

Elizabeth Costello as a Socratic Figure

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The figure of Elizabeth Costello, Coetzee's fictional persona, has proven to be very controversial. Reviewers and critics of *The Lives of Animals*, *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man*, and even characters within those works, have described her as irrational and confused, even mad. 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. Reviewers and critics like Douglas Cruikshank have considered her case for the sympathetic imagination to be inconclusive or unconvincing, with Cruikshank describing her as someone "who comes off as something of a pill, a piece of work, a monopolizer of oxygen and presumably no treat as a mother-in-law."¹

In *Slow Man*, the protagonist, Paul Rayment, on meeting Costello for the first time, thinks to himself: "*Who is this madwoman I have let into my home?*" (81, italics in original). 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).

The same is true of the reception of *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), in which the two parts of *The Lives of Animals* were reprinted, alongside additional "lessons," as "Lesson 3" and "Lesson 4." Furthermore, some critics, like Peter Singer, have found it difficult to clarify Coetzee's views in relation to Costello's and have professed an inability to decide whether his adopted fictional mode indicates commitment or confusion (Singer 91), although more recently he has agreed that Coetzee's views on animals tend to converge with those of Costello (Dawn and Singer 109). It will be argued

that the recognition that Costello is a Socratic figure will help to explain her controversial nature.

In contrast to the reviews that 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 evince 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 8), but no one in the collection pursues this idea and explicitly identifies Costello as a Socratic figure. Moreover, most of the critics featured in this book still tend to see her as standing outside of reason. In one of the last essays in 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.

More recently, Carrol Clarkson applies, in a sophisticated linguistic analysis, Bakhtinian ideas of dialogism to both the critical and the creative work of Coetzee, arguing (in specific relation to *Diary of a Bad Year*) that “[t]here is no author-narrator who prescribes a resolution to the collision of voices from a position of anonymous omniscience” (Clarkson 100). Clarkson’s focus is on Coetzee’s linguistic choices and their aesthetic and ethical implications rather than on the embodiment of ideological positions in his various characters.

Concerning the genre of *The Lives of Animals*, 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). Marjorie Garber in her essay in the “Reflections” section of *The Lives of Animals* 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 79–80). These insights will be developed in this article by relating them to Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism.

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 initiated by Plato and embedded by Coetzee in the two-part structure of *The Lives of Animals*. Nietzsche sums up Socrates’s 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 88).

He elaborates on this by summarizing 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. [. . .] 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 83)

Costello, too, is perceived as “arrogantly superior” and as heralding an alien set of values, those of animal rights, in opposition to a narrowly anthropocentric culture, and both figures make enemies in courageously questioning the prejudices of the people around them. Socrates describes his mission, which Costello appears to share with him:

“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, reproving 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)

A contemporary philosopher, D. W. Hamlyn, provides an illuminating account of Socrates, supplementing that of Nietzsche, which also helps to explain Costello’s character and her exhortation to her audience to “open your heart and listen to what your heart says” (Coetzee, *Lives* 37), as well as her explanation of her vegetarianism: “[i]t comes out of a desire to save my soul” (Coetzee, *Lives* 43):

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's 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 39)

Nietzsche argued that Socrates's effect on Plato was such that "the young tragic poet [. . .] burned all his writings in order to qualify as a student of Socrates;" nevertheless, "[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 87).

Finally, discussing Socrates's 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 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. While Nietzsche's characterization of Socrates is largely accurate, it needs to be emphasized that, for all Socrates's 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.

Coetzee's adopted narrative mode has added to the confusion among critics concerning his own views on the subject of his lectures and speeches. The multiple levels of reflexivity may seem playfully postmodernist but as Amy Gutmann, the editor of *The Lives of Animals* (with "Reflections") (1999), points out, "John Coetzee displays the kind of seriousness that can unite aesthetics and ethics" (Gutmann 3). Benjamin Kunkel has also noted the ethical seriousness of Coetzee's fiction despite its postmodern mode

(Kunkel). The uncertainty inherent in Coetzee's technique is basically Socratic, and it does not imply a superficial, trivial or playful relativism, but instead is opposed to the authoritarianism of moral certainty. Its aim is to encourage readers to work through the issues themselves rather than subscribe dogmatically to some principle or position.

