utopian society Plato describes in the *Republic*. However, this can be considered to be a parody of a rationally organised society. Indeed, Popper would argue that totalitarian, or closed, societies are irrational, paradoxically often because they appeal to an unqualified rationalism, and that a truly rational, open society is based on a critical rationalism, and is egalitarian and pluralistic. This is in marked contrast to Plato’s inegalitarian and uniform utopian society where justice is defined as the agreement between the three classes of society that the wise, and between the three parts of the soul that reason, should rule. Unlike in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, in the *Republic* desire is presented as the enemy of reason. It is from this utopian society that Plato banishes the poets as purveyors of pleasure and illusions, and from which Coetzee derives the two-part structure of *The Lives of Animals*. As Popper has pointed out, Plato’s concept of justice is aesthetic:

Nowhere do we find this aestheticism more strongly than in Plato. Plato was an artist; and like many of the best artists, he tried to visualize a model, the ‘divine original’ of his work, and to ‘copy’ it faithfully. . . . What

Plato describes as dialectics is, in the main, the intellectual intuition of the world of pure beauty. His trained philosophers are men who ‘have seen the truth of what is beautiful and just, and good,’ and can bring it down from heaven to earth. Politics, to Plato, is the Royal Art. . . . It is an art of composition, like music, painting, or architecture. The Platonic politician composes cities, for beauty’s sake. (Popper, 1966, 165)

As beautiful as this image of the artist-politician appears to be, Popper criticises it as inegalitarian and authoritarian. The philosopher-ruler is given complete power to recreate the ideal society from scratch like an artist, based on his exclusive knowledge of the Ideal Form in heaven, and without regard to the needs of individuals (166-67). This also suggests that not only philosophers (who subscribe to a comprehensive rationalism) but artists, too, may be tempted by authoritarianism, at least in the sense of being the ultimate authority in the imaginative worlds they create. Indeed, this authoritarianism seems inherent in the notion of an author, a problem of which Coetzee is aware and which will be explored later.

Thus, Elaine Marx may have a valid point, namely that one ought not to impose ethical vegetarianism on a society, but it is misdirected if it is intended as a criticism of Costello’s position, since she has gone to great lengths to reject reason as a decisive criterion of moral worth and as the sole means to live an ethical life. However, it is incorrect to construe the animal rights movement as imposing vegetarianism on free citizens. Rather, it should be seen as protecting the interests and rights of nonhuman animals, protecting animals from exploitation, although this may well result in the outlawing of meat eating. Nonetheless, it is evident that just as Coetzee distrusts commitment to ethical principles, so too is he suspicious of certain notions of justice. His, and Costello’s, aim is to change the heart of individuals by means of sentiment, fiction and the sympathetic imagination rather than impose a large-scale, utopian change on society as supposedly dictated by reason.

This leads to the paradox at the heart of the *Republic*, namely, despite having exiled the poets from the ideal society, and despite having subordinated imagination to reason, Plato is unable to explain the central truth of his metaphysical system

without resorting to his three famous images, those of the sun, the divided line, and the cave. According to the divided line images, the products of imagination are at a third remove from reality, since they are imitations of physical things, which are imitations of mathematical objects, which in turn are imitations of the pure Forms. According to Plato, it is reason which frees one of the prisoners (Socrates) from believing to be real the shadows projected onto the back of the cave and allows him to ascend even past the manufactured objects the reality of whose shadows he used to believe in, to the outer world illuminated by the sun where he can gaze at real things (the Forms) and eventually at the sun itself (the Form of the Good). Even though Socrates is the central character of the *Republic*, he is merely Plato's mouthpiece at this stage. Socrates himself avoided metaphysical philosophy and adhered, instead, to ethics (like Costello).

In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee reinterprets the Platonic image of the cave in a striking way:

I don't believe that any form of lasting community can exist where people do not share the same sense of what is just and what is not just. To put it another way, community has its basis in an awareness and acceptance of a common justice. You use the word faith. Let me be more cautious and stay with awareness: awareness of an idea of justice, somewhere, that transcends laws and lawmaking. Such an awareness is not absent from our lives. But where I see it, I see it mainly as flickering or dimmed—the kind of awareness you would have if you were a prisoner in a cave, say, watching the shadows of ideas flickering on the walls. To be a herald you would have to have slipped your chains for a while and wandered about in the real world. I am not a herald of community or anything else, as you correctly recognize. I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations—which are shadows themselves—of people slipping their chains and turning to the light. (Coetzee, 1992, 340-41)

Coetzee's interpretation is more modest than Plato's. He may portray himself as a Socratic figure but, unlike the Platonic Socrates, he does not make the Platonic ascent to the vision of the sun. He does not claim to have exclusive access to the truth, nor that he alone has intimations of freedom. He does not see himself as a philosopher-ruler whose exclusive access to the vision of the Good gives him the right to reshape society according to the ideal Forms. Rather, he admits that he merely constructs representations that allow other people to free themselves from false beliefs and prejudices, which is precisely what Elizabeth Costello attempts to do in *The Lives of Animals*. In this sense he is like the early Socrates who aimed not to reconstruct society according to an ideal Form, but rather to free individuals from their prejudices. But he differs from Socrates in that his chosen mode is imagination, the creation of images, rather than reason. Even here, however, Socrates' fallible mode of reasoning differs from Plato's infallible rationalism, the type of rationalism Costello criticises so harshly. While Costello may prefer imagination to argument—or may refuse to privilege reason over imagination, this does not make her approach unreasonable, as was argued in Chapter 1. Indeed, her modest aims are far more reasonable—and humane—than the utopianism that follows from Plato's rationalism. It is the difference between a democratic and an authoritarian approach.

What, then, is the Socratic spirit and how is Socrates akin to Elizabeth Costello? It will be useful to follow Nietzsche's characterization of the Socratic spirit in *The Birth of Tragedy*, since he continued in that work the battle between the philosophers and the poets. In his "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech" Coetzee asserts the power of the imagination to enable a writer to escape the "deformed and stunted" society of apartheid. He goes on to quote Nietzsche:

We have art, said Nietzsche, so that we shall not die of the truth. In South Africa there is now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination. (Coetzee, 1992, 99)

In *The Lives of Animals* the truth that threatens to overwhelm Costello's imagination is the scale of suffering and death that humans cause to animals on a daily basis (Coetzee, 1999b, 69).

Nietzsche lamented the triumph of Socrates' rational and scientific discourse over the emotive and artistic discourse, the conflict between Socratic and Dionysian replacing the older poetic conflict between Apollonian and Dionysian (although the Socratic has much in common with the Apollonian):

For in a certain sense Euripides was but a mask, while the divinity which spoke through him was neither Dionysos nor Apollo but a brand new daemon called Socrates. Thenceforward the real antagonism was between the Dionysiac spirit and the Socratic, and tragedy was to perish in the conflict. (Nietzsche, 1956, 77)

This suggests that Costello *cannot* be identified as a Socratic figure, since her claims for poetry pit her against Socrates. This problem will be explored further in Chapter 3. Nietzsche sums up Socrates' optimistic, ethical and rationalistic philosophy:

Consider the consequences of the Socratic maxims: "Virtue is knowledge; all sins arise from ignorance; only the virtuous are happy"—these three basic formulations of optimism spell the death of tragedy. (Nietzsche, 1956, 88)

Nietzsche elaborates further, summarising and interpreting the story of Socrates as preserved in Plato's early dialogue, the *Apology*:

It was Socrates who expressed most clearly this radically new prestige of knowledge and conscious intelligence when he claimed to be the only one who acknowledged to himself that he knew nothing. He roamed all over Athens, visiting the most distinguished statesman, orators, poets and artists, and found everywhere merely the presumption of knowledge. He was amazed to discover that all these celebrities lacked true and certain knowledge of their callings and pursued those callings by sheer instinct

... From this point of view Socrates was forced to condemn both the prevailing art and the prevailing ethics ... Socrates believed it was his mission to correct the situation: a solitary man, arrogantly superior and herald of a radically dissimilar culture, art, and ethics. (Nietzsche, 1956, 83)

Costello, too, is perceived as “arrogantly superior” and as heralding in an alien set of values, those of animal rights in opposition to a blindly anthropocentric culture, and both figures made many enemies in courageously questioning the prejudices of the people around them. However, the characterization of both Socrates and Costello as arrogant will be contested. This “arrogance” can be seen as a projection on to Costello and Socrates (and Coetzee for that matter) of certain members of their audience, resentful of having their prejudices and ignorance exposed. In the case of Socrates this arrogance can be seen as a later Platonic addition which conflicts with the Socratic figure of the early dialogues who seems genuinely uncertain and humble in his knowledge (or lack thereof), as is evident in the epigraph to this chapter. Likewise, Costello seems to be earnestly trying to penetrate the darkness of ignorance and prejudice with the light of her imaginative sympathy and is willing to admit that she does not know for certain that she is right: “Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad!” (Coetzee, 1999b, 69).

