



## *“A purgatory of clichés”: Elizabeth Costello and the Impossible Paradise for Writers*

by Valeria Mosca

Forbidden places and thresholds impossible to cross are not an uncommon theme for Elizabeth Costello to deal with – as a character and as an author, since Elizabeth Costello is both: a prominent character in J. M. Coetzee’s production, and a fictitious author. Her first appearance dates back to 1996. Coetzee had been invited to Bennington College (Vermont) to receive a literary prize, and he chose to read a short story instead of delivering a more traditional acceptance speech. The story, “What is Realism?”, is about Elizabeth Costello, an Australian novelist invited to the United States to receive a literary prize, and *her* acceptance speech. Since then, Costello has featured in many similar, academic events. She appears, most famously, in the readings that Coetzee gave at the 1997 Princeton Tanner Lectures, which would later become *The Lives of Animals*, published in 1999. Both the readings and the book were deemed controversial – the former because of the subject matter (the ethics of factory farming instead of a more traditional literary topic) and the way in which it was treated (a lecture embedded in a fiction); the latter because of the resulting uncertainty as to which genre the book ought to belong to.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Attridge, D., 2004, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, pp. 192-93: “I was lucky enough to be in the auditorium at Princeton University [...] when Professor John Coetzee rose to deliver ‘The Philosophers and the Animals’. [...] This was, of course, J. M. Coetzee the novelist, but his presence in an academic setting made one particularly conscious of his status of Professor of General Literature at the University of Cape Town. There had been indications in a few of Coetzee’s publications of a concern with the question of human responses to animal suffering [...]. Now, it seemed, he was going to spell out in two lectures his views on animal rights and the ethics of human-animal relations. Although I don’t recall any audible reaction from the audience, there could be no doubt about the surprise produced by Coetzee’s opening words [...]. No preliminary explanation, no introduction to prepare us to this clearly fictional statement. [...] What made the event in which we were participating all the more disquieting was our gradual realization that it was being mirrored, in a distorted representation, in the fiction itself.”



Over the years Elizabeth Costello has made many more appearances of the same sort, giving lectures within lectures, and thus has become a central figure in Coetzee's public readings. All the Costello pieces were collected and published, along with two hitherto unpublished ones, in 2003, under the title *Elizabeth Costello – Eight Lessons*. Much speculation arose about a number of issues connected to this work. First of all, the title: it is never made clear who these lessons are for (Costello, the readers, or both?<sup>2</sup>). Secondly, there are serious difficulties in defining a book made up of lectures embedded in fictions<sup>3</sup>. Most notably, though, controversy revolves around the Costello persona itself. Is she an alter-ego of Coetzee, or a mask he wears? A spokesperson for her author, or simply a character? This problem has been discussed widely, and critics have never reached agreement over it<sup>4</sup>. Much emphasis, though, was always placed on Costello being a writer. Meta-literary reflection is a major feature of Coetzee's work, and this is to be seen very clearly in *Elizabeth Costello*. Even though the book comprises eight short stories on a variety of subjects, Costello's thoughts concerning authorship and literary creation remain constant throughout. Costello is both character and writer and, what is more, one that appears inherently prone to self-questioning. This is a very effective tool which Coetzee uses to explore the power and the limits of literary representation. Be it the death of literary realism ("Realism"), the inconsistency of language ("Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos"), the uncertain place of African literature in Western society ("The Novel in Africa"), or the moral value of storytelling ("The Problem of Evil"), all of the Costello pieces display a preoccupation with the places, either literal or figurative, into which a writer cannot or should not venture. This is particularly evident in the last short story in the book, "At the Gate", which is also the main subject of this essay.

If compared to the other stories in the collection, "At the Gate" is slightly atypical, both in terms of content and of structure. It was neither meant to be read publicly, nor did it appear before the 2003 book, and it does not include a lecture given by Costello or by anyone else. The setting is also very different from those of the other stories. Whereas Elizabeth Costello is usually portrayed in official academic or literary contexts,

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<sup>2</sup> See Lodge, D., 2003, "Disturbing the Peace", *The New York Review of Books*, 50 (18), pp. 6-11, p. 6, and Attridge, 2004: 198.

