

# Long Paddock

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## Coetzee's Animal Afterlives

"Where, O death, is your victory?  
Where, O death, is your sting?"

1 Corinthians 15:55

I

JC: "theorist of the afterlife"

In order to get to the heart – the ox heart, we might say – of J. M. Coetzee's recent fiction, we need to speak not only of the lives of animals but also of the afterlives of animals. It might seem somewhat odd for me to propose discussing an author so concerned with the problems of physical suffering, human indignity and irredeemable finitude in terms of what he has to say about the afterlife. "As for grace, no regrettably no: I am not a Christian, or not yet" (250), remarks Coetzee to David Attwell in *Doubling the Point*. This final qualification – "or not yet" – bears the rhetorical stamp of Coetzee's famous Czech precursor, Franz Kafka, who once memorably wrote: "The pages of the Bible don't flutter in my presence" (*Diaries* 342). In novel after novel, Coetzee has proved himself a genuine devotee of something Kafka wrote in his *Diaries* on 1 February 1922: "Looked at with a primitive eye, the real, incontestable truth, a truth marred by no external circumstance (martyrdom, sacrifice of oneself for the sake of another), is only physical pain" (410). Indeed, earlier in the same interview with Attwell, Coetzee echoes this very sentiment in what has become a much-cited passage: "The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt.... Not grace, then, but at least the body" (248).<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, the movement being outlined here – away from the theological notion of grace and towards the "body with its pain" – would seem to imply a disbelief in the efficacy of the afterlife. But, as any reader of Coetzee's recent fiction would be able to tell you, nothing could be further from the truth. One cannot read the post-*Disgrace* novels without noticing how prominently the afterlife figures in them both as theme and narrative device. While it would be going too far to label him a theologian, I think it is not too much of an exaggeration to call the late Coetzee a "theorist of the afterlife" (*Diary of a Bad Year* 125).

My aim in this paper is to flesh out Coetzee's theory of the afterlife in order to see how it conditions the sense of his post-South-African fiction. The strangely touching essay "On the Afterlife" that brings the "Strong Opinions" section of *Diary of a Bad Year* to an end is as a good a place as any to start this investigation. In this piece, which ushers in the essayistic afterlife of the "Second Diary," the novel's main protagonist, JC, labels the Christian theory of the afterlife "skimpy." "Christianity gives only the most tentative account of the life of the soul after the death of the body", he writes:

The soul will be eternally in the presence of God, Christianity teaches; more than that we do not know. Sometimes we are promised that in the afterlife we will be reunited with

our loved ones, but this promise has little theological backing. For the rest there are only vague images of harps and choirs. (125)

St Paul, the namesake of *Slow Man's* Paul Rayment, provides a spectacular example of the skimpiness of the Christian theory of the afterlife in the second of his letters to the Corinthians. "I know a man in Christ", writes Paul, possibly referring to himself:

who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body, I do not know – God knows. And I know that this man – whether in the body or apart from the body, I do not know, but God knows – was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to utter. (2 Corinthians 12:2–4)

This passage is remarkable not simply for its lack of detail – or essential skimpiness – but also for the centrifugal movement it sets in motion. As we read it, we feel ourselves being pushed inexorably outwards into epistemological quicksand: from the realm of the knowable to the realm of the unknowable, from the effable to the ineffable, from the earth to the "third heaven."

Perhaps the first thing to say about Coetzee's theory of the afterlife is that it moves in the opposite direction to St Paul's – centripetally, if you like. In contrast to Paul, Coetzee tries to fold the notion of the afterlife back into life so as to make it a tool for existential reflection. As Derek Attridge notes: "In his reaching for a register that escapes the terminology of the administered society Coetzee has often turned to religious discourse, and there is a continuity among several of his characters who find that, although they apparently have no religious beliefs, they cannot talk about the lives they lead without such language" (180). *Slow Man's* Paul Rayment proves no exception to this rule – and here's a passage that shows him putting the theological concept of the afterlife to a-theological use:

A phrase from catechism class a half-century ago floats into his mind: *There shall be no more man and woman, but ...* But what – what shall we be when we are beyond man and woman? Impossible for mortal mind to conceive. One of the mysteries.

