

# Coetzee's Haunting of Australian Literature

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In June 2006, the *Good Weekend*, the magazine supplementing Saturday's the *Age* in Melbourne, ran the following cover story by Catharine Lumby: "Worried TV will turn your child into a zombie?" The cover featured a science-fiction image of a boy's upturned face. Televisions were reflected in his pupils, giving them the effect of being square instead of round. The message, though, was ultimately non-alarmist with the subheading already instructing "Relax. It's all good". Stories like this appear regularly in the press, and while I am not interested in debating whether TV is good or bad for children, I am interested in the popular image of children—or, for that matter, adults—as being akin to zombies when they watch TV, if only because something similar happens when we read books. Although it is not as fashionable to talk about it, we become emptied of ourselves, possessed by something other.

What this experience reveals about our identities is fascinating. Constituted by the laws and stories of our society and the memories and reflections of others (and, in Lacanian terms, the repressed recollection of an other state in the primordial Real or brute pre-symbolic reality), we are narratological and other at the heart of our being. We are ghostly—indeed, soul-like, as we have long suspected—at our core. We are also profoundly permeable and thus (ideally) capable of infinite metamorphoses. Reflecting on this idea of the self as a creative work in progress, Jacques Lacan wrote: "A birth certificate tells me that I was born. I repudiate this certificate: I am not a poet, but a poem. A poem that is being written, even if it looks like a subject" (43). Literary texts, or arguably any texts—including genre fiction, television soaps and blockbuster films—in making possible an experience of haunting and thus of transformation occupy an ethical space. This is not to say, of course, that all texts operate in ethical ways. Certainly, the stereotype of the TV zombie is of one enslaved to the mindless comfort of the *status quo*.

Ethics, like literature, is another uncomfortable topic in the current political climate in Australia. However, J.M. Coetzee's two latest novels,

*Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and *Slow Man* (2005), manifest a deep engagement with the transformative and ethical potentialities of literature. The links between the thematisation of these issues and the Australian dimensions of the texts (Elizabeth Costello is an Australian novelist, and *Slow Man* is set in Adelaide) seem uncannily apposite and quite possibly instructive (the subtitle for *Elizabeth Costello* is *Eight Lessons*). While literature in this country occupies a marginalised position, a situation that provokes anxiety about its usefulness even among writers and literary academics, Coetzee's latest novels haunt the Australian literary landscape with visions, however ironic, of literature's repressed power. They demonstrate literature's potential to take possession of the self—to make a zombie of it—and, through exposing the reader to otherness (both the fundamental otherness of him- or herself as well as of others), effect transformations within the space of the self that could be called humane, defined here as an ability to imagine oneself as other.

#### THE POSSESSED READER

The zombie is originally a creature from Haitian voodoo. It is a dead person who is magically revived by a *bokor* or *mambo*—a witch-doctor if you like—and who is controlled by that person. We can regard the reader, as we can the viewer of TV or cinema, as a zombie, defined as someone whose sense of self is lost and who becomes infected by and animated by the otherness of the literary experience. Coetzee refers to this phenomenon in *Elizabeth Costello*, when the narrator describes the experience of reading to the reader thus: “storytelling works by lulling the reader or listener into a dreamlike state in which the time and space of the real world fade away, superseded by the time and space of the fiction” (16). Ironically, the metafictional comment disrupts precisely the absorption about which Costello speaks. However, what it simultaneously demonstrates is that the literary illusion is so compelling that even self-reflexivity cannot destroy it. Thus, in the first chapter or lesson called “Realism”, Coetzee can arrogantly begin:

There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge. People solve such problems every day. They solve them, and having solved them push on.

Let us assume that, however it may have been done, it is done. Let us take it that the bridge is built and crossed, that we can put it out of our mind. We have left behind the territory in which we were. We are in the far territory, where we want to be. (1)

Later in the novel, Elizabeth Costello herself, who is as much a reader as a writer, refers to “the madness” of reading (174) during which one loses oneself and is entered by the other.