Gutmann also points out how the fictional mode of the dialogue form of *The Lives of Animals* enables Coetzee to dramatize the relationships among the various speakers, most significantly those closest to Costello. The power of this narrative mode is that it shows how philosophical points of view are not merely abstract positions but are embodied in thinking, emotional and social beings. It allows several conflicting perspectives to be expressed in all their complexity, without any ultimate resolution.

Coetzee stages situations in which ideas can be debated, especially in the dramatic structure of *The Lives of Animals*. It allows various voices, both complementary and contradictory, to express various views, without any single one dominating: the result is a Bakhtinian polyphony. Furthermore, by adopting the fictional mode of the dialogue, rather than delivering the traditional argumentative or discursive format of the speech and lecture, Coetzee is asserting the power of fiction, both intellectually and emotionally, as a vehicle for serious ethical concerns.

Coetzee has in several interviews discussed the significance of Bakhtin's polyphony, or dialogism, to his writing (Coetzee, *Doubling* 65; Scott 89; Wachtel 44). Bakhtin's concepts of "dialogism" and "polyphony" can clearly be applied to *The Lives of Animals*, the different characters representing the countervoices within Coetzee. Costello, Coetzee's persona and alter-ego, as shown in a previous paper (Northover 37–38), expresses many opinions that Coetzee holds concerning animal rights, although in a manner that lacks Coetzee's reserve; whereas her son, John, who shares both Coetzee's name and reserved nature, expresses many doubts about Costello's position that Coetzee himself may feel. Norma and O'Hearne represent even more stridently self-critical voices within Coetzee. The other characters all occupy well-defined, contrary and complementary positions on the issue of animal rights.

Bakhtin's concept of dialogism may also provide an answer to the question of how Costello can be considered a Socratic figure if she asserts the superior power of the poetic imagination above philosophy, whereas Socrates rejected the poets and the poetic mode for a philosophical one. The problem can perhaps be resolved by an application of Bakhtin's ideas of the polyphonic novel and of the origin of the novel in the Socratic dialogue. Like Nietzsche, Bakhtin sees in Socrates the precursor of science,

democracy and modernity, but, whereas Nietzsche disapproves of these characteristics, Bakhtin approves of them. Seen in Bakhtin's terms, there is no contradiction between identifying Costello (and Coetzee) and Socrates, because Costello and Coetzee are novelists, and the Socratic dialogue is, according to Bakhtin, one of the precursors of the novel. Thus, while Socrates may have been opposed to poetry, he was one of the founders of the novel:

We possess a remarkable document that reflects the simultaneous birth of scientific thinking and of a new artistic-prose model for the novel. These are the Socratic dialogues. For our purpose, everything in this remarkable genre, which was born just as classical antiquity was drawing to a close, is significant.

(Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 24)

It should be noted, however, that whereas Nietzsche opposed Socrates to tragedy, Bakhtin opposed the novel (and thus the Socratic dialogue) to epic poetry. He considered epic poetry to be part of a closed, aristocratic, monologic, valorized past, complete and retrospective (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 15–20). As opposed to that, the novel is popular, dialogic, scientific, open and future-oriented (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 23, 30–31). A glance at the characteristics of the Socratic dialogue, as Bakhtin sees it, appears to confirm the view that Costello can be considered to be a Socratic figure. Bakhtin's point that it is characteristic of a Socratic dialogue "that a speaking and conversing man is the central image of the genre" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 24) clearly applies to the figure of Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals*. His insight that "[c]haracteristic, even canonic, for the genre is the spoken dialogue framed by a dialogized story" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 25) is equally evident in the dramatic setting of *The Lives of Animals*. According to Bakhtin, characteristic of a Socratic dialogue is "the combination of the image of Socrates, the central hero of the genre, wearing the popular mask of a bewildered fool [. . .] with the image of a wise man of the most elevated sort" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 24). He points out that "this combination produces the ambivalent image of wise ignorance" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 24), an image that fits Costello. Her audience obviously respects her as an accomplished novelist yet finds her discussion of animal rights puzzling or even, for Norma, confused (Coetzee, *Lives* 36).