The words are St Paul's, he is sure of that – St Paul his namesake, his name-saint, explaining what the afterlife will be like, when we shall love all with a pure love, as God loves, only not as fiercely, as consumingly.

He, alas, is no spirit being as yet, but a man of some kind, the kind that fails to perform what man is brought into the world to perform: seek out his other half, cleave to her, and bless her with his seed.... A man not wholly a man, then: a half-man, an after-man, like an after-image; the ghost of a man looking back in regret on time not well used. (33–4, original emphasis)

Although it's unclear exactly which words of his "name-saint" Paul Rayment has in mind, my guess is that Coetzee is here playfully displacing onto the afterlife the universalist description of the Christian community that Paul gives in Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ."<sup>2</sup> Lending support to this hypothesis is the fact that Rayment insists on secularizing St Paul's account of the afterlife by conceiving of a highly terrestrial or existential afterlife for himself, an afterlife experienced as a form of self-diminishment. Rayment is not simply a slow man as a result of his horrific bicycle accident on Magill Road; he is also an "after-man" – in the sense of having experienced a metaphorical kind of death.

Rather than Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, Coetzee uses the animal to embody the mundane afterlife that can be thought to follow a metaphorical kind of death. The second thing to note about Coetzee's account of the afterlife, then, is that that most unchristian of souls – the animal – plays a decisive role in it.<sup>3</sup> Writing just before

the publication of *Elizabeth Costello* in 2003, Louis Tremaine notes that there is “an unmistakable and ever more insistent pattern in Coetzee’s fiction, from his earliest to his most recent work, a pattern of incorporating animals as narrative elements associated with suffering and death and, especially, with the question of the foreknowledge of impending death” (595). Writing just after the publication of *Elizabeth Costello*, Attridge argues along similar lines that: “the most powerful writing in the novel [*Disgrace*] involves the relation not to animal life but to animal death” (185). My claim in this essay is that some of Coetzee’s best writing now involves the relation to the animal afterlife. In contrast to Tremaine and Attridge, I want to show how Coetzee has recently associated animals with the aftertaste rather than the foreknowledge of death. *Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year* are all works concerned with the very permeability of the threshold between life and death. To be sure, the animals in these narratives come to haunt human being at the point at which life threatens to tip over into death. But there is a crucial shift of orientation to take note of here: the animal comes to haunt the human mind in Coetzee’s latest work when death reveals itself to be strangely impotent: when animal life – or rather when animal afterlife – proves stronger than death.

The best way to illustrate Coetzee’s recent shift of orientation in the presentation of animal suffering and death is through a comparison of the endings of *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*. The Kafkaesque penultimate chapter of *Elizabeth Costello*, which presents the title character at the gate of heaven, ends with Costello having an unforgettable vision of the animal afterlife:

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 manglings. 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 the particular anagram GOD-DOG. *Too literary*, she thinks again. A curse on literature! (224–5, original emphasis)

As David Lodge notes: “This dog seems to have loped out of *Disgrace*, which ends with the hero dedicated to putting such unfortunate animals humanely out of their misery.” *Disgrace* leaves off (relents might be a better word) with the novel’s stoically reprehensible protagonist, David Lurie, carrying a crippled young male dog into the surgery of an animal clinic in Grahamstown, South Africa, in order to euthanise it. What makes this scene so affecting is that we do not see the dog die – we do not see him pass through the gate, so to speak. Rather than in reality, Coetzee prefers to present the details of the dog’s death through the anticipatory lens of Lurie’s imagination: “a time must come, it cannot be evaded,” thinks Lurie to himself (in what is a remarkable example of polysyndeton), “when he will have to bring him to Bev Shaw in her operating room ... and caress him and brush back the fur so that the needle can find the vein, and whisper to him and support him in the moment when, bewilderingly, his legs buckle; and then, when the soul is out, fold him up and pack him away in his bag, and the next day wheel the bag into the flames and see that it is burnt, burnt up” (219–20).

