

Embodiment and Sacrifice in J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*

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1. Introduction: Neither Fish nor Fowl

A recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature and other prestigious awards, J. M. Coetzee has written novels, fictionalized biographies, and essays. Coetzee's early writings reflected his context as a dissident writer living in apartheid South Africa. More recently, after his emigration to Australia in 2003, the settings of his stories reflect a broader ethnic and national context.

Despite this shift in location, "each of Coetzee's novels," Jane Poyner writes, "portrays a (troubled) writer-figure or intellectual" in communities animated by strong, conflicting beliefs.¹ The intellectual delivers a paradoxical message: the divisions animating these conflicts are superficial; the violence each perpetrates renders the combatants more alike than different. "The intellectual," Poyner notes, "must maintain independence from all organized social bodies, especially political ones, in order to speak the truth to power."²

In *Giving Offense*, a series of essays on censorship, Coetzee writes that he follows the "spirit of Erasmus" by pursuing an unwavering social critique that is nonetheless "not certain of itself either." Luther dismissed Erasmus as "King of the Amphibians" for theologically and politically being neither fish nor fowl.³ However, Coetzee sees Erasmus pursuing a deeper project than mediation and accommodation. By showing the indeterminacy that attends every text, Erasmus

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¹ Jane Poyner, "Introduction," in *J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*, ed. Jane Poyner (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006), 2.

² Poyner, "Introduction," 6.

³ J. M. Coetzee, *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1996), ix, 83.

unmasked the ideology underlying the conflicts over the Word in his milieu. By refusing to choose sides in these interpretive conflicts, Erasmus claimed a “well-established political role” that, instead of taking a position or joining a party, asks what it means “*to take a position.*”

To answer this question requires a move “outside oneself,” beyond one’s own particular point of view, “a position of *ek-stasis* in which one knows without knowing, sees without seeing.”⁴ Erasmus therefore sought to relativize all parties in a conflict so that a more self-critical and chastened politics might emerge.

The foregoing sets the stage for assessing *Elizabeth Costello*. Excerpts from the novel were initially delivered as the 1997–98 Tanner Lectures at Princeton University. The publication of these lectures, entitled *The Lives of Animals* (1999), along with interdisciplinary commentary, has created the impression that Coetzee’s purpose in this novel is to present a form of ethical vegetarianism through the main character, Elizabeth Costello, a celebrated Australian writer nearing the end of her career. However, a more complex theology emerges when we read the novel as written in the spirit of Erasmus. On this reading, Elizabeth’s vegetarianism expresses only a part of a broader ethical discussion of embodiment, love, violence, and sacrifice.

2. *Realism and Embodiment*

When Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello is asked why she became a vegetarian, she responds: “You ask me why I refuse to eat flesh. I, for my part, am astonished that you can put in your mouth the corpse of a dead animal, astonished that you do not find it nasty to chew hacked flesh and swallow the juices of death wounds.”⁵

Words like “corpse,” “hacked flesh,” and “juices” are deliberately intend to repulse, but a more considered position is signified with “death wounds.” To understand Elizabeth’s claims regarding vegetarianism, then, it is important to consider the philosophical background from which this visceral language arises.

Coetzee arranges his novel around eight “lessons” given during the last years of Elizabeth’s life. In Lesson 1, “Realism,” Elizabeth’s son, John, makes a telling observation:

⁴ Coetzee, *Giving Offense*, 99–100.

⁵ J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 83.

Realism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things. So when it needs to debate ideas, as here, realism is driven to invent situations—walks in the countryside, conversations—in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them. The notion of *embodying* turns out to be pivotal. In such debates ideas do not and indeed cannot float free: they are tied to the speakers by whom they are enounced, and generated from the matrix of individual interests out of which their speakers act in the world.⁶

At first read, this definition seems to confuse realism and materialism while positing a truth simultaneously invented and discovered. What is pivotal here, however, is the shift in the argument toward the body. The body is not merely the instrument by which the mind negotiates its way in the world, but possesses a prior wisdom the mind strains to discover. If this revelation is to be complete, caring for the body, and caring for every body, becomes imperative. The remaining lessons in the novel retrace decisive moments where Elizabeth learns this imperative.

