

Philosophical Fiction? *On J. M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello*

Robert Pippin
University of Chicago

I

THE MODERN FATE OF THE IDEAL of the beautiful is deeply intertwined with the beginnings of European aesthetic modernism. More specifically, from the point of view of modernism, commitment to the ideal of the beautiful is often understood to be both irrelevant and regressive. This claim obviously requires a gloss on “modernity” and “modernism.” Here is a conventional view. European modernism in the arts can be considered a *reaction* to the form of life coming into view in the mid-nineteenth century as the realization of early Enlightenment ideals: that is, the supreme cognitive authority of modern natural science, a new market economy based on the accumulation of private capital, rapid urbanization and industrialization, ostensibly democratic institutions still largely controlled by elites, the privatization of religion and so the secularization of the public sphere. The modernist moment arose from some sense that this form of life was so unprecedented in human history that art’s very purpose or rationale, its mode of address to an audience, had to be fundamentally rethought. Nothing about the purpose or value of art, as it had been understood, could be taken for granted any longer, and the issue was: what kind of art, committed to what ideal, could be credible in such a world (if any)? A response to such a development was taken by some to require a novelty, experimentation and formal radicality so extreme as to seem unintelligible to its “first responders.” Modernism was to be an anti-Romanticism, rejecting lyrical expression of the inner in favor of impersonality, or of multiple, fractured authorial personae, attempting an ironic distancing, experimental



innovation, and, in so-called high modernism, assuming an elite position, sometimes with multiple, obscure allusions, defiantly resistant to commercialization or a public role. In this context, commitment to the ideal of the beautiful, either in its classical sense as an intimation of perfection or the objectively ideal or in its post-Kantian, Schillerian sense as occasioning a harmony of sensible and intellectual powers, was rejected as naïve and historically dead. This modern world intimated no objective perfectibility (just the opposite), and the collective experience was alienation and commodification, not a possible harmony. As a result, aesthetic appreciation as taste (and evaluation) gave way to the practice of criticism and the goals of illumination and proper understanding, authenticity as an ideal replaced the beautiful, and, especially, art became “philosophical.” Forms of beauty would still, of course, exist and be enjoyed. The modernist suspicion was simply that such experiences of the beautiful no longer *meant* anything of any significance.¹

It is in this context, the becoming philosophical of art, that I want to suggest a way of appreciating the achievement of J. M. Coetzee’s book *Elizabeth Costello* and its eight “lessons.” (In my view, Coetzee is the greatest current representative of so-called high modernism, self-consciously carrying on the tradition of Kafka and Beckett.) Given the nature of these lessons, this will make inevitable an attempt to raise the question of understanding the work in terms of what must be called “philosophical fiction.” In this, I take myself to be following the lead given us by the book itself, in which philosophy obviously plays a large role, as it does in the modernist literature Coetzee so admires. The idea will not be to show that fiction is philosophy. Of course, it is not. The book is literary fiction, even if a unique genre—not quite a short-story collection, and certainly not a mere device for ventriloquizing philosophical claims. But the idea that fiction can be philosophical requires a defense of the claim, first, that fiction can be a distinctive form of thought, even a form of knowledge; and, second, that such knowledge is relevant to, has a bearing on, the sort of knowledge philosophy, or at least some version of philosophy, tries to achieve. It has this bearing even, and especially, when what fiction achieves throws into some doubt the prospects for philosophy to achieve what it is trying to achieve. The bearing of fiction on philosophy is not that fiction is a form of philosophy. It has this bearing precisely because it is not. The immediately problematic or paradoxical nature of the very thought can be put by saying: if the idea is that fiction is “philosophy by other means,” then the emphasis must first of all be on the phrase “*other* means.” And that already threatens the claim that it can be philosophical. (How “*other*” can such means be and still be of relevance to philosophy?) Eventually, this exploration will lead us back to the question of the beautiful at the end of this discussion, and so perhaps a kind of modernist “recuperation.”