The simple point to make about the end of *Elizabeth Costello* in relation to the end of *Disgrace* is that Coetzee has here allowed the dog to pass over the threshold between life and death. This dog has already been “burnt, burnt up.” In a gently Kafkaesque image, suffering is written on its lion-coloured skin, but there is no longer any pathos being attached to the instant of its death. What is important is not how the dog died, but rather how it is positioned in relation to Costello: just ahead of her on the other side of the gate, the side to which she is being refused entry because her belief system amounts to a pile of epistemological quicksand. Costello distrusts her vision – thinks it too literary – because it may have arisen from a bad pun: GOD-DOG. She might also be worried about falling into the trap of zoomorphism – of attributing animal qualities to the deity. She is characteristically evasive a little earlier in the chapter when asked by a “pudgy man” on

her panel of judges whether she believes in God: “That is too intimate ... I have nothing to say. ... I suspect that God would not look kindly on such a presumption – the presumption to intimacy. I prefer to let God be. As I hope He will let me be” (205).

Whether or not Costello’s vision of this old dog with “lion-coloured hide scarred from innumerable manglings” constitutes a vision of God, there is no doubt that Coetzee’s afterlife is dog-like or dog-shaped. Immediately after losing his right leg as a result of his bicycle crash, Paul Rayment thinks subjunctively to himself: “If you have hitherto been a man, with a man’s life, may you henceforth be a dog, with a dog’s life” (26). Here, Rayment imagines the afterlife of his accident as an animal afterlife – and so projects himself as yet another in a growing list of Coetzee’s dog-men. As Tremaine notes: “The epithet ‘dog-man,’ applied by Mrs. Curren to Verceuil in *Age of Iron*, returns in *Disgrace*, attached first to Petrus, who cared for the dogs in Lucy’s kennel, and then, with much deeper resonance, to David [Lurie], who conducts the dogs in Bev’s clinic to their deaths: ‘A dog-man, Petrus once called himself. Well, now he has become a dog-man: a dog undertaker; a dog psychopomp; a *harjan*’” (595).<sup>4</sup> Rayment is described throughout *Slow Man* as *dogged* and *doggy*, not least by that irrepressible author function and animal trainer Elizabeth Costello. “You could teach me doggedness and I could teach you to live on nothing, or nearly nothing” (263), says Costello to him on the final page of the novel in one last bid to convince her would-be “*copine*” (234) to follow her from his home in Adelaide to her home in Melbourne.

## II

### *Death: “a change of function”*

We may think of David Lurie and Paul Rayment as “dog-men” or as teaching “doggedness” in the sense that they experience an animal afterlife in the wake of the metaphorical death of their former, all-too-stiffly-human selves. The third thing to note about Coetzee’s account of the afterlife is that it implies a particular understanding of death, one which Paul Rayment unfolds for us immediately after discovering that he has been described in Elizabeth Costello’s notebooks as *doggy*:

It is as he feared: she knows everything, every jot and tittle. Damn her! [A curse on literature, he might say!] All the time he thought he was his own master he has been in a cage like a rat.... The greatest of all secrets may just have unveiled itself to him. There is a second world side by side with the first, unsuspected. One chugs along in the first for a certain length of time; then the angel of death arrives in the person of Wayne Blight or someone like him. For an instant, for an aeon, time stops; one tumbles down a dark hole. Then, hey presto, one emerges into a second world *identical with the first*, where time resumes and action proceeds ... except that now one has Elizabeth Costello around one’s neck, or someone like her.

Quite a leap to make, from the word D-O-G in a notebook to life after death. (122–3, original emphasis)

Rayment’s revelation here is of death as an almost-imperceptible transformation of one’s former life, death as “a mere hiccup in time after which life goes on as before” (123).

What if one were to experience one’s death not as a kind of departure – an ascension to the third heaven – but rather as the failure to depart – or disappear – from one’s immediate surrounds? This is the peculiar fate of Kafka’s character the Hunter Gracchus, who falls to his death from a precipice in the Black Forest but then miraculously fails to die. “My death ship lost its way;” the Hunter Gracchus explains, “a wrong turn of the wheel, a moment’s absence of mind on the pilot’s part, a longing to turn aside towards my lovely native country, I cannot tell what it was; I only know this, that I remained on

earth and that ever since my ship has sailed earthly waters" (*Parables and Paradoxes* 129).