Populists as well as Marxist cultural materialists have recently attacked the authenticity of literature, suspicious of the valorisation of the author and the category of literature, and this is something that I will discuss in more detail shortly. However, both critics and readers have attempted to defend literature precisely by focusing on its subjectivity effect. In her plenary speech at the 2006 ASAL conference in Perth, Carmen Lawrence defended, after Patrick White, the “reading sickness”. Jennifer Byrne, interviewed by Frances Atkinson in *The Age* to promote her new TV show, *First Tuesday Book Club*, waxed lyrical about literature’s transformative powers, listing some of the books “that have profoundly shifted my world in ways I can’t believe” (17). Literary critics, often informed by cognitive theory and a smattering of residual Romanticism, have also similarly begun to attempt to rehabilitate literary experience, often figuring it in terms of the trope of haunting.

Mark Roche, for example, in *Why Literature Matters in the Twenty-First Century*, describes the experience of literature as “divine possession”, arguing that “the lover of literature is enraptured—enthusiastic for the experience of beauty and its transferability to life” (81-2). J. Hillis Miller, in *On Literature*, contends that the “power” of literature to “open up a virtual reality” for the reader is nothing short of “magic” (21). Similarly, Derek Attridge suggests in *The Singularity of Literature* that the reader experiences the book as “a miracle in language” (99). Articulating the experience in less transcendental terms, he goes on to describe literature not as an object but as a performative event which “I am caught up in, and partly constituted as a subject by” (98). Attridge suggests that the literary performance requires a certain amount of self-abandonment, a letting go of one’s usual hold on “questions of truth, of morality, of history” (100). From that, through the book’s “handling of language, something we might call ‘otherness’, or ‘alterity’, or ‘the other’, is made, or allowed, to impact upon the existing configurations of an individual’s mental world” (19).

What is this other? While Lacan and Immanuel Kant before him might define the otherness generated by the literary work in more absolute terms as finding its source in the Real or the sublime, Attridge defines it as “that which is, at a given moment, outside the horizon provided by the culture for thinking, understanding, imagining, feeling, perceiving” (19). The other for Attridge is profoundly relative. It is also, quite simply, a new way of imagining or thinking that has repercussions for the subject’s sense of self

and vision of the world. For Attridge, the other necessitates a responsibility, “a form of hospitality and generosity” (126). Indeed, Attridge argues that receptiveness to an experience of otherness and of transformation is a requisite for the literary experience. As Attridge suggests, “reading . . . in full responsiveness to the other is a kind of madness” (134). This is valid if we define madness as losing one’s grip on one’s “normal” self and on one’s “normal” reality.

While it is often described, perhaps unavoidably, in suspiciously literary language, the experience of transformation felt by the engaged reader is personally real. As Harold Brodkey writes: “Reading is an intimate act, perhaps more intimate than any other human act. I say that because of the prolonged (or intense) exposure of one mind to another” (qtd. in Booth 168). With the experience of literary haunting, intimate things are done to the soul, that word-hoard at the centre of our being. In *Elizabeth Costello*, the eponymous author suffers the compulsion to speak about the intimacy of the literary experience to a sceptical audience. In a keenly ironic scenario, Costello is due to present a paper at an academic conference on the nature of evil when she suffers a visceral objection to a reading experience on that subject. Reading a book about the Holocaust, she feels that her soul has been obscenely infiltrated by the horrors endured by Holocaust victims, which were imagined in intimate detail in the book. Costello knows that she cannot explain her experience in a way that will satisfy rationalists, but she resents “the malign spell” (157) of the book, feeling that her body has been left with the imprint of evil as surely as the bodies of the victims were. While the validity of Costello’s position on representations of evil remains radically uncertain—not least because Coetzee repeats the passage of the book that offended Costello to his own readers—this chapter or “lesson” asserts not only the power of narrative to effect changes in the self but also the ethical responsibility of the writer that results from it.

Elizabeth Costello argues, “the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense”, that mingles the ethereal and the material, is something “that no one has explained and no one ever will” (99). The mingling of the soul of the reader, constituted by the narratives of a family and a culture, and the soul of the book, as the narrative of an other, is mysterious. But the interaction is real; it has real effects. Attridge describes the experience of the reader thus: “In performing the work, I am taken through its performance of language’s potency: indeed, I, or the ‘I’ that is engaged with the work, could be said to be performed by it. This performed I is an I in process,

undergoing the changes wrought by, and in, the encounter with alterity” (98). In fact, Attridge writes, “when I encounter alterity, I encounter not the other as such (how could I?) but the remoulding of the self that brings the other into being as, necessarily, no longer entirely other” (24). The experience of literature is thus always potentially one of self-metamorphosis.