She may also be ironically aware that some her images may be fanciful—for instance when she gives anthropomorphic thoughts to the ape, Sultan:

“In his deepest being Sultan is not interested in the banana problem. Only the experimenter’s single-minded regimentation forces him to concentrate on it. The question that truly occupies him, as it occupies the rat and the cat and every other animal trapped in the hell of the laboratory or the zoo, is: Where is home, and how do I get there?” (Coetzee, 1999b, 30)

The point is that she is trying to get her audience to think, to imagine and to feel in new ways about something people do not care to consider at all, namely their use and abuse of animals; indeed, she wants people to imagine how it would feel to be in the position of an exploited animal, a position of powerlessness. The mission she

feels she has to awaken people from their dogmatic slumbers (like Kant) is expressed by Socrates:

“It is literally true (even if it sounds rather comical) that God has specially appointed me to this city, as though it were a large thoroughbred horse which because of its great size is inclined to be lazy and needs the stimulation of some stinging fly. It seems to me that God has attached me to this city to perform the office of such a fly; and all day long I never cease to settle here, there, and everywhere, rousing, persuading, reproofing every one of you. You will not easily find another like me, gentlemen, and if you take my advice you will spare my life.” (*Apology*: 31a)

Socrates’ philosophy was inspired by the Apollonian injunction “Know Thyself”, words which appear above the entrance to the temple of the Oracle of Delphi. Socrates had consulted the Oracle in order to know who was the wisest man in Greece and was told that he, Socrates, was. In trying to disprove the Oracle, Socrates came to realise that the Oracle was right, because only Socrates knew that he knew nothing. The method of disproof, or refutation, is characteristically Socratic, and it is also the method adopted by Costello, which is why her position can be called reasonable. She does not so much try to disprove reason (which is impossible) as to refute its claim to infallibility and its claim to differentiate humans from animals and thereby justify the exploitation of animals. She can be said to be opposing a phallogocentric idea of reason.

A contemporary philosopher, D.W. Hamlyn, provides an illuminating account of Socrates, supplementing that of Nietzsche, which also helps to explain Costello’s character:

Socrates professes a deep concern with the saying that was written above the temple at Delphi: —‘Know thyself’. It seems clear that Socrates would probably not have counted something as knowledge unless it had that connection with self-knowledge. Hence, insofar as virtue is knowledge, and knowledge implies self-knowledge, virtue must involve both a knowledge

of and a care for oneself, for one's soul. That may indeed be Socrates' central message, and this view fits in with what Kierkegaard was later to see as so important in Socrates. It makes Socrates a prophet of inwardness and of a concern for one's real self. (Hamlyn, 1987, 39)

A further quotation may help explain why Costello does not accept the utilitarian and deontological defences of animal rights, since they are based on principles and rules:

It is a possible view that Socrates did not think that complete definitions of moral virtues, and thus definite rules to guide conduct, were possible; hence the negative conclusion of the dialogues. That view fits in with the Kierkegaardian view of Socrates that I referred to above. It is no good looking for rules or principles to guide conduct. It is of more importance, and of greater efficacy, to look into oneself, with the aim of acquiring a good character, of producing a good soul. (Hamlyn, 1987, 40)

In Socrates' own words:

“Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honour, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul?” (*Apology*: 28e)

This must be part of the solution of Costello's reply to President Gerrard:

“But your own vegetarianism, Mrs. Costello,” says President Gerrard, pouring oil on troubled waters: “it comes out of moral conviction, does it not?”

“No, I don't think so,” says his mother. “It comes out of a desire to save my soul.”

Now there truly is a silence ... (Coetzee, 1999b, 43)

This is a Socratic and humanistic, or secular, idea of salvation rather than a theocentric and religious one.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Costello's notion of "willed ignorance" powerfully raises the Socratic idea of "virtue is knowledge" in relation to ordinary Germans who allowed Nazism to flourish (just as ordinary meat-eaters today allow daily atrocities to occur):

"In Germany, we say, a certain line was crossed which took people beyond the ordinary murderousness and cruelty of warfare into a state that we can only call sin . . . It marked those citizens of the Reich who had committed evil actions, but also those who, for whatever reason, were in ignorance of those actions. It thus marked, for practical purposes, every citizen of the Reich. Only those in the camps were innocent." (Coetzee, 1999b, 20)

It is not surprising that Costello's audience resent her comparing them with those ordinary Germans. It was precisely because of acting the gadfly, as Costello does, that Socrates made influential enemies, who eventually had him executed. Of course, most philosophers find the Socratic maxim that "one cannot knowingly do evil" to be paradoxical, although it has a remarkable similarity with a Buddhist precept, namely that evil, or suffering, is a result of ignorance (Rahula, 1978, 3).

Nietzsche argued that such was Socrates' effect on Plato that "the young tragic poet . . . burned all his writings in order to qualify as a student of Socrates" but that "[a]lthough [Plato] did not lag behind the naïve cynicism of his master in the condemnation of tragedy and art in general, nevertheless his creative gifts forced him to develop an art form deeply akin to the existing forms which he had repudiated," namely the Platonic dialogue (Nietzsche, 1956, 87).

Finally, discussing Socrates' last days Nietzsche considers the possibility of a Socratic artist and concludes by framing these questions for Socrates:

"Have I been too ready to view what was unintelligible to me as being devoid of meaning? Perhaps there is a realm of wisdom, after all, from which the logician is excluded? Perhaps art must be seen as the necessary

complement of rational discourse?” (Nietzsche, 1956, 90)

It is the last question that links Socrates closely with Elizabeth Costello, despite her attack on reason. The Platonic dialogue is the perfect medium for the combination of the rational and the imaginative, and it is no wonder, then, that Coetzee chose it for *The Lives of Animals*, not to displace reason, but to achieve a proper balance between reason and imagination. The further significance of Coetzee’s choice of the Platonic dialogue will be explored in Chapter 3. The mode of the dialogue will also offer a solution to the apparent contradiction in claiming that Costello is a Socratic figure, and yet promotes poetry above philosophy, whereas Socrates did the opposite.

While Nietzsche’s characterization of Socrates is largely accurate, it needs to be emphasized that, for all Socrates’ emphasis on reason and knowledge, the results of his reasoning in the early Platonic dialogues were entirely negative, the destruction of false assumptions rather than the establishment of certain truths. It is also important to keep in mind the Socratic paradox that he alone is wise since he alone knows that he knows nothing. Elizabeth Costello shares these essentially negative Socratic characteristics, as will be shown later.