The possibility of dying without disappearing from the earth is a thought that occurs to the youthful and autobiographical protagonist of Coetzee's *Boyhood* one night, as he lies awake in bed:

He lies as still as he can in the sliver of light from the window, conscious of his body drawn up on its side, of his fists clenched against his chest. In this silence he tries to imagine his death. He subtracts himself from everything: from the school, from the house, from his mother; he tries to imagine the days wheeling through their course without him. But he cannot. ... He can imagine himself dying but he cannot imagine himself disappearing. Try as he will, he cannot annihilate the last residue of himself. (112)

This account of the difficulty of conceiving of one's own death bears an uncanny resemblance to one that appears in the notebooks of Robert Louis Stevenson. "I do not admit immortality", writes Stevenson in 1873-4:

but I can not believe in death: that is to say in my own death. I can easily enough understand the death of others; they pass out of the field of my vision, they cease to perform their respective antics before me: but how can you destroy that field of vision? how do you expect me to conceive myself as no longer existent? Cease to live I may; but not cease to be: it can only be a change of function. (179)

This remarkable passage from Stevenson gives us a clue as to why the protagonist of *Boyhood* (who, coincidentally, "has his own copy of *Treasure Island*" [46]) "can imagine himself dying but ... cannot imagine himself disappearing". It has to do with the indestructibility of his field of vision – with him remaining, to his last breath, a secretary of the visible.

Insofar as Coetzee presents death as "a change of function," he presents it as one rooted in the terrestrial rather than the heavenly. "The Greek view of the afterworld strikes me as truer than the Christian vision", writes JC in *Diary of a Bad Year* with the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice uppermost in his mind: "The afterworld is a sad and subdued place" (131). Doubtless, Coetzee would disparage the description of the resurrection of the dead St Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 15:51-3: "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet ... the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality." As we have seen with the lion-coloured dog from *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee insists, contra Paul, on clothing the imperishable soul with a perishable – which is to say, animal – body. "Cease to live I may;" Coetzee seems to be saying to us, "but not cease to be an animal." Put more subjunctively: "If I have hitherto been a man, with a man's life, may I henceforth be a dog, with a dog's life."

### III

#### *On the indifference of frogs and magpies*

The fourth – and perhaps final – thing to note about Coetzee's conception of the afterlife is that it is characterized by what I would call animal indifference. The lion-coloured dog that Elizabeth Costello dreams up at the gates of heaven remains profoundly indifferent to her – as does her singularly intransigent creation Paul Rayment. In both these instances, doggedness bespeaks a kind of animal indifference. After first telling her panel of judges that she has not beliefs at all, Costello then decides to revise her statement: "I believe in what does not bother to believe in me" (218). To explain herself

on this point, she tells of the metaphorical death and resurrection of the frogs she grew up with along the Dulganong River in Victoria:

In the dry season they go underground, burrowing further and further from the heat of the sun until each has created a little tomb for itself. And in those tombs they die, so to speak. Their heartbeat slows, their breathing stops, they turn the colour of mud. Once again the nights are silent.

Silent until the next rains come rapping, as it were, on thousands of little coffin lids. In those coffins hearts begin to beat, limbs begin to twitch that for months have been lifeless. The dead awake. ...

‘What do I believe? I believe in those little frogs.’ ...

‘It is because of the indifference of those little frogs to my belief ... it is because of their indifference to me that I believe in them.’ (217)

As James Wood glosses this: “the frogs, like a novelist’s characters, are believed in by the novelist, but cannot themselves believe in the novelist. To enter the frog’s life is like entering a fictional character’s life. And this is a kind of religion, akin to the worship of a God who gives us nothing back.”

According to Elizabeth Costello: “there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination” (80). But there is what we might call the indifference of animal being – that is to say, the ontological right of other beings to remain profoundly indifferent to our intrusive and voyeuristic acts of imagination. And, if we credit Wood’s reading of those Dulganong River frogs, we might think of extending this ontological right to all living creatures – both real and fictional.