In Lesson 2, she is a guest lecturer on a cruise to South Africa. She encounters a Nigerian colleague and former lover, Emmanuel, whose name, God-with-us, is a half-serious commentary on their relationship. Although Emmanuel was once a serious writer with profound views on orality, he has become a parody—a well-compensated “African exotic” carefully “packaged” for Western consumption.⁷

Meeting him again, however, Elizabeth is reminded of their former intimacy. Elizabeth’s memory of their tryst evokes passages from Genesis (2:7) and the Gospel of Luke (1:34). She flirtatiously asked Emmanuel, “Show me what an oral poet can do.” In response, Emmanuel “laid her out, lay upon her, put his lips to her ears, opened them, breathed his breath into her, showed her.”⁸

An even more unmediated experience of embodiment comes during the cruise, when Elizabeth wanders away from a landing party on an island. She encounters an albatross and is silently interrogated by the bird. Staring at the bird, she thinks: “*Before the fall. . . . This is*

⁶ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 9.

⁷ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 48.

⁸ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 58.

*how it must have been before the fall. I could miss the boat, stay here. Ask God to take care of me.*⁹

This memory is coupled with another, recounted in Lesson 5, recalled during an argument with her sister Blanche, a Roman Catholic nun. Revisiting the debate between Agape and Eros, Elizabeth tells of a time when, in her forties, she posed nude for a dying amateur painter named Mr. Phillips. Permitting him to paint her was a “blessing” bequeathed by permitting her body to receive his “worship.” She writes to Blanche: “Acts like that are not available to animals, who cannot uncover themselves because they do not cover themselves. Nothing compels us to do it. . . . But out of the overflow, the outflow of our human hearts we do it nevertheless: drop our robes, reveal ourselves, reveal the life and beauty we are blessed with.”¹⁰

This combination of beauty, disclosure, and vulnerability express, Elizabeth argues, neither the simple bestowal of Agape nor the mere appraisal of Eros. It is “Caritas,” the “Christian” love that ascends upwards through mutual friendship.¹¹ In Lesson 7, Elizabeth further argues that desire always runs “both ways,” even in divine–human interactions. Elizabeth redraws Mary’s acceptance of her role as *theotokos* as a sexualized event of being entered by a “male god” seeking “intimacy.” She poses the question: Why should a “god” seek “friendship” with the likes of us? Her answer is that the desire gods feel is the craving for the experience of desire itself, to experience human lack in order to know the gratuity and grace of human fullness.¹²

3. *Vegetarianism, Animality, and Exposure*

These lessons on embodiment frame the case for animal well-being presented in Lessons 3 and 4, which is organized around a lecture given at a Pennsylvania college. By inhabiting a body, Elizabeth argues that humans can imagine what every body feels when it suffers as well as when it is “full of being.” This empathy is like the “sympathetic imagination” readers feel for fictional characters in a well-constructed novel. “To be full of being is to live as a body-soul,” Elizabeth argues. “One name for the experience of full being is *joy*.”¹³

⁹ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 56.

¹⁰ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 150.

¹¹ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 154.

¹² Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 187–192.

¹³ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 77–78.

Elizabeth wants her listeners to contemplate the fragility and wonder of embodiment, in the hope that this might spark an ecstatic move outward through empathy accompanied by an inner, moral journey. Therefore, the goal of her vegetarianism is therapeutic—to help people rediscover their humanity through contemplating their animality. By refusing to imprison animals in zoos, murder them in slaughterhouses, and commodify their bodies, it may become possible to revive the moral sentiments that have been dying over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

However, the specific arguments Elizabeth offers fare poorly. Opponents find her logic faulty, her concepts flawed, and her conclusions illicit. These become spectacularly apparent when she compares the Shoah, or Holocaust, with the widespread and systematic “degradation, cruelty and killing” of animals.¹⁴ Abraham Stern, a poet on the faculty, refutes this analogy point blank: “If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead.”¹⁵ Similarly, in a critical response, Peter Singer objected to the “radical egalitarianism” Costello defends, which is unable to balance the relative interests that different animal species have.¹⁶

These assessments, however, miss the fact that Elizabeth’s arguments are not about philosophy or ethics as conventionally understood. Their purpose is to bear witness to an experience in which the life and death of animals is vividly present to her in a new way. Elizabeth’s arguments convey what Cora Diamond calls the sense of “exposure”: “The awareness we each have of being a living body, being ‘alive to the world,’ carries with it exposure to the bodily sense of vulnerability to death, sheer animal vulnerability, the vulnerability we share with them.” Diamond further argues that the acknowledgment of “exposure” is a “wounding” event. By it, Elizabeth invites psychic rupture, which she then places at the center of her knowledge.¹⁷

¹⁴ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 65.