Nietzsche could also be challenged for overstating Socrates’ faith in reason. Socrates did not seem to have much faith in the ability of reason to reveal the secrets of nature and thus limited his investigation—like the other sophists—to value and human convention, to persuasion and prescription rather than explanation and description. Like Socrates and unlike the Sophists, at least as Plato depicts them, Costello shows a deep ethical commitment. The Sophists were aware that, unlike the unchangeable laws of nature, human laws are more or less arbitrary conventions, norms, and that these can be changed and broken. It is significant that Coetzee chooses the name “Norma” for Costello’s philosophical daughter-in-law who seems incapable of questioning conventional norms, particularly in relation to animals, unlike her poetic mother-in-law whose sympathetic imagination empowers her to see beyond the boundaries of the traditional moral framework.

It remains to produce the proof that Coetzee does, in fact, depict Costello as a Socratic figure in *The Lives of Animals*, *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man*. The links

between eros, maieusis and death, in the chapter's title, should also become clear. It will not always be easy to separate the Socratic and Platonic Socrates, and so perhaps a brief explanation is necessary. In the middle dialogues, the considerable artistry of which one should bear in mind, Plato has begun to reinterpret Socrates in accordance with his metaphysical theory of Forms. As mentioned above, eros, which was seen as the enemy of reason in the *Republic*, becomes the focus of praise in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. Here Socrates' maieusis (midwifery) consists no longer merely in helping his interlocuters to deliver ideas, but rather in being a medium between the realm of impermanent things and the realm of eternal Forms, between opinion and knowledge, mortality and immortality. Socrates has become a teacher and an authority.

The Platonic Socrates argues that: "Given our agreement that the aim of love [Eros] is the *permanent* [his italics] possession of goodness for oneself, it necessarily follows that we desire immortality along with goodness, and consequently the aim of love has to be immortality as well" (*Symposium*: 207a). Those who are physically pregnant produce children, whereas those who are mentally pregnant produce virtue, especially wisdom (*Symposium*: 209a). In the most general sense, art defines all creative human activity, even philosophy. Every creative human act is thus motivated by the desire to extend one's mortal existence, whether this is expressed in having children, making laws for city-states or discoveries in science, or achieving immortal fame in war. These children of one's activities, especially those of one's mind, will continue long after one has died. Paradoxically, one is even prepared to die for one's children in order to ensure one's posterity.

It may be that Plato's keen awareness of the distinction between mortality and immortality, transience and permanence, was strongly conditioned by Socrates' execution. Certainly an awareness—and a prefiguring—of Socrates' death is evident in most of Plato's dialogues. There is also a strong sense of Costello's mortality in all the pieces that Coetzee has written involving her, expressed mainly in terms of her ageing appearance and her tiredness.

It will be seen that Coetzee is interested in both the Socratic and the Platonic Socrates. Also, he is interested in the idea of art as a means to immortality that comes from the *Symposium* rather than art as illusion that comes from the *Republic*. However, it will be seen that Coetzee expresses doubt as to the power of art to achieve immortality, which may seem to align him with Plato's dismissal of art as illusion in the *Republic*. For Coetzee, the real power of art is not the achievement of personal immortality, but its ethical power to enter into the being of others.

The analysis will begin with "What Is Realism?", because it was first published in 1997, before being republished in *Elizabeth Costello* in 2003. The Platonic and Socratic ideas clearly evident in this story reinforce the contention that Costello functions, at least in part, as a Socratic figure in *The Lives of Animals*. Indeed, Coetzee refers to this story in the very first footnote of *The Lives of Animals*, thus further supporting this view. In "What Is Realism?", Platonic ideas are essential to the story. Although Coetzee, or the narrator, keeps disrupting its realist mode and drawing attention to the fact that it is a performance, hence suggesting that realism—and indeed all fiction—deals with illusions, there are moments when the power of fiction to achieve immortality is asserted, although always ironically, since Costello, the author, is also a work of fiction, as is her famous novel:

Eccles Street is a great novel; it will live, perhaps, as long as *Ulysses*; it will certainly be around long after its maker is in the grave. He was only a child when she wrote it. It unsettles and dizzies him to think that the same being that engendered *Eccles Street* engendered him. (Coetzee, 2003, 11)

The Platonic ideas of achieving immortality through one's physical and mental offspring are clearly evident here. However, there are many levels of irony—and it should be remembered that Plato, too, was a master of irony. A particularly rich irony here is the fact that Costello's son, John, is also her parent since he is a stand-in for Costello's author, J.M. Coetzee. Thus Coetzee complicates the idea of origins, suggesting that he is his own parent, disrupting the realist mode with post-modernist

reflexivity. This reflexivity is reinforced by the fact that the title of Costello's speech is the same as the title of Coetzee's story.

Costello opens her speech on a very Platonic note when she explains how excited she was in the knowledge that the deposit copies of her first novel would guarantee her a degree of permanence when placed on the shelves in the great libraries, particularly the British Museum:

“What lay behind my concern about deposit copies was the wish that, even if I myself should be knocked over by a bus the next day, this first-born of mine would have a home where it could snooze, if fate so decreed, for the next hundred years, and no one would come poking with a stick to see if it was still alive.

“That was the one side of my telephone call: if I, this mortal shell, am going to die, let me at least live on through my creations.” (17)

However, the narrator goes on to note that “Elizabeth Costello proceeds to reflect on the transience of fame” (17) pointing out how even the British Museum will one day cease to exist, and even before then the books would have been destroyed, “After which it will be as if they had never existed” (17). This idea of the transience of all (physical) things is also part of Platonism, and Buddhism. However, whereas Plato offers immortality through the contemplation of the Form of the Good thanks to philosophical dialectic, Buddhism has no such illusions, but rather offers liberation from one's fear of transience and annihilation. These ideas will be explored in relation to Coetzee's fiction in a later chapter. Whereas for Plato, eros, or desire, is a bridge between mortality and immortality, for Buddhism desire itself is an illusion (Rahula, 1978, 18).

She goes on to claim that realism is dead, that the “word-mirror is broken, irreparably, it seems” (Coetzee, 2003, 19) and that:

“There is every reason, then, for me to feel less than certain about myself as I stand before you. Despite this splendid award, for which I am deeply grateful, despite the promise it makes that, gathered into the illustrious

company of those who have won it before me, I am beyond time's envious grasp, we all know, if we are being realistic, that it is only a matter of time before the books which you honour, and with whose genesis I have had something to do, will cease to be read and eventually cease to be remembered." (20)

Again the Platonic concern with transience and permanence is evident, but so, too, is a Socratic uncertainty and humility, and an awareness of mortality.

There follows the scene where John allows Susan Moebius to seduce him while knowing she does so in order to get closer to his mother. The dialogue is striking in the way it works out both Socratic and Platonic ideas. It is Platonic in the way that eros is the means by which Susan approaches the divine secret in Costello, the secret to her immortality through her fictions. The dialogue is Socratic in the sense that it consists of a dialectical exchange of views without final closure. They are arguing whether or not an author can transcend his or her sexuality (which is a reflection on Coetzee's adoption of his female persona, Costello). The dialogue gives birth in John to the crucial truth about the power of fiction, a truth which is essential for an understanding of Costello's "sympathetic imagination" in *The Lives of Animals*:

"But my mother has been a man," he persists. "She has also been a dog. She can think her way into other people, into other existences. I have read her; I know. It is within her powers. Isn't that what is most important about fiction: that it takes us out of ourselves, into other lives?" (22-23)

However, it could be argued that that is the power of philosophy, too. In Plato's *Symposium* we see how the desiring ego, how eros, can transcend itself, through the exercise of virtue, and achieve a mystical union with immortality, through a vision of the Good. This has striking similarities with Buddhism, which also aims at the annihilation of the self through following the Eightfold Path, a programme of virtue. Nonetheless, Plato and Buddhism achieve this because they devalue individuality, whereas for Costello, and presumably for Coetzee, embodied individuality is inherently valuable. Furthermore, modern philosophy has been burdened, since Descartes

formulated his “Cogito ergo sum,” with the problems of solipsism, namely, the problems of the isolated ego and the impossibility of knowing the other, or even the reality behind appearances. Also, art has for Coetzee and Costello an ethical function, just as philosophy has for Socrates, although whereas for Socrates it is ‘knowing oneself,’ for Coetzee and Costello it is also ‘knowing the other.’