It is perhaps no coincidence that JC dedicates one of his “Strong Opinions” in *Diary of a Bad Year* to Harold Pinter’s 2005 Nobel Lecture – for Pinter speaks in this lecture of how literary characters come to exhibit a type of (animal) indifference towards their creator:

It’s a strange moment, the moment of creating characters who up to that moment have had no existence. What follows is fitful, uncertain, even hallucinatory, although sometimes it can be an unstoppable avalanche. The author’s position is an odd one. In a sense he is not welcomed by the characters. The characters resist him, they are not easy to live with, they are impossible to define. You certainly can’t dictate to them. To a certain extent you play a never-ending game with them, cat and mouse, blind man’s buff, hide and seek. But finally you find that you have people of flesh and blood on your hands, people with will and an individual sensibility of their own, made out of component parts you are unable to change, manipulate or distort.

I can think of no better way of summarising the strange game of cat and mouse that takes place between Paul Rayment and Elizabeth Costello in *Slow Man* than with this passage from Pinter. Needless to say, Rayment eventually refuses Costello’s invitation to accompany her home to Melbourne. “You certainly can’t dictate to me; you were never welcome in the first place”, we might take Rayment qua literary character to be saying to his proxy creator Costello through his animal indifference. On the last page of the novel, we see Costello visibly affected by this metaleptic act of rejection, by which a character openly defies its creator: “‘But what am I going to do without you?’ She seems to be smiling, but her lips are trembling too” (263).

Coetzee evokes a sense of mortality in his late fiction by collapsing the already-permeable boundaries between the species – in short, by letting animal indifference be. JC provides a strangely poignant illustration of this phenomenon in one of the “soft” opinions in *Diary of a Bad Year* called “On the Birds of the Air”:

One morning there was a sudden imperious clatter at my kitchen window. There he was, clinging to the ledge with his claws, slapping his wings, glaring in, serving me with a warning: even indoors I might not be safe.

Now in the late spring, he and his wives sing to each other all night in the treetops. They could not care less that they keep me awake.

The magpie-in-chief has no firm idea of how long human beings live, but he thinks it is not as long as magpies. He thinks I will die in that cage of mine, die of old age. Then he can batter the window down, strut in, and peck out my eyes. (164)

The magpie-in-chief is here turning the tables on the voyeuristic sympathetic imagination of the human being. "I do not care to imagine what it is like to be a human being," he is saying in his animal indifference: "I will simply wait for you to die, and, if you are having trouble conceiving of your own death, old man, I will peck out your eyes for good measure." There is indeed something Greek rather than Christian about this stark vision of the animal afterlife in which what survives us remains so profoundly – so sublimely – indifferent to us.

## NOTES

1 Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* and *Elizabeth Costello* have provoked a flurry of recent criticism on the problem of animal embodiment in literature and philosophy. See Cavell *et al*, Mulhall and Cavalieri *et al*.

2 Another possibility, pointed out to me by Peter Alexander, is that Coetzee here has in mind Matthew 22:30: "At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven." See also Mark 12:25: "When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage." For a truly original account of St Paul's universalism see Badiou.

3 David Lurie says to his daughter Lucy in *Disgrace*: "The Church Fathers had a long debate about them [animals], and decided they don't have proper souls.... Their souls are tied to their bodies and die with them" (78). However, as Rod Preece has shown, Christian thought is in fact divided over the status of the animal soul. "Among the many calumnies Christianity has suffered is the frequent claim that the Christian tradition has denied souls, at least immortal souls, to animals", writes Preece. "It is an assertion we find, among many examples, in the writings of Peter Singer, Angus Taylor, Barbara Noske, and Randy Malamud. It is certainly not an entirely unwarranted claim, to which the works of Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Malebranche, and Swedenborg, among others, will attest. Yet many interpretations would counter this claim, including those of Lactantius, Origen, Arnobius, St. John of the Cross, Martin Luther, the Cambridge Platonist Henry More, the Quaker George Fox, the Puritan leveler Richard Overton, the Protestant ecumenical philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the skeptic but confessing Pierre Bayle, the Anglican theologian Bishop Joseph Butler, the Anglican priests John Hildrop and Richard Dean, the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, and his protégé Reverend Dr. Adam Clarke, the inquiring parliamentarian Soame Jenyns, and numerous devout Romantics, including Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge" (399).

4 There are many other good discussions of dogs in *Disgrace* apart from Tremaine's. See Attridge, Graham, Herron and Patton.

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