In *Elizabeth Costello* the source of the inspiration for literary creativity is presented as another mystery. Elizabeth Costello, ultimately called to justify herself in a purgatory outside the gates of heaven, cannot say what she believes. In fact, she presents belief as an obstacle to her vocation, which she describes as being “a secretary of the invisible” (199). Similarly, when she appears as an author in *Slow Man*, she cannot explain why she has been called to make the protagonist Paul Rayment account for himself. She tells him that “You came to me. In certain respects I am not in command of what comes to me” (81). Attridge describes creativity as a process during which the other comes to inhabit the self. The other is “that which beckons or commands from the fringes of my mental sphere as I engage in a creative act” (32). The creation of a literary work is a response “called for by this glimpsed apprehension of otherness as a result of the failure of existing modes of thought and evaluation” (33). Traditionally, though, creativity is a process attributed to divine inspiration—an idea that Coetzee plays with in his latest novels.

James Hans, in *Contextual Authority and Aesthetic Truth*, argues that in the course of literary studies “we lost sight of the fact that the original site of the sacred was indeed the aesthetic” (44). Coetzee seems to want to bring the aesthetic, as a source of the sacred, back into focus. However, this is not to say that Coetzee ever loses sight of the profane, of the materiality of the human body. Elizabeth Costello, for example, is an aging woman whose body will not be denied. At the gates of heaven, she reflects:

That at least she does not have to invent: this dumb, faithful body that has accompanied her every step of the way, this gentle, lumbering monster that has been given to her to look after, this shadow turned to flesh that stands on two feet like a bear and laves itself continually from the inside with blood. Not only is she in this body, this thing which not in a thousand years could she have dreamed up, so far beyond her powers would it be, she somehow is this body. (210)

The irony, though, is that her body is, of course, entirely literary. Costello’s body, apart from being the invention of Coetzee, recalls Mary Shelley’s description of Frankenstein’s monster. We see a similar paradox in *Slow Man*. The protagonist Paul Rayment is a solitary and insular man whose leg

is amputated after a bicycle accident. As a result of this event, he resigns himself to being even more confined to the limits of both his own body and his apartment. However, when afflicted by a compelling lust for his home nurse, he figures this experience, so historically entrenched in the corporeal, in a way that suggests both the literary and the spiritual: “I am in the grip of a force beyond me!” (125)

Through this emphasis on the physical body of the writer or of the reader, Coetzee acknowledges that the profane is intrinsic to the sacred experience of the other offered by literature. The body, after all, is a prerequisite for haunting. Indeed, in Coetzee’s fiction, the body is the source of the other. It is already haunted, full of a desire we can never understand, desire which Jacques Derrida calls “the most intimate stranger . . . the other within” (106). In *Slow Man* Rayment reflects on the otherness of his desire for his nurse Marijana, which is “no different from his love of God, who, if he does not exist, at least fills what would otherwise be a vast, all-devouring hole” (187). The novel also connects the desire to be loved with the desire for stories, both attempts, in Lacanian terms, at compensating for the primordial and traumatic loss of the Real. Costello reflects that “somehow, in ways so obscure, so labyrinthine that the mind baulks at exploring them, the need to be loved and the storytelling . . . are connected” (238). At the end of *Elizabeth Costello* Costello concludes, notably appropriating the haunting words of Arthur Rimbaud to describe herself: “*I am an other*” (221). Life, and not just literature, Coetzee suggests, affords the experience of a zombie.