Furthermore, Coetzee has Costello in the second-last lecture/chapter of *Elizabeth Costello*, entitled “Eros,” questioning, Socratic-like, the limitations of the sympathetic imagination:

Are there other modes of being besides what we call human into which we can enter; and if there are not, what does that say about us and our limitations? She does not know much about Kant, but it sounds to her a Kantian kind of question. If her ear is right, then inwardness started its run with the man from Königsberg and ended, more or less, with Wittgenstein the Viennese destroyer. (Coetzee, 2003, 188)

There are also strong erotic overtones to the dialogue between John and Susan, although not homo-erotic, as it is in the *Symposium*:

The drift of the conversation has changed. They are no longer speaking about writing, if they ever were.

“What do you think?” she says. “What does your experience tell you? And is difference such a bad thing? If there were no difference, what would become of desire?”

She looks him candidly in the eye. It is time to move. He stands up; she puts her glass down, slowly stands up too. As she passes him he takes her elbow, and at the touch a shock runs through him, dizzying him. (23)

During the night, while Susan is sleeping beside him, John awakes feeling sad at his betrayal of his mother (this may suggest that she is a Christ figure or may be a reference to King Duncan, in which case John would be Macbeth) and thinks about the image of sleep from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in the Platonic terms of a brain-child:

Sleep, he thinks, *that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care*. What an extraordinary way of putting it! Not all the monkeys in the world picking away at typewriters all their lives would come up with those words in that arrangement. Out of the dark emerging, out of nowhere: first not there, then there, like a newborn child, heart working, brain working, all the processes of that intricate electrochemical labyrinth working. A miracle. He closes his eyes. (27)

The reference to the monkeys echoes Costello's discussion of Kafka's ape, suggesting that artistic creation is what separates humans from other animals. In fact, however, this passage describes the divine creative spark in genuine artists like Costello (ironically, since she is a work of fiction) and Shakespeare, a creativity which transcends ordinary humanness. The comparison of the work of art to a living child, or animal, also echoes Plato's description of what makes a successful speech (although it is relevant to all works of art):

But I think you would agree that any speech ought to have its own organic shape, like a living being; it must not be without either head or feet; it must have a middle and extremities so composed as to fit one another and the work as a whole. (*Phaedrus*: 264) (Plato, 1973, 79)

The morning following their night of love-making, John and Susan speak over breakfast:

"I will tell you what I really think. I think you are baffled, even if you won't admit it, by the mystery of the divine in the human. You know there is something special about my mother—that is what draws you to her—yet when you meet her she turns out to be just an ordinary old woman. You can't square the two. You want an explanation. You want a clue, a sign, if not from her then from me. That is what is going on. It's all right, I don't mind."

...

“You really are her son, aren’t you? Do you write too?”

“You mean, am I touched by the god? No. But yes, I am her son. Not a foundling, not an adoptee. Out of her very body I came, caterwauling.”

(28)

(The use of the word “really” is very ironic in relation to the title and subject matter of this story.) Costello is seen as both a mortal and a divine figure (besides having produced both biological and mental children in a bid for immortality). In her speech she described her first novel as her “first-born”, but John is, biologically speaking, her first-born. However, there is something deeper about Coetzee’s description of John as Costello’s child. Despite the fact that Costello is actually a brain-child of John Coetzee, he presents himself as the child of Costello. This curious inversion is not merely post-modern reflexivity, but has a deeper significance that will be explored later in relation to Coetzee’s use of the term “amanuensis” in *The Lives of Animals*.

Susan’s fascination with the divine in Costello strongly echoes the fascination, expressed by Alcibiades in the *Symposium*, that people have for Socrates, who embodies the daemon Eros and thus provides a bridge between mortality and immortality. Alcibiades rudely joins the drinking party in the *Symposium* and interrupts the men who are competing with each other with speeches in praise of Eros. Socrates is the last to speak and he deliberately eschews a poetic mode, relying on a philosophical one instead. Alcibiades then insists on delivering a speech in praise of Socrates:

“The Socrates of your experience is in the habit of falling in love with good-looking people, and he’s constantly hanging around them in a stupor; secondly, he’s completely ignorant and has no knowledge at all. Do you see how Silenus-like he looks? The resemblance is striking. The point is, this is just an outer coating, like the outside shell of those carved Sileni. But if he were opened up, my friends, you’d find him chock-full of self-control inside. . . .

“I don’t know if any of you has seen the genuine Socrates, opened up to reveal the effigies he has inside, but I saw them once, and they struck

me as so divine, so glorious, so gorgeous and wonderful that—to cut a long story short—I felt I should obey him in everything.” (*Symposium*: 216d-217a)

Of course, the divine Socrates is the Platonic, infallible Socrates, rather than the human and fallible Socrates. The same tension exists in perceptions of Costello. John praises the divine in his mother to Susan, but keeps to himself his less flattering perceptions of her ageing appearance and even brutally realistic descriptions of her moments of ugliness:

He can see up her nostrils, into her mouth, down the back of her throat. And what he cannot see he can imagine: the gullet, pink and ugly, contracting as it swallows, like a python, drawing things down to the pear-shaped belly-sac. He draws away, tightens his own belt, sits up, facing forward. No, he tells himself, that is not where I come from, that is not it. (34)

Costello’s prize-acceptance “performance” over, she gets ready to return home:

She has won, more or less. On foreign turf too. An away win. She can come home with her true self safe, leaving behind an image, false, like all images. (30)

John asks himself, “What is the truth of his mother? He does not know, and at the deepest level, he does not want to know” (30). He keeps his opinions secret, comparing her to the sibyl or oracle (31), describing himself as her devoted servant. His reference to the frenzy also recalls the Dionysian references to Socrates that Alcibiades makes in the *Symposium*. John reflects:

He does not hate her. He serves at her shrine, cleaning up the petals, collecting the offerings, putting the widow’s mites together, ready to bank. He may not share in the frenzy, but he worships too.

A mouthpiece for the divine. But *sibyl* is not the right word for her. Nor is *oracle*. Too Greco-Roman. His mother is not in the Greco-Roman

mould. Tibet or India more like it: a god incarnated in a child, wheeled from village to village to be applauded, venerated. (31)

This may seem fatal to the thesis that Costello is a Socratic figure—rather than, perhaps, a Buddha or Christ figure—but there is no reason why one should take John’s word as final. In fact, the essential openness of Coetzee’s writings to many voices, and his absconding from any position of authority will be argued as Socratic in Chapter 3. Furthermore, it has been argued that Costello is a fallible Socratic figure rather than the infallible and divine Platonic Socrates. Finally, John’s comment that “His mother is not in the Greco-Roman mould” can be taken ironically.

The story of Socrates may also illuminate other aspects of Elizabeth Costello, as depicted in *The Lives of Animals*, namely references to her embodiedness and her mortality. Whereas Plato remains a shadowy figure, a disembodied intellect, in western literature, Socrates, thanks largely to the poetic prowess of Plato, is a vivid creation: bulging-eyed, snub-nosed, stocky and bare-footed, solidly embodied. In the *Theaetetus*, Theodorus compares Socrates to an Athenian youth:

But as it is—and I hope you will take this in good part—he isn’t good looking, but he looks like you! He’s snub-nosed and his eyes bulge, though not so much as yours. (143e)

In the *Symposium* Alcibiades, one of the most beautiful but immoral men in Greece, compares Socrates, physically unattractive but with a beautiful character, to the Sileni and Satyrs (*Symposium*: 215a), which “were commonly portrayed in Greek art with a snub nose and bulging eyes” (Plato, 1994, 91).