<sup>3</sup> Flanery, P. D., 2004, "(Re-)marking Coetzee & Costello: *The (Textual) Lives of Animals*", *English Studies in Africa*, 47, 1, pp. 61-85, p. 61: "Is it performance art, or performance didacticism? Is it moral philosophy? Does its generic slipperiness constitute academic evasiveness? Is it fiction or non-fiction? [...] Is it [...] a work of indeterminate genre?"

<sup>4</sup> See, among many others, Lodge, 2003 and Attridge, 2004 (who comment on those who see Costello as a means for Coetzee to avoid taking a stand on controversial issues); Tremaine, L., 2003, "The Embodied Soul: Animal Being in the Work of J. M. Coetzee", *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 44, n. 4, Winter, pp. 587-612 (Costello as a character); Lynn, D. H., 2005, "Love and Death, and Animals Too", *The Kenyon Review*, 27, 1, Winter, pp. 124-133 and Attwell, D., 2008, "Coetzee's Estrangements", *Novel*, 41, 2/3, Spring, pp. 229-244 (Costello as the embodiment of theories that would be too abstract otherwise); Shillinsburg, P., 2006, "Textual Criticism, the Humanities and J. M. Coetzee", *English Studies in Africa*, 49, 2, pp. 13-27 and Attridge, 2004 (Costello as a literary device used by Coetzee to provoke discussion on ethical matters).



here she moves in a significantly and deliberately undefined space; the only thing made clear about it, both to Costello and the readers, is the function it fulfils as a “waiting room” for yet another space, about which much is implied and nothing really stated. The first aim of this essay is to explore these imaginary spaces and their ambiguous nature.

The story opens with Costello, suitcase in hand, getting off a bus or, to be more precise, “the bus” (p. 193)<sup>5</sup> in a square (“the square”) and making her way to “the gate” (*ibid.*). Nothing is said about her journey, and nothing is explained about the destination she has reached – indeed, it seems to be implied that it is not necessary, either because it is too predictable to bother with (is there a more abused metaphor than journeying to The Beyond?) or, on the contrary, because the atmosphere is so dreamlike that the idea of wondering where one is, and why, does not even occur. The ambiguity will last throughout the story. We will never know if it takes place in Costello’s imagination, in a dream she is having, or if it is the real afterlife – however ironic the adjective may sound for a literary work – which Coetzee has chosen for his character. As we shall see, however, a closer look at the short stories provides us with both the space and the opportunity to address this question more deeply.

A lodge stands before the gate; it is inhabited by a man in uniform, a uniform Costello does not recognize. He is busy filling out a form of some kind, and he pays her very little attention. When she asks his permission to pass through the gate, he informs her nonchalantly that she first needs to make a statement – a statement of belief, as he tells Costello when she asks for clarification. After an initial sense of bewilderment, Costello recollects her thoughts: beliefs, she feels, are something she does not possess; they would be an obstacle to her profession, since writers only maintain beliefs provisionally, and “change them like they change clothes, according to [their] needs” (p. 195). This is what she writes in her statement, which is immediately rejected by the guardian on the simple grounds that it does not meet the requirements. Because of his refusal to let her through, Costello’s only aim becomes rewriting her statement, and she now has plenty of time (eternity?) to do so. In the meantime, she is free to wander about her new place of residence, and to explore it. From this point onwards, Costello’s thoughts about the place she finds herself in alternate with her further attempts to state her (un)beliefs and, thus, to pass through the gate. As all of her statements highlight, the fact of being a writer, of not having beliefs, and of being excluded from Paradise – or whatever there is on the other side of the gate – are linked to one another in Costello’s mind. The connection will be explored more deeply after a closer analysis of Costello’s statements, and what they imply about being a writer.

#### A MUNDANE AFTERLIFE

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<sup>5</sup> All the quotations from *Elizabeth Costello* are from the 2004 Vintage edition.