#### RE-ANIMATING THE CORPSE OF LITERATURE

The capacity of TV to transform viewers into zombies has proven to be far more concerning than the capacity of books to effect a similar transformation in readers, as suggested by the media attention given to the former and, indeed, the status of the TV zombie effect as cultural lore. We can attribute this greater anxiety about TV to the shared and simultaneous nature of the medium; TV, if you like, is the carrier of a zombie plague that infects people in their thousands and even millions. By contrast, the book tends to effect individuals and in a non-simultaneous way. The youth typically attributed to TV viewers probably also has something to do with the threat posed by the TV zombie. Books, by contrast—if the attendance at literary festivals is anything to go by—are associated with middle-class and middle-aged to elderly women. Nevertheless, books, more than TV, are the objects of suspicion and unease in this country—indeed, even among writers and academics.

Marxist cultural-materialist approaches to literature, which have become popular in the academy in the last thirty years, suggest that the peculiar haunting readers experience in association with literature is little more than a reactionary illusion. Literature and other cultural formations, they allege, are about bourgeois indoctrination and status. Among readers of a category disparaged as middle brow—an urban, economically-privileged, middle-aged, leisured, festival-attending and feminised class of book buyers—the book is said to have become secondary to the witnessed and shared experience of going to the bookshop and reading the “right” books. For Pierre Bourdieu and, after him, Australian cultural critics such as John Frow, literature is a status symbol in a social game that revolves around accumulating and displaying cultural capital. David Carter, for example, describes books and reading as “lifestyle and identity ‘accessories.’” As for the ethical potential of literature, he suggests that it forms part of the cultural capital that books provide. Middle-brow readers, Carter argues, have a particular taste for “books that deal (stylishly) with ‘issues’ or deep moral and political questions”. A.L. McCann expresses a similar cynicism about literature and its ethical power in his novel *Subtopia*. The book introduces us to a famous Australian writer who makes his living “happily writing for a massive global audience hungry for costume dramas about convicts, explorers, bushrangers and governors’ wives” (246) and his literary antithesis, the nasty, ugly, absurd and anarchic Chips Fischer. When the protagonist pursues the latter author in the hope of some insight, Fischer disappears, along with whatever wisdom he had to offer, into a stinking hole in a toilet wall in his basement archive. When the protagonist peers into the hole, “gagging at the sewer stench”, he sees “the shadow depths moving, morphing, slowly forming shapes until I could make out rats, dozens of them, scrambling over each other, tails, arses, claws and snouts” (251). He wonders if “Chips Fischer had transformed himself into a horde of sewer rats”.

Despite his subversive take on the aesthetic experience, McCann seems to support what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call a “Minor Literature”, a kind of creativity that aims to radically disconcert, denying sentimental ethical consolations. It is a kind of writing arguably practiced by someone such as Coetzee (whose debt to Franz Kafka, Deleuze’s and Guattari’s exemplar, is manifested in the title of the earlier novel *Life and Times of Michael K*). However, it is not hard to detect parallels between cynical “left-wing” appraisals of “middle-brow” literary culture and populist visions of literary posturing, the latter of which make no bones about favouring the authenticity of philistinism and economically productive labour. As John Holden documents, populism, working hand in hand with economic rationalism, is having a widespread effect on the arts generally, with central

government funding for the arts across the OECD countries over the past three decades being “turned on and off not for financial reasons, but on ideological grounds” (12).

David Marr, reflecting on the rise of Australian populism in 2003, lamented the return of “the exaltation of the average” feared by Patrick White and a concomitant hostility towards the so-called cultural elites. He tells the story of how in the election campaign of 2001, Kim Beazley met with the arts community of Sydney in an unpublicised affair in a back room of a hotel. Beazley’s support for the arts was seen as a tactically unsound campaign strategy. The Howard government, by contrast, proactively restricts “elite” narratives, championing the Australian over the un-Australian, designating the arts as incidental to the country’s national research priorities, telling historians to stick to the facts, and installing Keith Windschuttle on the board of the ABC. Control, it is worth considering, results from limiting the narratives and the perspectives to which people are exposed.