The contributors to *J. M. Coetzee and the Role of the Public Intellectual* (Poyner) have tried to interpret this image of Costello as the wise fool in various ways. David Attwell argues that Costello is a Moria-figure from

Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly*, standing outside of reason: "The point of this madness is that it enables things to be said that could not easily be articulated by a public intellectual in the real world; nevertheless her voice *lingers* as a mark of ethical accountability" (Attwell 36, original emphasis). Rosemary Jolly argues that "[t]aking up the challenge of imagining the other, and the ethical demands attendant upon this act, requires us to be vulnerable to Elizabeth Costello's insight: what we want to say about human society remains outside the realm of the sayable" (Jolly 166). Laura Wright argues that Costello's speech is a rant (Wright 196–97) – linked with emotional excess – that destabilizes the patriarchal binary oppositions characteristic of the rational, philosophical speeches that public lectures usually are (205).

Less obvious, but equally appropriate, to Costello is another feature mentioned by Bakhtin, "the ambivalent self-praise in the Socratic dialogue: I am wiser than everyone, because I know that I know nothing" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 24). I shall return to this later.²

Bakhtin concludes his list of characteristics of the Socratic dialogue:

It is, finally, profoundly characteristic [. . .] that we have laughter, Socratic irony, the entire system of Socratic degradations combined with a serious, lofty and for the first time truly free investigation of the world, of man and human thought. Socratic laughter (reduced to irony) and Socratic degradations [. . .] bring the world closer and familiarize it in order to investigate it fearlessly and freely.

(Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 24–25)

The Lives of Animals is particularly rich in irony, as several critics have noted. For instance, Graham Huggan focuses on *The Lives of Animals* as an animal fable the aesthetic play of which principally consists in multiple levels of irony (Huggan 712–13). Thus despite Costello's criticism of deep ecology as being Platonic, according to Huggan:

The Platonic dilemma remains: in her first lecture, for instance, she becomes, not Red Peter himself, but the idea of Red Peter [. . .]. The ironies begin to multiply again: fables, pushed to their interpretive limits, turn into versions of themselves, thus generating other fables; ecologism itself becomes a fable of the impossible attempt to escape anthropocentric thought.

(Huggan 713)

Thus in *The Lives of Animals* the irony often functions at a higher level than Costello's consciousness. Her words and deeds, as well as the dramatic situation of the novel and the interrelations of the various characters, are treated ironically by Coetzee himself. The effect is, however, similar to that of Socratic irony, namely to place in question any claims to ultimate authority, to stimulate creative doubt in the reader and to familiarize the world so that it can be explored fearlessly. Bakhtin also describes Socrates as a new type of "hero-ideologue:" "As a rule the hero of a novel is always more or less an ideologue" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 38). This is true, at least in part, of Costello, especially as she is presented in *The Lives of Animals*, since she bravely propagates a particular ideological position on animal rights, often in the face of incomprehension, resistance and even hostility. Bakhtin developed his theory of the polyphonic novel mainly with Dostoevsky in mind, a novelist whom Coetzee also admires, so much so as to have written a novel about him, *The Master of Petersburg*. Concerning the relation of Dostoevsky's voice to those of his characters, Bakhtin writes in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*:

Dostoevsky's voice is simply drowned out by all those other voices. Characters are polemicized with, learned from; attempts are made to develop their views into finished systems. The character is treated as ideologically authoritative and independent; he is perceived as the author of a fully weighted ideological conception of his own, and not as the object of Dostoevsky's finalizing artistic vision.

(Bakhtin, *Problems* 5)

In *The Lives of Animals* the voices of Costello's strongest critics, Norma and O'Hearne, are powerfully presented and their autonomy is respected. Indeed, some critics argue that her opponents get the better of Costello, even though Coetzee apparently sympathizes far more, or even identifies, with her position. Also, even Costello, who is a persona of Coetzee, has a strikingly independent voice, a voice that differs substantially from the voice in which Coetzee makes public statements or which he adopts in his academic writing. Where her voice is blatant, fanciful and overly emotional, even hysterical, his is subtle, cautious and reserved. Coetzee's use of polyphony may be the main reason why critics seem unable to work out his own position on animal rights on the basis of *The Lives of Animals* alone, and why they have to resort to statements by him taken from other, non-literary texts such as speeches and interviews (Northover 37–38; Dawn and Singer 109–17).