Upon her arrival at the gate, Costello's first statement of belief is, as we have seen, rejected outright. Immediately afterwards she makes a request. She wants to take a glance through the gate, "just to see if it is worth all this trouble" (p. 195), as she ironically and rather contemptuously remarks. To her surprise, she is allowed to satisfy her curiosity, and what she sees actually matches the irony in her request:

What has she seen? Despite her unbelief, she had expected that what lay beyond this door [...] would be unimaginable: a light so blinding that earthly senses would be stunned by it. But the light is not unimaginable at all. It is merely brilliant, more brilliant perhaps than the varieties of light she has known hitherto, but not of another order, not more brilliant than, say, a magnesium flash sustained endlessly.<sup>6</sup>

In a more classical kind of narrative the hero would have to at least overcome some obstacles before being allowed to see what lies beyond a closed gate – but this is not the case here. Not only is the door opened for her without any effort on Costello's part; not only does this happen without any sense of anticipation – at the beginning of the story and not, as some kind of final reward, at the end; but the main character also goes so far as to comment disparagingly on the quality of what she sees. It is not difficult for the writer Costello to notice how much this questions the literary tradition and the imagery it has constructed: "[t]here is light, certainly, but it is not the light that Dante saw in Paradise, it is not even in the same league" (p. 209).

This light of disappointing intensity is only one of the many un-heavenly features of Costello's afterlife. At the beginning of the story we find her in an undefined new dimension; what is surprising is how detailed the description of such a dream-like setting can be. On the one hand, no explanation is given as to where the place is, how it is to be defined, and why Costello is there; on the other, many details concur to depict a place that is, more than anything else, simply mundane; the first of those details is Elizabeth's neck, "burned red and beaded with sweat" (p. 193) as the old lady makes her way into the crowded square. The place is not one of heavenly purity and rarefaction; on the contrary, the body and its earthly limitations continue to affect existence.

Bodily needs and limitations, though, are not the only earthly legacy Costello is surprised to find in this new dimension: money is also part of the picture. Elizabeth finds some banknotes in her purse, and ironically remarks on how they "look suspiciously like play money" and have "the image of a bearded nineteenth-century worthy" on one side (p. 197). In this afterlife, where sublime contemplation is replaced by petty worries, Elizabeth orders a drink, and finds herself worrying about running out of money. She interrogates the guardian, who assures her that "[a]ll needs have been foreseen" (p. 197); the place is one of earthly necessities, and everything needed to take care of them is available: in this case, dormitories for those who need a room.

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<sup>6</sup> EC, p. 196



Indeed Costello takes up residence in the dormitory, and it is there that she gets the only clue as to the nature of where she is:

“What is this place?” she asks the woman who has let her in.  
She need not have asked. Before it comes, she knows what the answer will be. “It is where you wait.”<sup>7</sup>

Waiting, though, is not a matter of eternity: “[e]ven in this town time passes”, and the moment comes for Costello to present her second statement of belief. The hearing, too, lacks the grandeur one would associate with an ultimate trial. It takes place in a poorly furnished room with an emblem on the wall: “two shields, two crossed spears, and what looks like an emu but is probably meant to be a nobler bird, bearing a laurel wreath in its beak” (p. 198) – yet another example of how expectations of majesty are deflated by a much more mundane and disappointing reality. Even the judges are very different from what one might expect from a celestial jury; she sees them as a parody of the idea of judges, and “under the black robes [she] half expects them to be creatures out of Grandville: crocodile, ass, raven, deathwatch beetle” (p. 198).

The second statement, although more articulate, shares the same bottom line as the first one – writers are, by profession, exempt from holding durable beliefs. Unsurprisingly, it is rejected. Back in the dormitory, Costello lies on the greasy mattress of her bunk and listens to the band that plays popular songs every afternoon. Everything, from the situation she finds herself in to the people she meets, has a stereotyped feel to it; everything, she thinks, looks like a poor literary imitation: “[i]s it all being mounted for her sake, because she is a writer? Is it someone’s idea of what hell will be like for a writer, or at least purgatory: a purgatory of clichés?” (p. 206). The idea of being in a meta-literary construct, thus far only hinted at, becomes Costello’s key to the interpretation of the place she finds herself in:

Is that where she is: not so much in purgatory as in a kind of literary theme park, set up to divert her while she waits, with actors made up to look like writers? But if so, why is the make-up so poor? Why is the whole thing not done better?  
[...] If the afterlife, if that is what this is, give it that name for the moment – if the afterlife turns out to be nothing but hocus-pocus, a simulation from beginning to end, why does the simulation fail so consistently, not just by a hair’s breadth – one could forgive it that – but by a hand’s breadth?<sup>8</sup>