Literature, perhaps not surprisingly, has become decreasingly valued as an object of concern, particularly in the university, where enrolments in literary studies have been in decline for some time. While economic rationalism renders economically unproductive activities, such as the study of literature, suspicious, Marxist cultural materialists within the literary academy suggest, as Peter Goodall writes, “the continued existence of English is like the class war carried on by other means” (150). Elizabeth Beaumont Bissell asks in *The Question of Literature*, “What other discipline so routinely diminishes and decries its own objects?” (3) While the question is significant, the academy does not function in isolation from the public sphere, and undoubtedly these attempts to democratise (or do away with) literary studies are, at least in part, a response to public culture, which has long regarded literary academics as guilty of reactionary aestheticism and ivory towerism. This form of cultural *ressentiment* is not solely class-based, for the rich and powerful are celebrated, but it is often perceived as peculiarly marked in Australia where, as Carmen Lawrence speculates, the people “prefer being relaxed and comfortable” and the arts are dismissed as being “beyond the realm of ‘mainstream Australia’” (12).

This national hostility towards the cultural “elites” typically comes to the fore after the exposure of literary frauds, which tend to make front-page news in a public culture that otherwise increasingly marginalises literature. The exposure of literary fakes tends to lead to the reprisal of what are, as the Ern Malley hoax reminds us, long-standing arguments in the Australian public sphere about the authenticity of the literary. The Ern Malley affair certainly

mobilised class-based conflict about literature's public status. When James McAuley and Harold Stewart criticised what they perceived to be the "arty-farty" (qtd. in Lloyd 23) meaningless of the modernist poetry favoured by Max Harris and his journal *Angry Penguins* (where the Malley poems appeared), they did so by constructing a figure who represented the average Australian. They also revealed their hoax in a tabloid newspaper, engaging Australian working class resentment against the "cultural elite" to support their case. According to Cassandra Atherton, "the public was delighted by the hoax . . . *The Bulletin* . . . lent their support to the McAuley/Stewart cause at the time, publishing the comment: 'earnest thanks to the diggers who are joint debunkers of Bosh, Blah and Blather'" (16). When Max Harris was subsequently put on trial for publishing obscenities, literature itself, perceived as a foreign, undemocratic, decadent and un-Australian activity, was clearly the offender. Literature, like refugees, continues to be viewed as something alien and thus offensive to our national ethos.

#### THE PECULIAR DANGERS OF LITERARY POSSESSION

Why the suspicion about literature and not film or TV, which have the potential to infect many more minds and convert many more zombies? While my following comments are certainly relevant to certain kinds of TV and film (those which could be characterised, after Deleuze and Guattari, as a Minor Cinema), what I want to argue is that certain types of literature, such as the novels of Coetzee, and certain types of reading encourage an appreciation of otherness and a reassessment of the self that could be called humane or, alternatively, "left wing". While humanism has almost lost its credibility as a political standpoint, it is far from being antithetical to political engagement. As Richard Nile suggests, "Reading . . . tends to be an individual act, engaging readers in a very personalised and often quite private interaction with the text" (135). However, we are embedded in culture and society. Whatever transformations we experience privately in our performance of literature we can bring to our public lives.

What, then, is the nature of the transformation that an encounter with the otherness of certain kinds of literature can bring about? To begin with, literature invites us to imagine the other. Coetzee's novels, informed by his experience of apartheid, have always been particularly concerned with the separation of people from one another, with the nature of the relationship between one and an other. Typically that relationship is shown to be one of impenetrability. However, the eponymous hero of *Elizabeth Costello* proclaims a faith in the limitless ability of humans to imagine themselves into the body of the other—indeed, even into the bodies of bats and frogs—and the dead.

Costello asserts: “There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination” (80). She offers as proof the miracle of our ability to think ourselves into the minds of non-existent fictional characters. The novel also defends this as an important function of literature, indeed, perhaps as its *raison d’être*. Elizabeth Costello’s son asks, “Isn’t that what is most important about fiction: that it takes us out of ourselves; into other lives?” (23) In *Slow Man* Paul Rayment is decidedly impoverished when it comes to his capacity to imagine others, including his married nurse Marijana, her son Drago, the people represented in the colonial photographs he collects and in which he confesses he has little interest (176), and Costello herself. The book suggests that it is this, his lack of interest in others, rather than his leg injury, which results in his life being so “circumscribed” (26). Costello tells him that “You have it in you to be a fuller person, Paul, larger and more expansive, but you won’t allow it” (158). She encourages him to imagine himself as her, as Marijana or even as one of the ducks swimming in the pond in the scene before them.