As a strictly theoretical question this leads us immediately to the notion of the form of literary fiction. Knowledge is knowledge by being of some generality, and generality is formal. It extends to many instances. This problem is dual. It concerns the distinctive form of all literary thought, as contrasted, say, with forms like mathematical or religious thought. And it concerns the specific content of any fictional insight. If a drama can be philosophical, then, say, the play *Othello* cannot be about, be a way of understanding, Othello’s jealousy without also being about, showing us something about, jealousy in general.

One possibility would be that the form of literary—and indeed all artistic—knowledge is a form of self-knowledge. This would not be of much interest if it referred to the writer’s own

¹ I discuss this transformation at greater length in *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

self-knowledge as a psychological individual, the revelation of her motivations or even intentions, for example. The scope of the knowledge would also not be very wide if it covered only the undeniable reflexive knowledge embodied in the artwork as artwork. Any artwork realizes (or attempts to realize) a notion of itself, whether this was explicitly attended to by the artist or not. The more ambitious claim is that the artwork, in this case, fiction, also realizes a form of collective self-knowledge of a community at a historical time, that this knowledge has a bearing on what philosophy attempts, and in a way unavailable to philosophy. This is especially so when the attempt at self-knowledge—in which “what has happened to us?” is everywhere imbricated in “what has happened to me?”—is in the service of some sort of project of justification; in Elizabeth’s case, the justification of a literary life at this time, in this form of life.

These are sweeping and controversial claims. It would take several essays to begin to make any element clearer and warranted. My attempt in the following is more in the way of suggesting their plausibility by attending to a particular work and making use of it to illustrate the themes just introduced.

II

On October 18, 1902, there appeared in the Berlin newspaper *Der Tag* a small piece called simply “A Letter” (Ein Brief). It appeared to be a letter written on August 22, 1603, by a certain twenty-six-year-old Lord Chandos to the famous philosopher and scientist Francis Bacon.² In it, Chandos, who apparently had had great early success as a poet (“pastorals,” he says), tries to explain to Bacon why a certain spiritual paralysis (a “gesitige Starrnis”; many have called it a “crisis of language”) had prevented him, and would forever prevent him, from writing anything more. The “letter” was actually written by the twenty-eight-year-old Austrian poet and writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal (who had himself experienced great early success, his work having first become known to the leaders of Viennese literary society when he was seventeen). The letter, now widely known as “the Chandos Letter,” is regarded as one of the most influential and telling documents of literary modernism. In other words, it is taken as having general significance, as bearing on the form of modernist art and the unique demands on understanding that it makes. (We should note the date of the fictional letter itself, 1603. It was an epochal, momentous time, not only of Bacon but of Caravaggio, Shakespeare, Cervantes; just after the time of the great Montaigne, just before the revolutionary Descartes; a quintessentially modern moment. Hofmannsthal seems to be suggesting that even in such a heyday, a coming crisis was already emerging.)

J. M. Coetzee’s collection of eight Elizabeth Costello “lessons” concludes with two elements.³ It is inevitable that these passages will then back-shadow what we have just read. Since they do not seem proper *parts* of the book, they can easily be taken as, in some sense or other, *about* the book as a whole. One is a quotation from the Chandos Letter itself, a famous passage in which Chandos tries to explain the debilitating, paralyzing experiences that convinced him that “everything means something.” The other is a “Postscript,” a four-page letter that is the last passage we read in Coetzee’s book. The letter, also addressed to Francis Bacon, is purportedly from Lady Chandos, written twenty days after her husband, Lord Phillip Chandos, had written his own letter to Bacon. In it, she does not doubt the genuineness of her husband’s crisis, either as

² References to the letter in the text will be to Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *The Lord Chandos Letter and Other Writings*, trans. Joel Rotenberg (New York: New York Review of Books Classics, 2005).