The fictive dimension shows through so blatantly as to puzzle her, and the same goes for the Kafkaesque atmosphere, palpable from the very beginning of the story. She did not fail to notice it before: after having her first statement rejected, her thoughts had gone to the petitioner in the short story “Before the Law”, to whom, too,

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<sup>7</sup> EC, p. 198

<sup>8</sup> EC, p. 209



access to a gate was invariably denied.<sup>9</sup> References to, and echoes of Kafka do not stop here: there are also the trials, the judges, the gate and its guard, the dreamlike feeling and the rarefied atmosphere, the “long line [of judges] leading to who knows what featureless functionary in what chancellery in what castle” (p. 194) that she was afraid she would find ahead of her. What she recognizes, though, is not a literary homage or a genuine quotation, but “only the superficialities of Kafka; Kafka reduced and flattened to a parody” (p. 209). Although unable to figure out the exact reasons why such a meta-literary construct has been created, Costello senses that everything hinges on her being a writer. Her profession is to produce imitations, and she now finds herself in one of them. This remains at the core of her three statements of belief, all of them refused, and also of the last vision she has of that Paradise she cannot enter:

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, 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 particular the anagram GOD-DOG. Too literary, she thinks again. A curse on literature!<sup>10</sup>

Upon her arrival, Costello did not know how to describe her destination, “this country, [...] this town” (p. 194). By the end of the story, however, we have learned that the only possible topography for it may be a literary one. References to other writers, both explicit and implied, are countless. Aside from the Kafkaesque, the most obvious are to Beckett and the idea of endless waiting, and to Dostoyevsky (“She had been about to say something about her ticket, about handing back her ticket. But it would be too grand, too literary, for so petty an occasion.”, p. 214). Other, minor hints are hidden throughout the short story; new ones may well be found at each re-reading. No place could be more familiar to someone who has devoted their life to literature. The familiarity, though, is uncanny and disquieting. The literary imitations are, in Costello's words, “poor” and “failing” (p. 208-209) – so much so that, she suspects, they may be there to mock her.

It is not uncommon for Coetzee's narratives to have disquieting settings. As David Attwell points out, “[p]lace in J. M. Coetzee's writing is seldom just home, in any comfortable sense, nor is there the process of re-familiarization that one finds in so much postcolonial writing [...]. On the contrary, place in Coetzee is a site of epistemological dualism, of failed self/other relationship, of incommensurability.”<sup>11</sup> Attwell goes on to quote Coetzee himself; he reports his description of South Africa as

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<sup>9</sup> “Will this be the point where he tells her the gate is meant for her and her alone, and moreover that she is destined never to pass through? Should she remind him, let him know she knows the score?” (EC, p. 196).

<sup>10</sup> EC, p. 224-225

<sup>11</sup> Attwell, 2008: 229



a place with “too much truth [in it] for art to hold”<sup>12</sup>. Neither Attwell nor Coetzee are referring to Elizabeth Costello in their statements. They still apply, however. Costello's afterlife, too, is a place that shows the limits of artistic representation – moreover, it is specifically constructed to do so. There may well be a curse on literature – it is very clear that Elizabeth Costello will not be able to reach Paradise as a writer. It is still to be decided whether or not she will be able to do so as a human being, and there will be an opportunity to focus on this in the next section of this essay.

Before moving on, though, I would like to look deeper into an issue I mentioned earlier on. With meta-literature opening new lines of thought, it is now possible to go back to a hypothesis I made at the beginning of this essay. I introduced two possible explanations as to why *no explanation is given* about where Costello is: either it meant stating the obvious, or, on the contrary, it was only obvious to Costello herself, as in those dreams where being in the most uncanny of places looks just as natural and consequential as it may possibly be. I also mentioned at the beginning of this essay how thinking about literature is a major element of coherence throughout the book. The first paragraphs in the first chapter, “Realism”, are indeed meta-literary, and discuss the problem of how to open a narrative:

There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, [...] to the far bank. [...]