¹⁵ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 94.

¹⁶ Peter Singer, “Reflections,” in J. M. Coetzee et al., *The Lives of Animals*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 86. See also Marjorie Garber’s remarks, 80–84.

¹⁷ Cora Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” in Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Ian Hacking, and Cary Wolf, *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 74.

It is also clear that Elizabeth is working with an epistemological framework that these criticisms overlook. She employs an older epistemology, in which knowledge participates in what it cognitively apprehends in order to find a broader reality. In an ensuing seminar, she remarks: “Our eye is on the creature itself, but our mind is on the system of interactions of which it is the earthly, material embodiment.”¹⁸

Animals cannot know this greater system. They are already living according to their nature. Humanity, however, has been given the responsibility of care for this “great, complex dance.” As “managers of the ecology,” humans “understand the greater dance, therefore we can decide how many trout may be fished or how many jaguar may be trapped before the stability of the dance is upset.” It is in this respect that humanity “is different,” she argues. “Man understands the dance as the other dancers do not. Man is an intellectual being.”¹⁹

4. *Intimations of Sacrifice*

At an awkward reception following her lecture, the president of the college commends Elizabeth’s “moral conviction.” She responds that her concern “comes out of a desire to save my soul.” When he persists, she responds, “I’m wearing leather shoes. . . . I’m carrying a leather purse. I wouldn’t have overmuch respect if I were you.”²⁰ This theological language reveals the emergence of another theme in the novel—Elizabeth’s desire for atonement and redemption.

The first intimation happens in her encounter with the albatross during her voyage. Unlike Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), there is no actual bloodletting. However, the accusing silence of the albatross reveals that the traces of sin and guilt—and the corresponding desire for atonement—remain. Elizabeth’s belief that the albatross lives in a pre-fallen world highlights the extent to which her own world is exiled from God’s grace. Her desire to return to Eden is balanced by the recognition that to ask God to care for her in this place would make her vulnerable, place her in a subordinate and disadvantaged position, where God’s will would likely be that she be offered up and eaten to sustain the lives of the animals and plants around her. Like Coleridge’s Mariner, Elizabeth’s decision to board the cruise ship seals her fate, at least for the near future: her redemption will take the

¹⁸ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 99.

¹⁹ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 99.

²⁰ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 89.

form of bearing penitent witness to the God who “made and loveth all.”²¹

As the novel progresses, this theme surfaces in more detail. Elizabeth's visit with her sister Blanche in Africa, recounted in Lesson 5, is spent arguing over desire, salvation, atonement, revelation, and reality. Blanche is awarded an honorary doctorate for her missionary work in Zululand. In her commencement address, she lectures on the humanities, which, she argues, have lost their originating purpose. The first humanists were “textual scholars” who “saw themselves as servants in the recovery of the true message of the Bible, specifically the true teaching of Jesus.” This focus on Christ explains why the “figure they employed to describe their work,” the Renaissance, was that of “rebirth or resurrection.”²²

This textual scholarship was driven by another kind of realism—one defined in this case not merely by the body but by revelation. Blanche argues: “Textual scholarship meant, first, the recovery of the true text, then the true translation of that text; and true translation turned out to be inseparable from true interpretation, just as true interpretation turned out to be inseparable from true understanding of the cultural and historical matrix from which the text had emerged.” The “truth” holding these related disciplines together was the “True Word, by which they understood then, and I understand now, redemptive word.” Their inquiry into the “record of antiquity” was to discover humanity's “unredeemed state” in order to “grasp the purpose behind Incarnation—that is to say, to grasp the meaning of redemption.”²³

Structurally in the novel, Blanche's address is placed in opposition to Elizabeth's lecture. Like Elizabeth, Blanche is misunderstood and largely dismissed. Like Elizabeth, Blanche confronts her audience with a disturbing message. Like Elizabeth, she operates with a different epistemological framework from her audience. Like Elizabeth, her vocation is not to persuade, but to bear witness.