A similar relation stands between Coetzee and Costello. Despite his undeniable intellectual contributions as a public intellectual, Coetzee himself remains a retiring and shadowy figure. Costello, on the other hand, is described as heavily embodied throughout *Elizabeth Costello* and *The Lives of Animals*. Behind every Platonic dialogue in which Socrates appears there is an awareness of the fact that Socrates will be executed by the Athenian democracy for impiety and corruption of the youth. This fact adds a further level of complexity to the dialogues, often in the form of irony. A

similar sense of Costello’s mortality, alongside a declining sense of desire, accompanies all of Coetzee’s works in which she appears. So while Costello cannot be said to become a martyr for her beliefs as Socrates did, there is nonetheless a sense in which she is dying for her beliefs. Her own mortality—and sense of her own mortality—heightens her sympathy for the animals that are being bred in vast numbers and, when still young and healthy, are being exploited for hunting, experimentation, testing and slaughter. However, while Socrates was always described as energetic (his iron constitution was famous), cheerful and humorous, Costello is described as perpetually tired, even exhausted:

After the long flight, she is looking her age. She has never taken care of her appearance; she used to be able to get away with it; now it shows. Old and tired. (Coetzee, 2003, 3)

Her hair has a greasy, lifeless look. (Coetzee, 2003, 3)

These descriptions continue in the very first paragraph of *The Lives of Animals*:

He is waiting at the gate when her flight comes in. Two years have passed since he last saw his mother; despite himself, he is shocked at how she has aged. Her hair, which had had streaks of gray in it, is now entirely white; her shoulders stoop; her flesh has grown flabby.

...

“A long flight,” he remarks. “You must be exhausted.”

“Ready to sleep,” she says; and indeed, en route, she falls asleep briefly, her head slumped against the window. (Coetzee, 1999b, 15)

Just before she speaks, she is introduced by Elaine Marx:

Then it is the turn of Elizabeth Costello. To him she looks old and tired. Sitting in the front row beside his wife, he tries to will strength into her. (18)

Death is also a recurrent topic of her speeches. In a sense, *The Lives of Animals* reads like a *memento mori* for Coetzee himself. John suspects what his mother is about to speak about:

He does not look forward to what is coming. He does not want to hear his mother talking about death. Furthermore, he has a strong sense that her audience—which consists, after all, mainly of young people—wants death-talk even less. (19)

He is right, because Costello goes on to compare the mass slaughter of animals in abattoirs to the mass slaughter of Jews in Nazi death camps. Throughout her speech, she mentions and discusses the Nazi death camps (19, 20, 21, 26, 34, 69). She returns to a discussion of death when she talks about Nagel's bat-being:

“What I know is what a corpse cannot know: that it is extinct, that it knows nothing and will never know anything anymore. For an instant, before my whole structure of knowledge collapses in panic, I am alive inside that contradiction, dead and alive at the same time.” (32)

After her speech is over, and the floor has been opened to questions, John dissuades his wife from asking a question:

“She can't just be allowed to get away with it! She's confused!”

“She's old, she's my mother. Please!”

Behind them someone is already speaking. He turns and sees a tall, bearded man. God Knows, he thinks, why his mother ever agreed to field questions from the floor. She ought to know that public lectures draw kooks and crazies like flies to a corpse. (36)

At the dinner, John thinks of Plutarch's words:

“You ask me why I refuse to eat flesh. I, for my part, am astonished that you can put into your mouth the corpse of a dead animal, astonished that you do not find it nasty to chew hacked flesh and swallowed the juices of death-wounds.” (38)

The closing paragraph of *The Lives of Animals* ends on a note which seems to foreshadow death:

They are not yet on the expressway. He pulls the car over, switches off the engine, takes his mother in his arms. He inhales the smell of cold cream, of old flesh. “There, there,” he whispers in her ear. “There, there. It will soon be over.” (69)

Some reviewers have argued that all Costello’s talking about the lives of animals can be more or less reduced to her own isolation, loneliness and awareness of her own mortality, and that all she needed was compassionate contact with another human being (Webb, May 19, 1999). While this may be true, it is only part of a correct interpretation, and a minor part at that, since it evades confronting the ethical importance of what she has to say.

In *Slow Man* Costello returns revived. However, before going on to discuss *Slow Man*, it will first be necessary to discuss Coetzee’s use of the term “amanuensis” in *The Lives of Animals*. When Costello begins her speech, she returns to her use of Kafka previously in another speech, “What Is Realism?” (referenced as Coetzee’s story in the first footnote of *The Lives of Animals* (Coetzee, 1999b, 18)), once again identifying with Kafka’s ape, Red Peter. In both cases she points out her similarity with Red Peter, namely that they are both paid entertainers performing before a learned audience.

Later in her speech, when she returns again to Kafka, she uses the term “amanuensis” twice with reference to the relationship between Kafka and his fictional creation, the ape, Red Peter:

“That is not what Red Peter was striving for when he wrote, through his amanuensis Franz Kafka, the life history that, in November of 1917, he proposed to read to the Academy of Science. Whatever else it may have been, his report to the academy was not a plea to be treated as a mentally defective human being, a simpleton.

“Red Peter was not an investigator of primate behaviour but a branded,

marked, wounded animal presenting himself as speaking testimony to a gathering of scholars. I am not a philosopher of mind but an animal exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word I speak.

“If Red Peter took it upon himself to make the arduous descent from the silence of the beasts to the gabble of reason in the spirit of the scapegoat, the chosen one, then his amanuensis was a scapegoat from birth, with a presentiment, a *Vorgefühl*, for the massacre of the chosen people that was to take place so soon after his death. So let me, to prove my goodwill, my credentials, make a gesture in the direction of scholarship, backed up with footnotes”—here, in an uncharacteristic gesture, his mother raises and brandishes the text of her lecture in the air—“on the origins of Red Peter.” (26)

A definition of “amanuensis” is “a person employed to take dictation or to copy manuscripts”, but the etymology is even more interesting: “from the phrase *servus a manu* slave at hand (that is, handwriting)” (*Collins English Dictionary* 3rd ed., 1991: 45). The use of this term is unusual since it suggests that Kafka, the author, takes dictation from Red Peter, his fictional creation. The same applies to the relation between Coetzee, the author, and his fictional creation, Costello. In both cases the normal causal relationship between author and character, creator and creature, is reversed. This is repeated in the way, mentioned above, that Coetzee presents himself in “What Is Realism?” as a creature of Costello and is reinforced in *The Lives of Animals* when Costello mentions “footnotes” in which Coetzee’s own name appears as the first footnote. The author, usually seen as the master, becomes the slave, or servant, to his or her creature. And yet in both “What Is Realism?” and *Slow Man* these creatures are presented as caged animals.

This puzzle can perhaps be resolved by conceiving the authors as Socratic midwives—and it should be noted that Socrates’ own mother, significantly, may have been a midwife—who assist in the birth, but from their own minds, their imaginations, of

these fictional creations, Coetzee of Costello and Kafka of Red Peter. These creatures then have an artistic integrity, a life of their own, that the authors then have to represent faithfully. The authors have to respect the individual voices and independent being of their creations. (This idea will be pursued further in Chapter 3.) They must come across as living animals and not just the *ideas* of animals. In “What Is Realism?”, Costello argues that the greatness of Kafka is that “Kafka stays awake during the gaps when we are sleeping” (32) and one is reminded of John’s vision of the birth of an idea as though it were a living being, and of Plato’s comparison of a good speech to a properly formed living organism. However, the apparently inverted relationship between creator and creature may perhaps be best explained in relation to Costello’s description of herself as “secretary of the invisible” in “At the Gate,” the eighth and last lesson of *Elizabeth Costello*, which will be discussed later. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, Anya, employed as John Coetzee’s secretary, performs a similar function, although she also embodies Platonic beauty that inspires Coetzee to creativity. The name “Anya” is Sanskrit for “inexhaustible,” although its meaning in Russian, as a shortened version of “Anna,” meaning “graceful or bringing goodness,” would seem more suited for Coetzee’s ideas on secular salvation and grace.