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.<sup>13</sup>

Elizabeth Costello as a character questions the value of literature; *Elizabeth Costello* as a book does exactly the same thing. Is it possible that Coetzee has chosen to employ, in the last chapter, the same mechanisms of creation he enunciated openly in the first page of the book – this time without any explicit statement?<sup>14</sup>

#### WRITERS AND HUMAN BEINGS

Authorship is a pivotal question in a short story like “At the gate”. We have already discussed this in relation to meta-literature, but it is not just meta-literature that demonstrates how central authorship is. Being a writer is also what Costello's

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<sup>12</sup> Ibidem

<sup>13</sup> EC, p. 1

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Mulhall makes a similar hypothesis about Lesson 7, “Eros”: “In other words, both the form and the content of this lesson reflect the understanding of Kafkaesque realism laid out in lesson 1”. (Mulhall, S., 2009, *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 216)



three statements of belief revolve around, and this section of the essay is devoted to their analysis.

Costello makes her first statement on the spur of the moment upon her arrival at the guardian's lodge. The guardian's request for a statement of beliefs surprises her, and she asks him what happens to those who do not hold any. This is something the guardian will not even contemplate: "[w]e all believe. We are not cattle." (p. 194), he states, thereby linking having beliefs to being human. On "professional, vocational grounds" (p. 195), though, Costello asks if she can be exempted from the rule; fixed beliefs, she points out, are an obstacle to writers, whose profession is not to believe, but to imitate. At best, she feels, she can offer an imitation of beliefs.

Some critics have been puzzled by Costello's declaration of un-belief, among them David Lodge: "We wonder what has happened to her passionate belief in the rights of animals"<sup>15</sup>. Others, on the other hand, have found no lack of coherence in it, on the same grounds as Costello herself: "[t]here is no inconsistency between Costello's disclaimer in 'At the Gate' and her passionate expression of beliefs elsewhere; the former, she makes clear, refers to her existence as a novelist, whereas the latter arises out of her experience as a human being"<sup>16</sup>. Thus Derek Attridge, highlighting the main point in all of Costello's statements, namely the division between artists and human beings. This dichotomy is already contained in the first, very short statement. In the second, Costello goes on to elaborate this idea more extensively. The first words in it are "I am a writer"; then Costello goes on and, quoting Czeslaw Milosz, explains how being a writer means being "a secretary of the invisible" (p. 199), "hearing" words – whose words she does not say and, to her surprise, she is not asked – and writing them down. Beliefs would inevitably stand in the way of this process; they would constitute a form of resistance.

"Without beliefs we are not human" (p. 200), one of the judges simply objects. Costello explains that, though she may not be immune from beliefs, she is wise enough to mistrust them. At that, the judge enquires further: how does this cynicism of hers affect her humanity? Costello does not believe (*believe*, with unintended irony, is the verb she uses) she is cynical at all, and ends her statement without any further explanation. A discussion of what Costello hears from this invisible source then follows, and one of the judges addresses the key point in Costello's arguing:

You present yourself today not in your person but as a special case, a special destiny, a writer who has written not just entertainment books but books exploring the complexities of human conduct. In those books you make one judgement upon another, it must be so. What guides you in these judgements? [...] Have you no beliefs as a writer? If a writer is just a human being with a human heart, what is special about your case?<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Lodge, 2003: 10

<sup>16</sup> Attridge, 2004: 204

<sup>17</sup> EC, p. 203





Once again Costello denies having beliefs and making judgements accordingly. She states that she is “open to all voices” (p. 204), even those of murderers and violators, if they choose to speak their truth through her. Now it is the judge’s turn to be puzzled. He asks if being a writer means following the dictates of the invisible unquestioningly, “to be bankrupt of conscience” (*ibid.*). We are presented, on one more occasion, with a literary reference: this time, an intra-textual one. The situation is familiar to the readers of *Elizabeth Costello*, since it is very similar – albeit with reversed roles – to that found in the sixth short story in the collection, “The Problem of Evil”. On that occasion it was Costello’s turn to preach against the literary representation of the obscene, arguing that it has consequences both on the writer and on the readers.<sup>18</sup> Access to dark and forbidden places, as she attempts to prove in that story, should be denied to writers. Now her position has changed. She has become the writer to whom access to a forbidden place is denied. Her second statement is also rejected.