³ Page references in the text are to J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2003).

a psychological problem or as ontological insight, but she pleads with Bacon to help her convince her husband that we are not ready yet to bear the burden of such insight. For her, the crisis seems to involve these elements: First, it has become impossible for her husband to “enter,” as she puts it, the dyads and sirens he sees in mythological paintings, and she cannot serve as such; second, her words, all words, always mean something other than what is intended. (“Always it is not what I say but something else.”) And, especially, third, the experience of the interpenetrating unity of all things, her “rapture,” is existentially unbearable.

But how I ask you can I live with rats and dogs and beetles crawling through me day and night, drowning and gasping, scratching at me, tugging me, urging me and urging me deeper and deeper into revelation—how? (229)

We are not, she says, the giants or angels who can someday, perhaps, bear such a burden, but mere fleas. She concludes with what are the last lines of *Elizabeth Costello*, “Drowning, we write out of our separate fates. Save us.” (That both letters are addressed to a founder of modern European scientific rationalism—that is, to a man very unlikely to be in any position to respond to such a plea—is an irony worthy of a large separate discussion. As is the fact that one letter is from a man, another from a woman.)

Now, we have been listening to the distinctive voice of Elizabeth Costello for the whole of the book, so the first question is obvious. Why end this collection, not with her voice, but with the equally fictional voices of Lord and Lady Chandos, from four hundred years ago, and with this sort of reference to a literary text over one hundred years old? Trying to answer this question will lead us eventually to the topic announced in my title.

I would suggest that while this sort of quotational ending is somewhat perplexing, it is not entirely so—or at least it is not unfamiliar. Not only is this inhabitation by Coetzee of another author’s characters familiar from his other works (as with Dafoe or Dostoyevsky) but it reminds us that Elizabeth Costello’s most important work, *The House on Eccles Street*, involves her entry into the fictional world of James Joyce and her inhabitation of one of his characters, Molly Bloom. And this itself, of course, already represents Joyce’s invocation of the Homeric world, the *Odyssey* in particular, and his inhabitation, in the setting of modern Dublin, of those characters. Moreover, given that the most discussed lesson, “The Lives of Animals,” raises the philosophical question of inhabiting, imaginatively entering, and thereby understanding both other human and nonhuman animals, the theme has a resonance greater than literary. (In the lesson “Realism,” Elizabeth’s son insists that his mother “has also been a dog. She can think her way into other people, into other existences” [22]. And Chandos compares himself to Crassus, devastated by the death of his pet eel, a figure that, Chandos knows, looks ridiculous but that inspires in Chandos “a kind of feverish thinking, but thinking in a medium more direct, fluid, and passionate than words” [127]. That feverish, nondiscursive “thinking” again brings us close to our theme and is reflected in all these inhabitings: Coetzee’s, Elizabeth’s, Joyce’s, and Chandos’s.)

So, my strategy in this brief presentation is simple: to present what in the two Chandos letters brings Elizabeth Costello, what she does and says, to mind; and to do this in a way that might lead to an initial understanding of the “fictional” treatment of philosophical issues, or at least the ethical and aesthetic issues that make up the core of each of the “lessons.”

III

To begin to understand this instance of such literary inhabitation, we need to remember the basic elements of the Chandos Letter, noting as we go where aspects call Costello to mind. The following associations, echoes, resonances, all suggest that the book itself, and the writer Elizabeth Costello, still must write in the shadow of a crisis, one that threatens to make the writing of poetry and fiction pointless or, at least, demands some sort of distinctive justification.

The letter has a simple narrative structure in three parts.⁴ Chandos describes first the period of his confident literary production and success. He was able to write pastorals, histories, and complex Latin prose, and he was filled with confidence about an underlying spiritual unity in all things, a unity of mental and physical, courtly and bestial, art and barbarism, solitude and society. His most vivid portrayal of the unity of sensibilities he experienced in that time was that he felt no difference between drinking “warm foaming milk” freshly drawn by a farmer and “drinking in sweet and frothy spiritual nourishment from an old book” (120). He was also able, he says, to “enter” the personae of ancient mythologies, inhabiting Narcissus, Proteus, Perseus, and Actaeon, speaking and writing from within their personae.