Another obscure reference in the “amanuensis” extract is to Costello’s wound. Red Peter’s physical wound is from the injuries he sustained when he was captured (he was shot). But there seems to be a suggestion that both Red Peter and Costello carry a further, spiritual wound, a wound that separates them from their respective audiences, and which somehow seems bound up with their humanity. In Red Peter’s case humanity has been forced upon him. In Costello’s case she, like Kafka (Coetzee, 1999b, 30-31), seems insecure in her humanity. It may also refer to her being a woman and therefore not fully a man. Her use of the words “gabble of reason” is unflattering, suggesting perhaps that Red Peter’s descent from apelike state to humanity was not worth the cost. Perhaps both Costello and Red Peter are literally only aping rationality, both women and animals having been excluded from reason by the Western philosophical tradition, in which case Costello can only ape a philosopher and “gabble” if she tries to use reason like a trained philosopher.

A quotation from Fredrick Karl, whose biography of Kafka Costello cites twice in *The Lives of Animals*, may help more fully illuminate the reference to “wound.” Karl comments on the significance of the wound of the patient in Kafka’s “A Country Doctor”:

The revelation of the wound suggests the festering, hidden nature of an injury, that universal, metonymic Kafkan wound. This wound lies behind all efforts of individual will, all assertions of independent action, all choice, all attempts at happiness or at controlling circumstance. Every dimension of life must eventually come back to the hidden wound, which ends only in death itself. One can never escape the wound, or withdraw from its inevitability; it is the “other” in all transactions, although one must hope and go forward as though no such wound exists. (Kafka, 2007, 552-3)

Thus this wound represents human suffering and, ultimately, mortality. It is a sign of our human fallibility, imperfection and incompleteness, which link us with the animals and differentiate us from the gods. Yet, through our reason and imagination, we aspire, tragically, to godlike status.

Stephen Mulhall, an academic philosopher who has taken seriously the challenge to philosophy in *The Lives of Animals*, although in terms of metaphysics rather than ethics, also very plausibly interprets the wound as the pain Costello feels as a consequence of her knowledge of what animals are suffering at the hands of humans and of human indifference to this (Mulhall, 2009, 70):

But the open wound that most thoroughly pervades her lecture, and that threatens to poison the hospitality of the college and family alike, is her sense of the continuing human treatment of animals in farms, trawlers, abattoirs, and laboratories throughout the world—the sadistic games we play around the production of meat for food—as comparable to the Holocaust. (Mulhall, 2009, 55)

The link between the wounded self and the Holocaust is reiterated in the critical writings of Coetzee whose discussion of Appelfeld’s work has been mentioned earlier.

Coetzee offers art as a means of salvation from the wound; he once again asserts the power of fiction to attain the truth, to say the unsayable: “Faith in the power of fiction to recover and restore the wounded self—‘to give the tortured person back his human form, which was snatched away from him’—has since been the core of Appelfeld’s work” (Coetzee, 2002a, 214).

Also in the “amanuensis” extract, the word “scapegoat” is applied both to Kafka and Red Peter, and hence, by extension, to Costello herself. Mulhall notes that Costello’s:

...idea of herself as scapegoat—a creature familiar to Jewish and Christian thought as the beast who bears the burden of our sins, and bears away our pollutedness by accepting that pollution itself—invokes (in all seriousness, as well as in the accents of irony and self-pity) a theological perspective that recurs throughout her visit. (Mulhall, 2009, 55)

While this may suggest she is a Christ figure, it could also be taken to suggest that she is a Socratic figure who, like Socrates, died a martyr for his beliefs, the innocent victim of an unjust society, bearing their sins with him to his death. The idea of the scapegoat will be pursued further in Chapter 6.

Perhaps the most decisive proof that Coetzee intends Costello as a Socratic figure can be found in *Slow Man*, published in 2005.⁵ Coetzee makes liberal use of Platonic and Socratic ideas, appropriating philosophy for literary purposes, truth in the service of fiction, in a comical yet serious manner. *Slow Man* is about love and the rebirth of love in a wounded soul (and body), which is a main theme in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, to which Paul Rayment ironically refers:

A memory comes back to him of the cover of a book he used to own, a popular edition of Plato. It showed a chariot drawn by two steeds, a black steed with flashing eyes and distended nostrils representing the base appetites, and a white steed of calmer mien representing the less easily

⁵The novel is set in 2000, since Paul Rayment, the story’s passionless and maimed protagonist, mentions that Costello is seventy-two and was born in 1928 (120).

identifiable nobler passions. Standing in the chariot, gripping the reins, was a young man with a half-bared torso and a Grecian nose and a fillet around his brow, representing presumably the self, that which calls itself *I*. Well, in his book, the book of himself, the book of his life, if that ever comes to be written, the picture will be more humdrum than in Plato. Himself, the one he calls Paul Rayment, will be seated on a wagon hitched to a mob of nags and drays that huff and puff, some barely pulling their weight. After sixty years of waking up every blessed morning, munching their ration of oats, pissing and shitting, then being harnessed for the day's haul, Paul Rayment's team would have had enough. (Coetzee, 2005, 53)

Rayment had been reflecting how wasted his life has been, especially since he has had no children, that is, has not been stirred to creative activity through the passion of love. In fact, earlier he had reflected that he was:

“All in all, not a man of passion. He is not sure he has ever liked passion, or approved of it. Passion: foreign territory; a comical but unavoidable affliction like mumps, that one hopes to undergo while still young, in one of its milder, less ruinous varieties, so as not to catch it more seriously later on. Dogs in the grip of passion coupling, hapless grins on their faces, their tongues hanging out.” (45-46)

Then, Rayment falls in love with his Croatian nurse, Marijana, whose third and youngest child, a daughter, is named Ljuba, which is Croatian for love. Whereas homo-erotic love is the theme of the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, Rayment falls in love with his female nurse, but also with her son, Drago (Croatian for “dear”)—the beautiful youth—and with her family (her younger daughter is named after cupid). He offers to sponsor Drago's studies, much like the older male lover of the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* would offer advancement in society to his young beloved in return for his sexual favours. When he proposes to sponsor the studies of Drago, Marijana's eldest child, and son, and states as his reason that he loves Marijana (76-77), she leaves and is absent for a while. During her absence Elizabeth Costello, calling

herself a “doubting Thomas” (81), arrives to advise Rayment against pursuing his “unsuitable passion” (85, 89, 99) for Marijana, much to his irritation. In terms of the *Phaedrus* dialogue, Costello resembles Socrates, and Rayment, Phaedrus. The way she interferes in Rayment’s private affairs resembles both the way the voice (god or daemon or conscience) in Socrates’ head dissuaded him from making certain choices rather than prescribing what he should do, as well as the way Socrates himself interfered in people’s private affairs in order to urge them on to self-knowledge and virtue:

“It may seem curious that I should go round giving advice like this and busying myself in people’s private affairs, and yet never venture publicly to address you as a whole and advise on matters of state. The reason for this is what you have often heard me say before on many other occasions: that I am subject to a divine or supernatural experience, which Meletus saw fit to travesty in his indictment. It began in my early childhood—a sort of voice which comes to me; and when it comes it always dissuades me from what I am proposing to do, and never urges me on.” (*Apology*: 31d) (Plato, 1959, 63-64)

As Costello says:

“Most of the time you won’t notice that I am here. Just a touch on the shoulder, now and then, left or right, to keep you on the path.” (87)

Costello also speaks and behaves, in *Slow Man*, in other ways which strongly recall the Socrates of the *Symposium*. Enacting her function of amanuensis, or secretary of the invisible, or midwife of ideas, she tells Paul Rayment to make a better case for his life so she can have something to write about:

“What case would you prefer me to make?” he says. “What story would make me worthy of your attention?”