Much meditation takes place afterwards on Costello's part. Thinking about her beliefs in relation to literature leads her to wondering whether or not she still holds on to a faith that she had deemed lost: faith in the truth of art. This thought only leads her to an even more radical idea of the division between the artistic and the human self:

Her books certainly evidence no faith in art. [...] Her books teach nothing, preach nothing; they merely spell out, as clearly as they can, how people lived in a certain time and place. More modestly put, they spell out how one person lived, one among billions: the person whom she, to herself, calls she, and whom others call Elizabeth Costello.<sup>19</sup>

Such a quotation certainly rings a bell with Coetzee's readers. Many of his books are of an uncertain genre, including *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002), described by some as fictionalized memoirs or pseudo-autobiography. Both of these works feature a fictionalized version Coetzee gives of himself, always and only referred to as “he”. The third-person pronoun once again shows how distant human beings who write are from human beings who simply live – even when the former write about themselves<sup>20</sup>. But there is another important He in Coetzee's production, namely the He of “He and His Man”, Coetzee's Nobel Prize Lecture. As the reader may have guessed by now, “He and His Man” is not a traditional acceptance speech; rather, it is a meta-literary short story. It portrays Daniel Defoe as a character created by Robinson Crusoe, and, in Derek Attridge's words, it explores “the strange process of fictional writing: the self-division it necessitates, the uncertain origins of the words that one

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<sup>18</sup> Role-reversal recurs frequently in *Elizabeth Costello*, and it often highlights the incoherency of its main character. Elizabeth Costello often finds her own critical judgements turned against her; a significant example is to be found in “The Humanities in Africa”, fifth story in the collection. Costello's idea of the unreliability of rationality had been her main argument in “The Lives of Animals”, third and fourth stories in the collection. In the fifth story, yet, her sister Blanche accuses her of relying excessively on rationality. See also Lodge, 2003: 9.

<sup>19</sup> *EC*, p. 207-208

<sup>20</sup> Derek Attridge describes these books as “self-distanced autobiographies” (Attridge, 2004: 199)



finds oneself writing, the haunting illusion [...] that there is an unbridgeable distance between the person who lives in the world and the person, or impersonal force, that produces the words".<sup>21</sup>

The artist/human division seems inescapable, both in Coetzee's works and in Costello's mind. For her third statement she decides to put this division to use; as her profession allows her to do, she decides to open herself up to "the dictates of the invisible". What she hears, though, is very different from the allegories of literary writing: she perceives her body and the sounds of its workings, and in them she finds inspiration. Bodily existence – not the idea of it, not what it stands for – may be her credo; the body exists without any need to believe in it, without any rationalizations to validate its allegorical value. She does not feel she is *in* a body, but simply that she *is* a body, and she wonders if that can become her belief: *I am, therefore I believe* overturning, and standing in firm opposition to, the Cartesian *I think, therefore I am*.

The resulting statement is very different from the others, both theoretically and in tone. The language is lyrical, and in striking contrast with that of the rest of the story. The main image is that of the frogs which Costello remembers from her childhood in rural Victoria. She explains that the frogs go underground in the dry season, and "in those tombs they die" – that is, they are dead up until the next rain. After the rain "the dead awake", and "their voices resound again in joyous exultation beneath the vault of the heaven" (p. 216). Ironically, this is the first and only time in the story when the words *death* and *heaven* are mentioned.

Preoccupied that her words might be misinterpreted, Costello specifies further:

Today I am before you not as a writer but as an old woman who was once a child, telling you what I remember of the Dulgannon mudflats of my childhood and of the frogs who live there. In my account, [...] the life cycle of the frog may sound allegorical, but to the frogs themselves it is no allegory, it is the thing itself, the only thing.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, this clarification does not prove sufficient: "[t]hese Australian frogs of yours embody the spirit of life, which is what you as a storyteller believe in" (p. 219), one of the judges notices. Costello is less than happy with the judge's remark, but she also feels exhausted, and accepts it – only to change her mind immediately afterwards. Surprisingly, she finds herself contemplating the literary and allegorical value of the frogs, which previously she had been considering exclusively in terms of their bodily, non-allegorical existence. Costello is more confused than ever. On one hand, she is unable to escape literariness; on the other, she has finally discovered that she *is* able to believe in the circle of life symbolized by the frogs. Enunciating her newfound belief, though, does not result in permission to pass through the gate, as she had expected. On the contrary, new questions arise about her dubious coherence. Costello's identity now appears utterly inconsistent:

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<sup>21</sup> Attridge, 2004: 200

<sup>22</sup> *EC*, p. 217



You ask me if I have changed my plea. But who am I, who is this I, this you? We change from day to day, and we also stay the same. No I, no you is more fundamental than any other. You might as well ask which is the true Elizabeth Costello: the one who made the first statement or the one who made the second. My answer is, both are true. Both. And neither. I am an other.<sup>23</sup>

The judges smile to one another, and then they laugh openly in Costello's face. The statement is rejected, and access to Paradise is denied to someone with so fragmented an identity.