While Coetzee’s novels advocate a passionate attempt to imagine the other, they refuse the possibility of any kind of sentimental identification with or consolatory knowledge of the other. (This is something that arguably distinguishes Coetzee’s writing from other kinds of fiction that share an interest in representing the other but in ways that encourage illusions of accessibility.) In *Elizabeth Costello*, the reader is continually surprised by revelations of the otherness of Costello herself. At the end of the “lesson” called “The Novel in Africa”, in which Costello rails against the valorisation of oral culture by the Nigerian novelist Emmanuel Egudu, we learn that Costello had slept with the man when she was younger. The scene, exposing the otherness of our protagonist, is juxtaposed against a scene emphasising the otherness of the natural world. The cruise ship, on which Costello and Egudu are special guests, arrives at Macquarie Island near Antarctica in the fog of pre-dawn. Seals swim to the cruise ship, despite a history of being clubbed to death, and an albatross and fledgling greet her on shore with hostility. Costello reflects:

The Southern Ocean. Poe never laid eyes on it, Edgar Allan, but criss-crossed it in his mind. Boatloads of dark islanders paddled out to meet him. They seemed ordinary folk *just like us*, but when they smiled and showed their teeth the teeth were not white but black. It sent a shiver down his spine, and rightly so. The seas full of things that seem like us but are not. Sea-flowers that gape and devour. Eels, each a barbed maw with a gut hanging from it. Teeth are for tearing, the tongue is for churning the swill around: that is the truth of the oral. (54)

In *Slow Man*, as well as in *Elizabeth Costello*, the metafictional elements introduce irony and serve to similarly distance the reader from the characters, whose ontological status is emphatically phantasmal. The self-reflexivity of the text also highlights the literary experience as one of beholding an otherness that remains, by definition, radically elusive.

This confrontation with the other effects changes in the self. These are changes that come about from awareness not of the other, which is unknowable, but of one's own strangeness and one's own limitations. Using Emmanuel Levinas's definition of ethics, James Meffan and Kim Worthington equate literary experience with ethical experience, defining it as "the *ongoing process* of self-critique, in particular, of putting the knowing ego into question through the process of the exposure to and recognition of alterity" (136).

Attridge makes the additional point that the experience afforded by literature—of an encounter with otherness and of a shift in the self—is not just a result of content but also of form, which is a way of shaping meaning. In *Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Attridge suggests that "the formally innovative text, the one that most estranges itself from the reader, makes the strongest ethical demand" (11). It disrupts assumptions of transparency and referentiality, making a real space for the apprehension of otherness (30). (While I do not wish to engage here in hasty categorisations and evaluations of the moral worth of different kinds of literature, I would nevertheless posit that the "uneasiness"—the formal difficulty and the ensuing sense of unease that it generates—of Coetzee's writing is another feature, compatible with its ironic discouragement of sentimental identification, that distinguishes his work from what could be disparaged as "middle-brow" fiction.)

As James Ley suggests, reading is not always easy; and nor, he suggests, should it be. It is "a creative act. Unlike almost everything we are encouraged to consider entertainment, it is an active pursuit" (38). The reader, though, is not always willing to be tested and expanded, a problem that Coetzee, typically self-conscious and ironic, addresses in *Slow Man*. Costello, who arrives magically and meta-fictionally at Rayment's door after his failed romantic overture to Marijana, reprimands him: "Reflect, Paul. Do you seriously mean to seduce your employee into abandoning her family and coming to live with you? Do you think you will bring her happiness?" (82). Paul is struck by her sudden appearance and her impertinence:

Elizabeth Costello: it is coming back to him who she is. He tried once to read a book by her, a novel, but gave up on it, it did not hold his attention. Now and then he has come across articles by her in the

press, about ecology or animal rights, which he passes over because the subjects do not interest him. Once upon a time (he is dredging his memory now) she was notorious for something or other, but that seems to have gone away, or perhaps it was just another media storm. Grey-haired; grey-faced too, with, as she says, a bad heart. Breathing fast. And here she is preaching to him, telling him how to run his life! (82)