“How must I know? Think of something.”

Idiot woman! He ought to throw her out.

“Push!” she urges.

Push? Push what? *Push!* is what you say to a woman in labour.

“Push the mortal envelope,” she says. “Magill Road, the very portal to the abode of the dead: how did you feel as you tumbled through the air? Did the whole of your life flash before you? How did it seem to you in retrospect, the life you were about to depart?” (83)

The fact she asks him questions suggests the Socratic didactic method, and her asking him to “push” alludes to her role of Socratic midwife trying to help Rayment give birth to virtuous ideas, even though he is ‘merely’ a fictional creation. Once again, Coetzee presents his fictional creations as being at least partly self-originating and as having a degree of independence from their author. He humorously investigates the nature of artistic creation by having Costello, herself a creation of Coetzee, take artistic responsibility for her creation, Paul Rayment, telling him that she cannot leave him alone because he came to her:

“*I came to you? You came to me!*”

“Shush, don’t shout, the neighbours will think you are beating me.” She slumps into a chair. “I’m sorry. I am intruding, I know. You came to me, that is all I can say. You occurred to me—a man with a bad leg and no future and an unsuitable passion. That was where it started. Where we go from there I have no idea. Have you any proposal?” (85)

Costello tries to dissuade Rayment from rash actions that could possibly destroy the Jokić family and tries to set him up with a woman called Marianna, who like Paul is lonely and incomplete (she has lost her sight). Here Costello is acting the match-maker, although, despite one amorous meeting in the dark in Paul’s flat, the match turns out to be a dead-end and Paul suspects that Costello has set them up as a “biologico-literary experiment” (114):

Eros. Why does the sight of the beautiful call eros into life? Why does the spectacle of the hideous strangle desire? Does intercourse with the

beautiful elevate us, make better people of us, or is it by embracing the diseased, the mutilated, the repulsive that we improve ourselves? What questions! Is that why the Costello woman has brought the two of them together: not for the vulgar comedy of a man and a woman with parts of their bodies missing doing their best to interlock, but in order that, once the sexual business has been got out of the way, they can hold a philosophy class, lying in each other's arms discoursing about beauty, love, and goodness?

Although Coetzee seems to make fun of Platonic philosophy, *Slow Man* is true to the comical spirit of the Socratic dialogue, as will be argued in Chapter 3. Rayment later remonstrates with Costello:

“You treat me like a puppet,” he complains. “You treat everyone like a puppet. You make up stories and bully us into playing them out for you. You should open a puppet theatre, or a zoo. There must be plenty of old zoos for sale, now that they have fallen out of fashion. Buy one, and put us in cages with our names on them. *Paul Rayment: canis infelix. Marrianna Popova: pseudocaeca (migratory)*. And so forth. Rows and rows of cages holding the people who have, as you put it, *come to you* in the course of your career as a liar and fabulator. You could charge admission. You could make a living out of it. Parents could bring their children at weekends to gawp at us and throw peanuts. Easier than writing books that no one reads.” (117)

Although comically petulant, this charge is also serious, since it suggests that Costello (and therefore Coetzee?) is a tyrannical author, a dictator rather than a scribe. However, the fact that Costello allows one of her creations to make such a complaint against her, suggests the opposite, that she is open to all voices, even to that of this character with whom she can sympathise so little. Indeed, so much so does Costello refuse to assert her authorial authority that when she proposes to live with Rayment and asks him whether they have found love, he has the final word:

He examines her, then he examines his heart. “No,” he says at last, “this is not love. This is something else. Something less.

“And that is your last word, do you think? No hopes of budging you?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“But what am I going to do without you?”

She seems to be smiling, but her lips are trembling too.

“That is up to you, Elizabeth. There are plenty of fish in the ocean, so I hear. But as for me, as for now: goodbye.” And he leans forward and kisses her thrice in the formal manner he was taught as a child, left right left. (263)

A final point about *Slow Man* is that when Rayment and Costello finally visit the Jokić family at the end of the novel, Marijiana is not pleased to see them and says bluntly, “So, you bring your secretary” (243). Rayment replies: “Elizabeth is not my secretary and has never been. She is just a friend”, although he does add soon after: “Yes, Elizabeth knows me better than I know myself. I need barely open my mouth” (243). The relationship between author and character, creator and creation seems to be one of familiarity, friendship, rather than authority. This also counts for the relationship between Coetzee and his persona, Costello. The significance of the reference to “secretary” will be evident from the previous discussion of Coetzee’s use of “amanuensis” in *The Lives of Animals* and in the analysis of “At the Gate” which is to follow.

Returning to the idea of the author as amanuensis, one should see it in relation to Coetzee’s story, “At the Gate,” published in 2003 in *Elizabeth Costello*. Although this story is an allusion to Kafka’s “Before the Law” (Kafka, 2007) and is related to Coetzee’s concern with confessional literature, it also arguably has another precedent in Plato’s *Apology*, a Socratic monologue, wherein Socrates has to provide an account—a defence—of his life and values to the democratic Athenian court. One is reminded of MacIntyre’s assertion, quoted in Chapter 1, that narrative gives meaning

to one's life, of which one can be expected to provide an account, and of MacIntyre's contention that one's life consists of the roles or performances that one plays, since the idea of performance is repeated throughout *Elizabeth Costello* and especially in "At the Gate". Indeed, it could be argued that "At the Gate" has more in common with Plato's *Apology* than Kafka's "Before the Law", since in Kafka's story the protagonist never has an opportunity to state his case before the judges, whereas Costello does, and she is not so much confessing as making a plea for fiction.

In this story, Costello arrives at a small Italian or Austro-Hungarian fictional town, whose artificiality and clichéd appearances are continually emphasized, where she is expected to write a statement of her beliefs which will first have to be judged before a board of examiners before she can pass through a portal to, possibly, the afterlife or eternity. Once again Costello is in transit—she seems never to be at home—and this reminds one of MacIntyre's point that the narrative of the journey is an important one (MacIntyre, 2007, 175-76). The reference to Odysseus later in the story seems to confirm this idea of Costello as a perpetual traveller, perhaps not so much a pilgrim or wanderer as a quester after the truth.

The judges, or examiners do not find her first statement acceptable, apparently believing she lacks commitment:

"I am a writer, and what I write is what I hear. I am a secretary of the invisible, one of many secretaries over the ages. That is my calling: dictation secretary. It is not for me to interrogate, to judge what is given me. I merely write down the words and then test them, test their soundness, to make sure I have heard right.

"Secretary of the invisible: not my own phrase, I hasten to say. I borrow it from a secretary of a higher order, Czeslaw Milosz, a poet, perhaps known to you, to whom it was dictated years ago." (199)

She insists that she can hold no beliefs, for professional reasons, since she is a writer, and beliefs merely interfere with her occupation of recording what she hears. One judge asks her what effect she thinks this lack of beliefs has on her humanity, to

which she replies “On my humanity? Is that of consequence? What I offer to those who read me, what I contribute to their humanity, outweighs, I would hope, my own emptiness in that respect” (201). She is immediately labelled “cynical,” a label she resists, and accepts only in a “technical sense” but insists “as regards other people, as regards humankind or humanity, no, I do not believe I am cynical at all” (201). This appears to suggest, contrary to what she has said, that Costello does seem to believe in humanity and the power of fiction to extend humanity. She appears to be a Socratic figure who delivers ideas from others rather than imposing her own ideas on them. Thus the secretary of the invisible, the amanuensis and the midwife are one and the same, sharing in common the function of an assistant to an other.