In the previous section of this essay I attempted to highlight how Costello's afterlife is designed to demonstrate the limits of literary representation; my conclusion was that such an afterlife is inaccessible to Elizabeth Costello as a writer. In this section we have focused on Elizabeth Costello as a human being, only to find that Paradise remains inaccessible nonetheless. The self-division she experiences cannot be overcome; the artistic self is pervasive, and it always prevails over the human self. Once again, what matters is literature, and what literature cannot represent.

Although "At the Gate" leaves us with very little doubt about Costello's impossibility of ever entering Paradise, I feel there is still something worthy of remark. After reading *Elizabeth Costello*, one is tempted to consider "At the Gate" as the on-stage death Coetzee has chosen for his character. Yet this is not so. In 2004 a new Costello piece, *As a Woman Grows Older*, was published, and the character is also featured in Coetzee's 2005 novel, *Slow Man*. Every time Costello reappears she looks ill, tired, nearing death and ready for it; each new appearance may well be her last. Yet Costello continues to feature in public readings – readings that remain, as yet, unpublished. I was lucky enough to be in the audience at one of those public readings. It took place in Milan on July 3rd, 2011, and it revolved entirely around Elizabeth Costello's expected death. I could not help wondering if Coetzee was ever going to kill Costello off, and maybe give her an afterlife – or were these never-ending preparations for her death just another, undoubtedly lighter, way for him to say that no Paradise is possible for Elizabeth Costello and the literariness she stands for?

## BEYOND ELIZABETH COSTELLO

As previously mentioned, J.M. Coetzee's more recent work is heavily meta-literary, and Elizabeth Costello is not the only writer-character he has created. The main character in his *Diary of a Bad Year*, published in 2007, is also an author, and one that draws consistently on Coetzee himself. We do not know his name, but we do know that his initial is C; that he has achieved success with a novel entitled *Waiting for the Barbarians*; that he is from South Africa, and that he lives in Australia.

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<sup>23</sup> EC, p. 221



No division between the human and the writing self is postulated in *Diary of a Bad Year*; yet it appears very clearly in the graphic organization of the novel. Every page is divided into two or three sections. In the first we find *Strong Opinions*, a series of miscellaneous pieces of writing by the main character in the book; in the second and occasional third sections we follow his life as a human being and his far-from-literary preoccupations. There are only two pages that lack this layout, namely those devoted to discussing the persistence of identity, and the impossibility of an afterlife if no such persistence is, in its turn, possible.

The main focus in this piece is the Christian account of what happens to the soul ("that which the I calls 'I' " – p. 153) after the body dies. The vision is ironic, if not openly humorous: the soul, reunited with its loved ones, finds itself among a chaotic and less than heavenly crowd of quarreling wife-soul and mistress-souls. To prevent any foreseeable theological objections, it is also stated that love and modes of soul-association as they are in the beyond cannot be known to living men, whose knowledge is still limited to the temporal realm. This consideration, though, allows for another step in theorizing about the impossibility of an afterlife as we picture it:

But if "I" will in the next life have a kind of existence that "I" as I am now am incapable of understanding, then Christian churches should rid themselves of the doctrine of the heavenly reward, the promise that good behaviour in the present life will be rewarded with heavenly bliss in the next: whoever I am now I will not be then.<sup>24</sup>

Of course the persistence of identity as it is referred to in this section, namely the persistence of identity after death, is different from that of Costello's, who experiences self-fragmentation even as a living being. What the two literary situations have in common is the impossibility of a representation of Paradise: in *Diary of a Bad Year* it is explicitly stated and theoretically supported; in "At the Gate" it is staged, with Costello as its main character, moving in a setting that is no afterlife at all, but just a pale literary imitation, so blatantly exposed as to end up as a mockery. True Paradise is, and remains, beyond the gate, in a forbidden place the writer cannot enter.

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<sup>24</sup> *Diary of a Bad Year*, Vintage, London, 2008 [2007], p. 153



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