Costello urges him to “Push!” (83). She urges him to push himself into the mind of the other, wanting him to give birth to a new self, a more expansive self. However, he remains resiliently hostile to her message. While Paul laments the “brave new world . . . whose watchword is *Laissez faire!*” (23)—that world of the self, that world without a sense of communal responsibility in which if “the crippled or the infirm or the indigent or the homeless wish to eat from rubbish bins and spread their bedroll in the nearest entrance way, let them do so”—he himself is very much a part of it. While he wants his caregiver Marijana to love him, thinking charity to her family is enough in return, he cannot extend any genuine understanding towards her. Neither can he bring himself to care for the aged Costello, who repeatedly tells Paul that she is homeless, hungry and unwell. Costello warns him that “Bringing me to life may not be important to you, but it has the drawback of not bringing you to life either” (159).

The ethical importance of strengthening one’s imaginative capacity is a lesson imparted in one of the most uncomfortable chapters in *Elizabeth Costello*, “The Lives of Animals: The Philosophers and the Animals”. Comparing industrial animal slaughter with the Holocaust, testing the limits of the reader’s imagination and compassion, Costello argues that the ultimate horror of the death camps was:

that the killers refused to think themselves into the place of their victims, as did everyone else. They said, “It is *they* in those cattle cars rattling past.” They did not say, “How would it be if it were I in that cattle car?” They did not say, “It is I who am in that cattle car.” They said, “It must be the dead who are being burned today, making the air stink and falling in ash on my cabbages.” They did not say, “How would it be if I were burning?” They did not say, “I am burning, I am falling in ash.” (79)

This failure of imagination and compassion may very well be responsible for the horrors of animal slaughter, as Costello implies, but it is also arguably responsible for the horrors we are currently experiencing in relation to the War in Iraq, the detainees in Guantanamo Bay, the imprisonment of asylum seekers, and continuing Aboriginal deaths in custody.

Attridge writes, “our cultural institutions are busy massaging the novel into a more appealing, and probably less powerful, shape” (*Coetzee* 133). Jane Kenway, Elizabeth Bullen, Johannah Fahey and Simon Robb similarly argue that the radical potential of literature to effect ethical transformation is becoming increasingly neutered as a result of literature’s forced entry into the “creative industries”, in which “the market is permitted to define the rules, norms and values of these knowledge traditions” (80). They argue that “the knowledge economy has invited the arts to move into the hegemonic zone” (94), an invitation the arts, wanting to survive, has trouble refusing. As Holden documents, the arts are now compelled to justify themselves in the populist and economic rationalist language of governments in terms of their “instrumental value” (16) or “institutional value” (18) rather than their “intrinsic” value (15), which he describes as “the *capacity and potential* of culture to affect us”.

However, the novelist—unlike most film makers or television producers, for example—can arguably afford to operate more independently, and the novel, certainly one such as *Elizabeth Costello* or *Slow Man*, continues to demonstrate the potential to issue powerful challenges to narrow ways of thinking about one’s self and one’s relationship to the world. Indeed, the experience of being haunted by any text says something fundamental about human identity and, in addition, is fundamental to humane-ness, defined as the ability to imagine oneself as other. These are issues that Coetzee’s fiction highlights, and they are certainly ideas that require emphasis in Australia right now.

I am hesitant to believe in the vision of a revolution of ethical readers marching back from the peripheries to claim the city like some horde of enlightened zombies from a Hollywood horror film cum moral idyll. Coetzee is too. At the end of *Elizabeth Costello*, the eponymous author curses literature, perhaps as the force that made her believe in such possibilities. Paul Rayment, at the end of *Slow Man*, rejects the Australian writer, who encourages him to live his life as a “biologico-literary experiment” (114). He also, significantly, rejects her offer to share her life with him on the basis of caring equals, tending to each other in old age. However, perhaps my lack of faith, and Coetzee’s, is something learned from academia. For in the view of Holden, working in the public sphere and agitating for change in cultural policy, communities do value art, and they do so not for its economic or social benefit but for aesthetic reasons: “those wonderful, beautiful, uplifting, challenging, stimulating, thought-provoking, terrifying, disturbing, spiritual, witty, transcendental experiences that shape and reflect their sense of self and their place in the world” (23).

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