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin returns to discuss the characteristics of the genre of the Socratic dialogue:

At the base of the genre lies the Socratic notion of the dialogic nature of truth, and the dialogic nature of human thinking about truth. The dialogic means of seeking truth is counterposed to official monologism, which pretends to possess a ready-made truth, and it is also counterposed to the naive self-confidence of those people who think that they know something, that is, who think that they possess certain truths. Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction. Socrates called himself a pander: he brought people together and made them collide in a quarrel, and as a result truth was born; with respect to this emerging truth Socrates called himself a "midwife," since he assisted at the birth.

(Bakhtin, *Problems* 110)

Costello clearly plays the role of the Socratic pander or midwife in *The Lives of Animals*. She elicits strong responses from Abraham Stern, Norma and O'Hearne, and less heated but equally thought-provoking responses from others, like Elaine Marx and her son, John. Of course, the dialogue structure of *The Lives of Animals* ideally suits this creation of truth through dialogic interaction. However, while most of the characters express strong views on the issue of animal rights, none, except Costello, seems to express any self-doubt. At the same time it can be argued that there is a sense of truth being born in *The Lives of Animals* in the process of the exchange of opinions. It is clear too that this dialogic interaction in *The Lives of Animals* has the power to unsettle readers, shake them out of their complacency and encourage them to question their prejudices and assumptions.

This alone can answer critics who may object that *The Lives of Animals* may be dialogic in form but monologic in substance. Confirming the distinction made earlier between the Platonic and the Socratic, Bakhtin distinguishes between the early, middle and late Platonic dialogues and argues, concerning the later dialogues, that "[t]he content often assumed a monologic character that contradicted the form-shaping idea of the genre" whereas "the dialogue of these earlier periods has not yet been transformed into a simple means for expounding ready-made ideas (for pedagogical purposes) and Socrates has not yet been transformed into a 'teacher'" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 110). Again, Costello is presented in *The Lives of Animals* not so much as a teacher or guru in possession of all the answers,

but as a Socratic midwife to ideas who, without having any final answers of her own, provokes others to think about an important issue and to form their own opinions.

Bakhtin goes on to identify other features of the Socratic dialogue. He asserts that the two “basic devices of the Socratic dialogue were the *syncrisis* [. . .] and the *anacrisis*,” the *syncrisis* being the “juxtaposition of various points of view on a specific object” and the *anacrisis* “a means for eliciting and provoking the words of one’s interlocutor, forcing him to express his opinion and express it thoroughly” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 110). *Syncrisis* is evident in the dramatic structure of *The Lives of Animals*, while Costello’s provocative approach and words stimulate *anacrisis*. Bakhtin argues that “[i]n the Socratic dialogue, the plot situation of the dialogue is sometimes utilized alongside *anacrisis*, or the provocation of the word by the word, for the same purpose” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 111), an insight that also clearly applies to *The Lives of Animals*. He makes special mention of “the situation of [Socrates’s] impending death” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 111), mortality being a motif that appears in all the fiction relating to Costello. Finally, Bakhtin contends that: “[i]n the Socratic dialogue the idea is organically combined with the image of a person, its carrier (Socrates and other essential participants in the dialogue). The dialogic testing of the idea is simultaneously also the testing of the person who presents it” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 111–12). It is arguable that Coetzee actualizes most of these features in *The Lives of Animals*. Indeed, it seems to be the case that he has always aspired to writing polyphonic novels. This seems evident in the two-part structure of *Dusklands* and the three-part structure of *Life & Times of Michael K*, the dialogic structure of *The Lives of Animals*, the authorial intervention of Costello in *Slow Man*, the tripartite page division in *Diary of a Bad Year* and the interview structure of *Summertime*. Considering what Coetzee says in his interview with Joanna Scott (quoted above), even the apparently monologic forms of *In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace* are arguably dialogic in substance.

The Lives of Animals has provoked a response from a prominent animal rights philosopher, Paolo Cavalieri, who has published a Platonic dialogue (2009) on animal ethics with responses from Coetzee and philosophers in both the analytic and Continental traditions. Coetzee’s response to the dialogue’s critique of perfectionism as a justification of the exploitation of animals is that the dialogue is itself perfectionist in its overly cerebral and disembodied style (Cavalieri 86–87). Indeed, the dialogue does come across as monologic in that the main character, a female British philosopher called Alexandra, appears to be in control and in possession of the truth throughout

the dialogue. Coetzee calls the two “bloodless and certainly sexless” participants in the dialogue “children of Socrates,” in respect of the “cool rationality that they practice” (85).

