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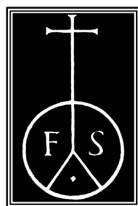
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POSTHUMANIST ETHICS  
AND THE SYMPATHETIC IMAGINATION:  
J. M. COETZEE'S *ELIZABETH COSTELLO* (2003)

RICARDO GIL SOEIRO\*

A FAIRLY recent and interdisciplinary body of thought, posthumanism has become a decisive and multifaceted critical discourse in urging us to think beyond humanism, calling into question the classic humanist divisions of self and other, mind and body, society and nature, human and animal, organic and technological.

According to Hassan, who first coined the term in 1977, «We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism» (1977, p. 843). In his view, humanism, which he connects with the attribution of a special status to human beings, began during the Renaissance and has ended recently with the dissolution of human sovereignty. In a similar vein, Donna Haraway has argued that the essence of posthumanism is to undermine the notion of human exceptionalism. In *When Species Meet*, she draws upon Freud's discussion of the three great historical wounds inflicted to the narcissism of the self-centered human subject: the Copernican revolution, Darwin's theory of evolution, and Freud's work on the subconscious, to which she adds a fourth wound: the informatic or cyborgian (2008, pp. 11-12), further complexifying the answer to the overriding questions which are being asked more and more forcefully today: 'What does it mean to be human, nonhuman, inhuman, posthuman?'

In this article I will try to show how posthumanist literary imagination helps to envisage alternative conceptualizations of both the human and the posthuman, and of their mutually informing relationship. It departs from the hypothesis that literary texts can be perceived as imaginary laboratories of both the possible and the impossible, serving as a speculative staging-ground for anthropologies and post-anthropologies of the past, the present, and the future. 1) If we concede that «Literature in particular is an epistemological device for interminably deferring the location of an ultimate perspective from which the being of things could be thought to be known once and for all» (Clarke, 2008, p. 71); 2) if we furthermore acknowledge that «Literary texts are not merely passive conduits» but rather «actively shape what the technologies mean and what the scientific theories signify in cultural contexts» (Hayles, 1999, p. 21); 3) if we conclude that «While the central role of literature might be questioned in the (post) humanities, the principle of 'fictionality' – the right, in principle, to be allowed to 'say anything' – this fictional freedom of affirmation, this 'as if' (...) cannot be abandoned» (Herbrechter, 2013, pp. 175-176), then it is rather striking how sporadic and perfunctory the attempts at a posthumanist approach to literature have been.

Clearly, a literary standpoint is still missing, a different perspective which would otherwise bring to the fore potential trajectories of the posthuman. The last few years have witnessed insightful new work from four leading authors in the field: Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013) offers a comprehensive survey of the constellation of posthumanity,

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while at same time outlining new forms of cosmopolitan neo-humanism that emerge from the spectrum of post-colonial and race studies, as well as gender analysis and environmentalism. Wolfe's *What is posthumanism?* (2013) is pivotal in the way it explores the radical repositioning of posthumanities beyond humanism and anthropocentrism and it does so by resorting to Derridean deconstruction and Luhmann's systems-theory and by presenting thought-provoking readings of visual and audio culture. Herbrechter's *Posthumanism* (2013) is a far-reaching study on the current state of the subject, delineating an intellectual genealogy situating the varieties of posthumanism in relation to anticipatory strains in philosophy from Nietzsche to Derrida and in related critical practices of postmodernism and poststructuralism. A far-reaching study, Nayar's *Posthumanism* (2014) examines the rise of posthumanism as both a material condition and a developing philosophical-ethical project in the age of cloning, gene engineering, organ transplants and implants. But even if these recent book-length contributions undoubtedly display the main merits of posthumanism (namely the critique of dualist metaphysics and human exceptionalism), they nevertheless also manifest an insufficient treatment of literary figurations of posthumanist subjectivities. The notable exceptions would be Wolfe's brief analysis of Wallace Steven's poetry in his 2009 volume *What is Posthumanism?*; Rosendahl Thomsen's *The New Human in Literature. Posthuman Visions of Changes in Body, Mind and Society After 1900* (2013); and Jeff Wallace's *D. H. Lawrence, Science and the Posthuman* (2005).

Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), it seems to me, is a particularly fitting example that does elicit such a posthumanist approach and it is a work that puts into play the ethical implications of literary configurations of posthumanist subjectivities. Consisting of eight lessons, Coetzee's novel oscillates between the essayistic mode and the novel form, and it comes as no surprise that such diversity of genres is combined with an equally heterogeneous set of literary and philosophical references that further complexifies and enriches the work in question.