These similarities aside, in a reprise of Leo Strauss's famous dichotomy between Athens and Jerusalem, Blanche and Elizabeth deliver contradictory messages. Where Elizabeth encourages her audience to ponder the mystery of embodiment, Blanche argues that

²¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1834), Part VII; www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173253.

²² Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 120.

²³ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 121–122.

there is no “rebirth without the intervention of Christ.”²⁴ Wrapped up in this statement is the figure of Christ crucified, manifested in the story when Elizabeth and Blanche visit Joseph, a local African woodcarver, who has spent his life repetitively carving the same figure of Jesus in agony on the cross. Elizabeth finds Joseph disturbing. She believes that his focus on depicting Christ in agony, financed by Blanche’s order, has “denied” him a “fuller life.” Why, she asks Blanche, must the “specific model” Joseph is made to copy be that of a “Christ dying in contortions rather than a living Christ?”²⁵ Blanche replies:

Elizabeth, . . . remember it is their gospel, their Christ. It is what they have made of him, they, the ordinary people. What they have made of him and what he has let them make of him. Out of love. And not just in Africa. You will see scenes just like that repeated in Brazil, in the Philippines, even in Russia. Ordinary people do not want the Greeks. They do not want the realm of pure forms. They do not want marble statues. They want someone who suffers like them. Like them and for them.²⁶

As mentioned, Coetzee ends Lesson 5 by giving Elizabeth the last word, during which she presents her argument for Caritas buttressed by the erotic experience of posing nude for Mr. Phillips. This is followed by another meditation on Eros in Lesson 7, in which Elizabeth tries to rewrite the history of divine–human interaction from the standpoint of mutual desire. These digressions aside, the rest of the novel seems dedicated to demonstrating that Blanche’s account of sacrifice prevails over Elizabeth’s account of embodiment and exposure. As they are about to part, Blanche turns to Elizabeth and says, indiscreetly, “You backed a loser, my dear.” Even Elizabeth’s account of embodiment seems pale when compared to Blanche’s suffering body of Christ. People want, Blanche tells her, “someone who can die but then come back . . . someone who moves among the people, whom they can touch—put their hand into the side of, feel the wound, smell the blood.”²⁷

²⁴ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 133.

²⁵ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 137–138.

²⁶ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 144.

²⁷ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 145.

5. *Trial and Judgment*

In Lessons 6 and 8, Elizabeth's life begins to display, increasingly, the features of trial and sacrifice. Shortly after her lectures on animal well-being, in Lesson 6 we learn that she has been publically attacked for "belittling the Holocaust." After being hounded by news venders and an angry public, she realizes that "it was she, all at once, who was on trial." As a result of the controversy, she is invited to speak at a conference in Amsterdam on the general topic of "silence, complicity, and guilt."²⁸ She bases her remarks on a novel by Paul West that imagines the execution of Hitler's would-be assassins in the *Wehrmacht* so vividly that Elizabeth believes that it inspires its readers to commit similar acts of sadism. The book reveals the dangers inherent in her own account of embodiment. Imagining oneself in the place of another can evoke cruelty as well as empathy. There are certain "forbidden places" that must not be imaginatively entered—that a responsible writer must avoid and remain silent about if encountered.²⁹

After giving the lecture, Elizabeth recalls an all but unmentionable experience of sexual violence. As a younger woman, she "allowed herself to be picked up" in a "rough" area. When she refused to have sex, her date sadistically beat her. Lucky to escape with her life, she never speaks of the experience—either to her friends or in her fiction. Nonetheless, in the fifty years that have followed, "the memory has rested inside her like an egg." The damage has been done. The wound has been received. The devil himself has entered her, and "she can feel him, folded up like a bird, waiting his chance to fly."³⁰

In Lesson 8, Elizabeth faces another trial. In a setting drawn from Kafka's *The Trial* (1925), Elizabeth finds herself in a dreamscape, trying to offer a "statement" to a guard who will allow her to pass through a gate. In Kafka's original version, the parable drives home to Joseph K. the ineluctable nature of his fate as judged and condemned before "the Law." The parable is delivered as the final comment before Joseph K. is taken by officers who sacrificially execute him.³¹ In contrast, in the place where she finds herself, Elizabeth is only required to write a "confession" of what she believes. Appearing before a panel

²⁸ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 157.

²⁹ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 173.

³⁰ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 165–167.