Having discussed the formal aspects of (Socratic) dialogism in the work of Coetzee, I now turn to an analysis of the Socratic content of *The Lives of Animals*, *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man*. It will not always be easy to separate the (fallible) Socratic and (infallible) Platonic Socrates, and so a brief explanation may be necessary. Indeed, the distinction between Platonic and Socratic, a creation of nineteenth-century German scholarship, has come to be questioned in the twentieth century (Taylor 107), although Bakhtin evidently subscribed to it. In the middle dialogues, the considerable artistry of which one should keep 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’s *maieusis* (midwifery) consists no longer merely in helping his interlocutors to deliver ideas, but rather as mediating 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 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” (Plato, *Symposium* 207a). Those who are physically pregnant produce children, whereas those who are mentally pregnant produce virtue, especially wisdom (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 is most probable that Plato’s keen awareness of the distinction between mortality and immortality, transience and permanence, was strongly conditioned by Socrates’s execution. Certainly an awareness – and a prefiguring – of Socrates’s 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 the idea of art as illusion that comes from the *Republic*. Yet, as we shall see, Coetzee expresses doubt concerning 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 its supposed conferring of personal immortality on the artist, but its ethical power to enter into the being of others.

Both these possibilities are explored in "What Is Realism?," a story in which Costello is invited to give a lecture at an American college which has awarded her a prize for her achievements as a writer. Platonic ideas are essential to this story and it strongly reinforces the argument that Costello functions, at least in part, as a Socratic figure. 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 firstborn 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."

(Coetzee, *Costello* 17)

However, the narrator goes on to note that "Elizabeth Costello proceeds to reflect on the transience of fame" (Coetzee, *Costello* 17), pointing out how even the British Museum will one day cease to exist, and that even before then the books would have been destroyed, "[a]fter which it will be as if they had never existed" (Coetzee, *Costello* 17). Her reference to her first novel as her "firstborn" is particularly ironic, since biologically speaking her son John, the narrator of the story, is her firstborn. Coetzee thus plays with the Platonic ideas of biological and intellectual offspring.

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?'" (Coetzee, *Costello* 22–23). This is the very important "sympathetic imagination" that Costello promotes as an alternative to reason in *The Lives of Animals*, an idea that seems to be influenced by Bakhtin. In the editor's introduction to *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Wayne Booth writes of Bakhtin that "[h]is God-term – though he does not rely on religious language – is something like 'sympathetic understanding' or 'compassionate vision,' and his way of talking about it is always in terms of the 'multi-voicedness' or 'multi-centredness' of the world as we experience it" (Booth xxi).

Perhaps the most decisive proof that Coetzee intends Costello as a Socratic figure can be found in *Slow Man*, published in 2005. (The 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 [Coetzee, *Slow Man* 120].) In this novel, Coetzee makes liberal use of Platonic and Socratic ideas, appropriating philosophy for literary purposes, in a comical yet serious manner. *Slow Man* is about love and the rebirth of love, a main theme in Plato's *Phaedrus*, in a wounded soul (and body). Paul Rayment ironically refers to a popular edition of this Platonic dialogue that he used to own (Coetzee, *Slow Man* 53). He 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 "[a]ll in all, not a man of passion" (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, 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’s 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. 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.
 (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.

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 matchmaker, 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). Although Coetzee seems to make fun of Platonic philosophy, *Slow Man* is true to the comical spirit of the Socratic dialogue,

as has been discussed above. 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 [. . .]’” (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 implies 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.”

(263)

A final point about *Slow Man* is that when Rayment and Costello finally visit the Jokić family at the end of the novel, Marijana 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 applies to the relationship between Coetzee and his persona, Costello.