The judges seem to be trying to get her to make an ethical commitment, to concede that her fiction serves an ethical end, and not merely one of entertainment. Then they attempt to elicit a political commitment from her when they ask her for her thoughts on the extermination of the old Tasmanians, to which she responds, reiterating her appeal in *The Lives of Animals* to her audience to “open your heart and listen to what your heart says” (37):

“Let me add, for your edification: beliefs are not the only ethical supports we have. We can rely on our hearts as well. That is all. I have nothing more to say.” (203)

She does, however, eventually make a statement about the old Tasmanians, but in a way which only reiterates her initial statement that she is a secretary of the invisible:

“The aboriginal people of Tasmania are today counted among the invisible, the invisible whose secretary I am, one of many such. Every morning I seat myself at my desk and ready myself for the summons of the day. That is a secretary’s way of life, and mine. When the old Tasmanians summon me, if they choose to summon me, I will be ready and I will write, to the best of my ability.” (203-4)

She points out that she is as ready to record the voices of the perpetrators as she is of the victims, to which one of the examiners responds: “You do not judge between

the murderer and the victim? Is that what it is to be a secretary: to write down whatever you are told? To be bankrupt of conscience?" (204). It is a confirmation of her commitment to humanity that Costello points out that the guilty suffer too and a testament to her artistic integrity that she does not give in to what the judges seem to demand of her. The reference to conscience seems to be a Socratic echo, as was discussed in *Slow Man* above. Not surprisingly, her first petition is unsuccessful, and so she spends much time revising it, until she decides one day to take a different approach:

Since she boasts that she is secretary of the invisible, let her concentrate her attention, turn it inward. What voice does she hear from the invisible today? (Coetzee, 2003, 210)

In the end she finds she can believe, at least momentarily, in the embodied, if fictional, being of animals, of "the favourite ram of the king of Ithaca" (211) whose throat has just been slit and of the frogs that live in the mudflats of the Dulgannon in Australia. She goes on to make vivid descriptions of both the ram that Odysseus slaughters in the underworld as a sacrifice to Tiresius and the endless life-cycle of the frogs of the Dulgannon (entombment in the mud, revival in the rains, and mating). Both descriptions are vividly alive and concretely described, yet both are fictional. She refuses to allegorize the frogs' life-cycle, insisting that "it is because of their indifference to me that I believe in them" (217). Perhaps she is forced to admit her animal nature and to find no consoling illusion of immortality through art or in an immortal rational human soul, to admit that there is no escape from the endless biological cycle of birth, sex and death. It seems as though Costello's salvation is somehow bound up with animals rather than in literature, as her final vision reveals:

She has a vision of the gate, the far side of the gate, the side she is denied. At the foot of the gate, blocking the way, lies stretched out a dog, an old dog, his lion-coloured hide scarred from innumerable mangleings. His eyes are closed, he is resting, snoozing. Beyond him is nothing but a desert of sand and stone, to infinity. It is her first vision in a long while, and she

does not trust it, does not trust in particular the anagram GOD-DOG.

Too literary, she thinks again. A curse on literature! (224-5)

Despite Costello's curse, despite the fact that she does not trust the vision, and despite the realistic description of the dog—indeed, perhaps because of the realism⁶—the dog seems to be a literary allusion to Odysseus' dog, Argus, who has waited nineteen years for his master's return. This suggests that Costello has eventually arrived home, although to a faithful, old dog in an endless wasteland:

Stretched on the ground close to where they stood talking, there lay a dog, who now pricked up his ears and raised his head. Argus was his name. Odysseus himself had owned and trained him, though he had sailed for holy Illium before he could reap the reward of his patience. In years gone by the young huntsmen had often taken him out after wild goats, deer, and hares. But now, in his owner's absence, he lay abandoned on the heaps of dung from the mules and cattle There, full of vermin, lay Argus the hound. But directly he became aware of Odysseus' presence, he wagged his tail and dropped his ears, though he lacked the strength now to come any nearer to his master. Yet Odysseus saw him out of the corner of his eye, and brushed a tear away without showing any sign of emotion to the swineherd As for Argus, he had no sooner set eyes on Odysseus after those nineteen years than he succumbed to the black hand of death. (Homer, 1948, Book XVII, 266-339)

Costello's vision of the dog follows soon after her revelation: "*Fidelities*. Now that she has brought it out, she recognizes it as the word on which all hinges" (224). Not only does the word refer to the truthfulness, or faithfulness to the truth, demanded of all writers, but it also refers to the proverbial faithfulness of the dog, and hence to the deepest human-animal bond, a term not relating to rights or duties, but to the virtue terminology of patience, trust, faith and fidelity. Our humanity is bound up with

⁶Erich Auerbach traced back the origins of realism in Western literature to the *Odyssey* in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Auerbach, 1968).

how we relate to other animals, and thus with a recognition of our animal nature. Perhaps there is a third significance to “fidelity”, namely, Costello’s steadfastness to her profession, her “doggedness” as her son notes in “What Is Realism?”:

Now the scene has changed. He has grown up. He is no longer outside the door but inside, observing her as she sits, back to the window, confronting, day after day, year after year, while her hair slowly goes from black to grey, the blank page. What doggedness, he thinks! She deserves the medal, no doubt about that, this medal and many more. For valour beyond the call of duty. (Coetzee, 2003, 4-5)

In her insistence that she is “secretary of the invisible” Costello resembles the Platonic Socrates, a daemonic medium between the immortal, invisible realm and the mortal, visible one. Diotima explains to Socrates that Love (Eros) is neither a god nor a mortal, but a daemon:

“An important spirit, Socrates. All spirits occupy the middle ground between humans and gods.”

“And what’s their function?” I asked.

“They translate and carry messages from men to gods and gods to men. They convey men’s prayers and the gods’ instructions, and men’s offerings and the gods’ returns on these offerings. As mediators between the two, they fill the remaining space, and so make the universe an interconnected whole. . . . Divinity and humanity cannot meet directly; the gods only communicate and converse with men . . . by means of spirits.”
(*Symposium*: 202e-203a) (Plato, 1994, 43-4)

Nonetheless, the messages Costello conveys are not from the invisible other world, but from the invisible of this world, often the voiceless, like animals, whom she can only access through her imagination. She is not concerned with other-worldly, disembodied voices, but this-worldly, embodied and embedded voices, dead or alive, victims or perpetrators, fictional or historical. Indeed, the human Socrates, like Costello, is



as opposed to the authority of the other world as he is to the authorities of this world. Nor is there any salvation to be found in an afterlife, in immortality, these being illusions as unreal as the fictions Costello has spent her life spinning. She is midwife not to immortal Forms, but to mortal voices, and to the being of the voiceless. However, the power of the imagination lies not only in its ability to evoke and listen to other voices, and to enter into the being of others, including the voiceless, but also to use fiction to expose fictions, in particular the fiction that rationality is a divine spark that lifts humankind above the rest of nature, and thus, in showing our continuity with animal kind, enables us to reclaim our mortality, our fallibility and our humanity.

The similarities between Costello and Socrates are striking, and are more telling than their differences. Like Socrates, Costello tries to prompt people to realise their humanity, to open their hearts to the suffering of animals. She, like Socrates, faces prejudice, in her case the prejudice of speciesism, which she tries to dispel with counter-illusions. Her method differs from his: she uses images and the imagination (although she also uses argument) whereas he used dialectic and reasoning; but both work to the same end, namely the questioning of prejudices and false beliefs. In exposing ignorance and prejudice, both make enemies. Both function as prophets of inwardness, reminding people to take care of their souls and both appear to be wise fools. By presenting Costello as a fallible Socratic figure, Coetzee unmasks the pretensions of an unqualified rationalism and presents a more modest, more humane picture of humanity.