³¹ Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 207–220.

of judges, she explains: "In my work a belief is a resistance, an obstacle. I try to empty myself of resistances."³² She explains that she has dutifully tried to do without belief in her life: "Beliefs are not the only ethical supports we have. We can rely on our hearts as well."³³ When the panel finds this confession unacceptable, she reappears and relates a story of when she was a young girl encountering frogs who, almost miraculously, could survive the dry season in Australia. One judge asks, "Do you believe in life?" She responds, "I believe in what does not bother to believe in me."³⁴

6. *The Transcendental Imperative*

Coetzee's novel ends with Elizabeth's case undecided, her fate unknown. From one perspective, this might appear to be yet another victory for Blanche. Elizabeth is caught in a kind of Limbo, shut from heaven, yet unpunished.

However, from another point of view, it is important to remember that the Latin root for Limbo is *limbus*, meaning "edge" or "boundary." In light of the intimations of sacrifice noted above, Elizabeth's ultimate fate would have necessarily been so. Without an animal to sacrifice, and without accepting Christ's sacrifice of himself, she can only offer herself.

Whether this is enough is a question Coetzee leaves open. The decision to leave this question open, of course, is required by the indeterminacy that necessarily conditions his novel—if the answer was revealed, the sense of closure would destroy the novel's coherence, turning it into a morality play.³⁵ Portraying an Elizabeth lost in the beatific vision would render her unrecognizable to the reader, given her deep commitment to bearing witness to the broken world she inhabits.

More than a literary device, this indeterminacy reflects a moral commitment to what Coetzee has called a "transcendental imperative."³⁶ By refusing to pass judgment on Elizabeth, Coetzee

³² Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 200.

³³ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 203.

³⁴ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 218.

³⁵ Chris Baldick, "Indeterminacy," *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, third edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 168.

³⁶ Chris Danta, "J. M. Coetzee: The Janus Face of Authority," in *Strong Opinions: J. M. Coetzee and the Authority of Contemporary Fiction*, ed. Chris Danta, Sue Kossew, and Julian Murphet (New York: Continuum, 2011), xiii.

makes the point that there is no earthly being who can be the final arbiter of her life. This reserve of judgment does not empty her life of moral meaning, but in fact does the opposite. It is a counsel to the reader to follow our own conscience and to act as if all moral meaning rests in something greater than what we now can know or name. By choosing to be a “secretary of the invisible” Elizabeth followed this transcendental imperative to the end. Faithfully adhering to this apophaticism was both her saving grace and her undoing. The question of whether this undoing can be itself undone is left in larger hands.

7. *The Ethics of Indeterminacy*

In his recent *Approaching the End*, Stanley Hauerwas uses the character of Elizabeth Costello to explore the interrelation between eschatology, ecclesiology, and ethics.³⁷ Hauerwas turns to Elizabeth for two reasons. The first is that he identifies with her plight. Like Elizabeth, he has been lionized (and lambasted) for his work as a theologian, and this notoriety has brought him face to face with the same temptation to “give once again the stump speech” when faced with the same “stupid question.” Elizabeth’s moral commitment to bear witness to a reality that convicts her first and foremost guides his own vocation as a public theologian. “Like Costello,” Hauerwas writes, “I am old and trapped by a track record whose defense can stop thought from meeting the demands necessary to say as best as one can what is true.”³⁸

The second reason she appeals to him is that he sees her witness going with the grain of Christianity—bearing witness is a way to remain human in a hopelessly fallen world. Hauerwas argues that, by living nonviolently, the church bears witness to the peaceable kingdom Jesus has called into being, a kingdom that is both real and yet unrealized.

However, Hauerwas also argues that Christians must view “history doxologically,” by which he means that all Christian action and reflection must live with the recognition that God’s final truth, revealed at the *eschaton*, remains far beyond what we presently know or articulate.³⁹ This eschatology sets limits on what Christians ethically

³⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics, and Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2013), 139–157.

³⁸ Hauerwas, *Approaching the End*, 143.

³⁹ Hauerwas, *Approaching the End*, 151.

proclaim here and now. The church is called to be a witnessing community that recognizes its own inherent limitations and failures regarding the very truth it proclaims.