The novel revolves around the character of Elizabeth Costello, a 66-year-old Australian writer, who travels around the world, giving lectures on topics such as the lives of animals and literary censorship. The book is divided into 8 "lessons" and a postscript, each of which involves a topic. Lesson number 1 examines the notion of realism and Lesson number 2 deals with the future of the contemporary novel, but it is lesson 3 and lesson 4 that will be pivotal to address a post-humanist form of ethical thinking to which I will be hinting at. Let us take Lesson number 3, titled *The Lives of Animals* (bearing the subtitle *Philosophers and the Animals*, Coetzee, 2003, pp. 59-90). In the form of a lecture to be given at the Appleton College, the chapter begins with Costello's musings on Kafka's text *Ein Bericht für eine Akademie* (*A Report to an Academy* 1917): in it, a monkey named Peter reports before a scholarly academy the story of his transformation into a human being. Right from the start, then, the reader is invited to partake in an uncanny setting that the Kafkaesque narrative suitably conveys, by questioning the anthropocentric framework through which our very hermeneutic inquiry unfolds, and this is successfully accomplished through a disarming humor.

It could be argued that it is precisely the classic anthropocentric framework that, ultimately, Coetzee's novel wishes to subvert. According to Costello, there is an important distinction to be made between a philosophical inquiry and a literary analysis of the human positioning vis-à-vis the animal question. In this regard, she goes on to quote a number of philosophers (Thomas of Aquinas, Plato, Descartes, and Kant) that, to her mind, have misunderstood the full implications of the great divide that they have established between the human being and the non-human animal. In a decidedly

post-humanist motion, the protagonist will question as follows the primacy of anthropocentric reason: «Both reason and seven decades of life experience tell me that reason is neither the being of the universe nor the being of God. On the contrary, reason looks to me suspiciously like the being of human thought; worse than that, like the being of one tendency in human thought. Reason is the being of a certain spectrum of human thinking. And if this is so, if that is what I believe, then why should I bow to reason this afternoon and content myself with embroidering on the discourse of the old philosophers?» (Coetzee, 2013, p. 67). Costello will contend that something in her resists such a self-indulgent primacy, which, in her view, is merely a strategy placed at the service of the anthropocentric discourse.

It is hardly surprising, then, Costello's skepticism regarding the ancestral, although ultimately tautological, preeminence ascribed to reason as the distinctive feature of humanity. She claims: «For, seen from the outside, from a being who is alien to it, reason is simply a vast tautology» (Coetzee, 2013, pp. 69-70). To animals, however, silence is the sole possibility: «Animals have only their silence left with which to confront us. Generation after generation, heroically, our captives refuse to speak to us» (Coetzee, 2013, p. 70). In a bold gesture of laying bare her views, Costello assumes herself as a Kafkian character, presenting her wound: «I am not a philosopher of mind but an animal exhibiting, yet no exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word I speak» (Coetzee, 2013, pp. 70-71).

Anticipating the transition towards the next chapter, *The Lives of Animals: The Poets and the Animals* (pp. 91-115), the reader is here confronted, through the protagonist's eyes, with the stark contrast between the philosophical-scientific perspective and the poetic standpoint. The defense of the literary viewpoint, to the detriment of the dryness conveyed by philosophical rationality, is further analyzed by resorting to the example provided by Thomas Nagel and his famous question: «What Is It Like to Be a Bat?» To Nagel it would be impossible to a human being to even form a concept of what it would like to be a bat. To Costello, however, if human beings are able to phantom their own death, why wouldn't we be able to conceive the singular mode of existence of a bat?

Another decisive point raised by Costello is precisely the key concept of sympathetic imagination, the ability to imagine the emotion of others, including non-human others, so that, for example, the literary representation of suffering will concur to the enhancement of the reader's empathetic capabilities. In her lecture she examines three poems: Rilke's *Der Panther* (1902), *The Jaguar*, and *Second Glance at a Jaguar*, these two latter by Ted Hughes. From the comparison between the two poets, it becomes clear that it is Hughes that is most valued by Costello. Why so? She answers poignantly: «With Hughes it is a matter – I emphasize – not of inhabiting another mind but of inhabiting another body. That is the kind of poetry I bring to your attention today: poetry that does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead the record of an engagement with him» (Coetzee, 2013, p. 96). Once again the notion of «bodying forth» (Coetzee, 2013, p. 97) is brought to the fore, but now it is closely connected to the concept of poetic invention; both, however, unmistakably rest on the ethical grounds to which I have been alluding: «I would reply, writers teach us more than they are aware of. By bodying forth the jaguar, Hughes shows us that we too can embody animals – by the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will. He shows us how to bring the living body into being within ourselves. When we read the jaguar poem, when we recollect it afterwards in tranquility, we are for a brief while the jaguar. He ripples within us, he takes over our body, he is us» (Coetzee, 2013, pp. 97-98).