In *The Lives of Animals*, a particularly dialogic, or polyphonic, situation is that of the dinner at the Faculty Club. Michael Bell notes that “[p]artly novel and partly philosophical dialogue, Coetzee’s text follows both Fielding’s *Tom Jones* and Plato’s *Symposium* in drawing on the image of a social act of ingestion if only, in his case, to insist on the corollary of exclusion” (Bell 183) – although Christ’s last supper is also brought to mind. The dinner situation is an excellent device to achieve both *syncretism* and *anacrisis*. Indeed, it is dialogical in form, unlike Costello’s speech, and allows several independent voices to be heard, thus contributing to a polyphonic effect. Bakhtin notes that:

The symposium is a banquet dialogue, already in existence during the epoch of the Socratic dialogue [. . .]. Dialogic banquet discourse possessed special privileges (originally of a cultic sort):

the right to a certain license, ease and familiarity, to a certain frankness, to eccentricity, ambivalence; that is, the combination in one discourse of praise and abuse, of the serious and the comic. The symposium is by nature a purely carnivalistic genre.

(Bakhtin, *Poetics* 120)

("Carnival," quite appropriately for the vegetarianism Costello promotes in *The Lives of Animals*, also means "the setting aside of meat.")

Furthermore, the focus on food and eating naturally leads to conversation about the justification of dietary choices and to animal exploitation issues. Invariably strong emotions become involved since meat-eaters resent what they see as the moral posturing of ethical vegetarians; they sometimes feel offended and feel that their deepest values are being questioned, with the evidence of their presumed guilt right in front of their noses. As any ethical vegetarian knows, meal times in the company of meat eaters can be very tense affairs. According to the feminist vegetarian, Carol Adams, vegetarians are defeated at mealtimes by the dominant text of meat: "In this situation, *the issue of vegetarianism is a form of meat to meat eaters*: it is something to be trapped and dismembered, it is a 'dead issue.' Vegetarian words are treated like animal flesh" (Adams 102, original emphasis). Costello struggles heroically against this dominant text of meat during the college dinner.

Thus in the dinner situation, Costello continues as the central hero-ideologue figure and midwife to the birth of ideas as they emerge during the conversation over dinner. There is also much scope for Socratic laughter, which Coetzee realizes adeptly, making use of his narrator, John. Indeed, John's own private exchange of views with his mother as well as her poetic seminar and her public debate with O'Hearne the next day, in Part 2 of *The Lives of Animals*, are also particularly effective polyphonic devices, in contrast with the more monologic form of Costello's speech in Part 1.

Both parts of *The Lives of Animals* end with Costello in a Socratic state of uncertainty, questioning the presumption of an absolute rationalism. The debate itself is unresolved but, nonetheless, everyone who has participated in it or observed it, including both Costello's audience and Coetzee's readership (and audience), should have gained more insight into the animal rights debate. Thus, in a sense, truth has been born in the dialogue between different ideologues, a polyphony of independent voices, which was facilitated by the dialogic forms of the dinner conversation, poetic seminar and public debate. It is arguable that Coetzee even manages to turn the usually monological form of the speech into a dialogue, thanks to his use of sources and various fictional devices, not least his persona, Elizabeth Costello, and his narrative focus, John Bernard. Coetzee's polyphony is well

served by his use of the Socratic dialogue, as outlined by Bakhtin, in which Costello features as the central conversing figure and hero-ideologue, attempting to provoke her listeners to question their speciesism.

Coetzee is aware of the potential authoritarianism in being an author; hence his espousal of Dostoevsky and Bakhtin's polyphony. The question is whether Coetzee succeeds in *The Lives of Animals* in creating a truly polyphonic novel by employing the resources of the Socratic dialogue. The fact that critics and reviewers have struggled to work out his own views on the issue of animal rights suggests that he does in fact succeed.

The similarities between Costello and Socrates are striking, and are more telling than their differences. Like Socrates, Costello attempts to prompt people to realise their humanity, to look into their hearts. She, like Socrates, faces hostility when she tries to get people to question their preconceptions, 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 uses dialectic and reasoning; but both work to the same end, namely the questioning of prejudices and false beliefs in order to improve humanity. 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 offers a more modest, more humane picture of humanity.

NOTES

1. Citations without page numbers have been taken from online articles.

2. Sam Durrant mentions (without naming it as such) a very Socratic "state of humility or self-doubt that undoes the logic of self-certainty that founds the Cartesian tradition and underwrites the enterprise of colonialism" (Durrant 121).

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