For Hauerwas, our witness therefore expresses the truth of Christ's Lordship in a world in which violence often seems to have the last word. Because we are part of the world we bear witness to, however, our witness is compromised by our complicity with the sinful and evil structures we believe are passing away. "We are wounded by sin, we are wounded by our illusions of control, we are wounded by our inability to acknowledge the wounds our desperate loves inflict on ourselves and on others."⁴⁰ As the term "desperate loves" indicates, Hauerwas is speaking not only about ecclesiology but about Christian character and embodiment—topics that, in his writings, are deeply entwined.

My reading of Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*, however, reveals a more complicated theology. For Coetzee, our awareness of God is never so precise as the cataphatic doxology Hauerwas sets up as a signpost to guide Christian reflection and action. This imprecision reflects Coetzee's commitment to indeterminacy discussed earlier, which he at times articulates in nearly theological and spiritual terms. In an interview published in 1992, Coetzee was asked if he was animated by "a certain faith in the idea, or the possibility, of an ethical community." Coetzee responded:

You use the word *faith*. Let me be more cautious and stay with *awareness*: awareness of an idea of justice, somewhere, that transcends laws and lawmaking. Such an awareness is not absent from our lives. But where I see it, I see it mainly as flickering or dimmed—the kind of awareness you would have if you were a prisoner in a cave, say, watching the shadows of ideas flickering on the walls. . . . I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations—which are shadows themselves—of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Hauerwas, *Approaching the End*, 155.

⁴¹ J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 340–341. For a recent account of justice that is similarly Platonic but lacking in this sense of awareness, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

Though framed in terms of a Platonic metaphor, Coetzee's "awareness" is better described theologically as worship. Worship both grounds and decenters the justice individuals and communities seek by turning them toward a deeper truth, order, rhythm, and harmony received only through fragmented epiphanies. In this respect, Coetzee's project in *Elizabeth Costello* mirrors recent Jewish theology—despite the offense the main character in his novel gives to Jews in her lectures.

As Moshe Halbertal argues, inherent in worship is the ethical demand to refrain from idolatry. More than objects created by selfish desires, idols falsely demand self-transcendence and self-sacrifice. Idols therefore are not merely objects of perverted self-worship, but any human entity or cause that claims the total allegiance owed to God. Thus, Halbertal argues that "misguided self-transcendence is morally more problematic and lethal than a disproportionate attachment to self-interest."⁴²

This forswearing of misguided self-transcendence is coupled with a deeper theology of sacrifice and atonement that operates as a subtext in *Elizabeth Costello*. In recent theology and philosophy, this topic has been dominated by Girardian analysis on scapegoating as an outlet for the anger generated by mimetic competition. In such accounts, sacrifice as a practice is superseded by another that exposes the violence inherent in sacrificial systems and seeks to break the cycles that give them their power.⁴³

However, a very different account of sacrifice emerges in Coetzee's novel. Here, sacrifice is drawn in terms of the willing surrender of bodily desires, the acceptance of suffering, the offering of confession, and the work of charity—each of which are acts of self-donation. Running through each is the overriding desire of exiled, profane, and guilty people to experience communion, expiation, and grace.

In this account, bodies are not merely celebrated but surrendered, offered, wounded, killed, and consumed. As a result, anxiety permeates every act of sacrifice, no matter how magnificent the demonstration of God's prior generosity. Sacrifice therefore does not automatically initiate a gift-giving cycle, whereby God is somehow

⁴² Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012), 78.

⁴³ See for example, James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

bound to accept what humans prayerfully offer. Rather, sacrifice occurs within a “hierarchical context” that transcends any obligations of reciprocity, which means that “a dangerous gap between giving and receiving is opened up, creating a potential for rejection and trauma” that is never completely foreclosed.⁴⁴

In the end, then, despite the skill he demonstrates in constructing Blanche’s Christianity, Coetzee’s account of Elizabeth’s apophaticism offers a surer protection against the sins inherent in sacrifice than her sister’s cataphaticism. When faced with the temptation of self-transcendence, it is better to remind yourself always what you are than to develop a belief system constructed around what you hope to be.

A similar point might be made of Hauerwas’s attempt to incorporate such a resolute truth-teller as Elizabeth into his own Christian vision. The willed absence of words does not mean that there is nothing to say, but comes from the awareness that there is a presence greater than what words can encompass. Protecting this space may be just as important an imperative to follow as any other.

⁴⁴ Halbertal, *On Sacrifice*, 13.