To one of the audience member's main criticisms (according to which «Animals live, and then they die: that is all», p. 109) Costello simply recalls «the wholeness, the unabstracted, unintellectual nature, of that animal being», p. 111). Be that as it may, the fact remains that a full-fledged posthumanist positioning would push us even further. Take, for instance, Derrida's *L'animal que donc je suis* (2006). What is at stake here is a critical reading of Heidegger's fundamental ontology which, according to Derrida, is after all a more sophisticated form of anthropocentrism. In Heidegger's hierarchical spectrum, the stone is worldless (*weltlos*), the animal is poor in world (*weltarm*), and lastly the human is world-forming (*weltbildend*). Derrida would argue that, in classical philosophical discourse, the animal remains a passive object, something which is gazed upon, but doesn't look back – a prescient intuition first put forth by Montaigne in his *Essays* (particularly in his *Apology for Raymond Sebond*). Such an asymmetrical relationship is staged by Derrida in autobiographical terms, through the figures of looking and nakedness, and he does so by recalling his experience when his cat follows him into the bathroom in the morning. He asks what this animal sees and thinks when it sees this naked man.

Echoing Costello's views (one might say), Derrida will argue: «For thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry. There you have a hypothesis: it is what philosophy has, essentially, had to deprive itself of. That is the difference between philosophical knowledge and poetic thinking» (Derrida, 2002, p. 377). Contrary to the logocentric injunction, the question «will not be to know whether animals are of the type *zoon logon echon*, whether they can speak or reason thanks to that capacity or that attribute implied in the logos, the can-have [*pouvoir-avoir*] of the logos, the aptitude for the logos (and logocentrism is first of all a thesis regarding the animal, the animal deprived of the logos, deprived of the can-have-the-logos: this is the thesis, position, or presupposition maintained from Aristotle to Heidegger, from Descartes to Kant, Lévinas and Lacan). The first and decisive question will rather be to know whether animals can suffer». «Can they suffer?», asks Bentham – and to Derrida this is the simplest and yet the most profound question to be made.

Against the backdrop of the posthumanist approach (formulated on a post-anthropocentric and post-humanist episteme and based on decentralized and non-hierarchical modes of being-in-the-world), it is of particular importance the concept of 'becoming', championed by Deleuze and Guattari, and which was key to the birth of posthumanism. By replacing identity with difference and being with becoming, Deleuzian ontology provides the ground to think heterogeneity and inexhaustible novelty-producing processes that underlie all phenomena. Deleuze's concept is indelibly attached to a non-anthropocentrism, putting forward that «Not man as the king of creation, but rather as the being who is in intimate contact with the profound life of all forms or all types of being, who he is responsible for even the stars and animal life» (Deleuze, Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 1977, pp. 4-5). The challenge is to try to establish in its full impact the implications of such a concept for the replacement of the exclusionary facet of anthropocentrism by a rethinking of the human self as an instantiation of a network of connections, exchanges, linkages, and crossings with all forms of life. A renewed understanding of the human self as being less about Being and more about a "becoming-with", to use Haraway's phrasing in *When Species Meet* (2008). The emphasis will also be placed on the dynamic hybridization stressed by Nayar: «The human as a dynamic hybrid in critical posthumanist thought focuses not on borders but on conduits and pathways, not on containment but on leakages, not on stasis but on movements of bodies, information and particles all located within a larger system» (2014, p. 10).

I have tried to briefly show how all this set of questions and this nomadic and plural methodology is aptly exemplified in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), a novel by South-African author and Nobel Laureate J. M. Coetzee, a work that fictionally stages a discourse of a posthumanist ethics, forcing the reader to profoundly reevaluate human and non-human animal relations and to problematize orthodox notions of embodiment, otherness, singularity, life and death. This brief analysis would surely call for a fully developed inquiry (augmented by other case-studies analysis) of the ethical implications of critical posthumanism. Such a project is indeed under way and in it I will seek to understand how post-humanist thought, as a multidisciplinary-critical approach and a theoretical methodology, is best suited to unravel the discursive, institutional and material structures and processes that have conceded privilege to the allegedly sovereign human subject. It will propose a non-anthropocentric understanding of life, calling for a more inclusive ethics of difference and preparing the epistemological ground for a pioneering conceptualization of cultural representations of what it means to be human or post-human. As stated, this will be achieved mainly by resorting to literature's fictional potentially, examining its imaginary seminality which enables the reader to imagine otherwise. Ultimately, I will try to come to an understanding of the ways in which post-humanism, as a conceptual framework, is an apt medium of thinking in relational and multi-layered manners, expanding the focus to the non-human realm in post-dualistic, post-hierarchical modes. In short, far from signifying a fall into relativism or nihilistic defeatism, the posthumanist standpoint argues for a sustainable ethics for a non-unitary subject and proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others (including the non-human others).

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