Just this much already calls Elizabeth Costello to mind, from the lesson “Eros.” She is, and apparently always was, suspicious of this way of talking about literary inspiration. She asks, “Inwardness. Can we be one with a god profoundly enough to get a sense of a god’s being?” This is a question, she says, “that went out of fashion during her lifetime (she remembers it happening, remembers her surprise), just as it came into fashion just before her lifetime commenced” (122). It may be out of fashion, but the image still has work to do. In the lesson “Realism,” when John is asked if he is a writer, he responds in an “Elizabethan” way: “You mean, am I touched by a god?” Elizabeth also has her doubts about Hölderlin’s view of the world: that the world was inhabited by gods once, but that we have arrived too late. The gods have fled. (The past availability and the current unavailability of the gods also constitute Chandos’s lament.) She doubts there was ever a time when we could have understood the gods like this, and she does not think that the gods can “afford” to depart. How bored they would be without us, creatures who can die.

Second, there is Chandos’s present spiritual paralysis and his inability to write, described as a feeling of “Kleinmut,” timidity or faintheartedness, and “Kraftlosigkeit,” powerlessness. There is no single trauma or occasioning event for any of this. What had always seemed possible and good suddenly came to seem futile and pompous, arrogant. Suddenly, he simply saw everything differently. He describes himself as suffering like Tantalus,⁵ convinced that there is a reality to be grasped, but one that always seemed to withdraw and vanish as he approached it with any sort of language or thought. Words now seem like empty abstractions; everything that had some discursive unity seems to fall into pieces and then into further pieces. In the two best-known images from this account he says that “the abstract words which the tongue must enlist as a matter of course in order to make a judgment disintegrated in my mouth like moldy mushrooms [*modrige Pilze*],” and “I felt like someone locked in a garden full of eyeless statuary, and I rushed to get out again” (121).

⁴ For a discussion (to which I am much indebted) of the structure of the letter and the significance of that structure, see David Wellbery, “Die Opfer-Vorstellung als Quelle der Faszination: Anmerkungen zum Chandos-Brief und zur frühen Poetik Hoffmannstahls,” in his *Seiltänzer des Paradoxen: Aufsätze zur ästhetischen Wissenschaft* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2006), 196–230.

⁵ See *ibid.* for more on the Tantalus image and the connection it suggests with Schopenhauer (191).

There is no such intense existential crisis suffered by Elizabeth Costello, but at the end of “At the Gate,” when she is contemplating the “special fidelities” of a writer, she has a “vision” of the other side of the gate, the place denied her. It is of an old dog, lying before an infinite desert of sand and stone, and she thinks, “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” (224–25). Both Chandos’s and Elizabeth’s fidelities to literature or even a literary life, we can say, are in very different ways being tested, under examination, and they must respond with some sort of justification. To anticipate our topic, this is not a justification in the way of argument or evidence but, let us say, in a kind of “Lutheran” sense, a way in which a life, in this case a literary life, can be justified. (That way has as little to do with arguments as any potential response to great suffering first requires an argument justifying the response.) And it is one that neither Chandos nor Elizabeth can give, at least not in any form that their “judges,” the scientist Bacon and the literal-minded tribunal that Elizabeth faces, would recognize.

There is, in the third part of the Chandos Letter, his occasional experiences of what he calls “good instants,” *gute Augenblicke*. These rather strongly reflect Nietzsche’s notion of the Dionysian in art and they anticipate some of Heidegger’s reflections in the 1930s about the disclosive powers of art, especially their ontologically disclosive properties. (All of which is one way of thinking about literary knowledge.) These experiences fill him with a sense of unity and meaningfulness, even as they cut him off from others and also produce a lassitude and apathy that, he knows, is destroying him. What crushes him with frustration is that these experiences cannot be created, intentionally sought by an artwork, brought to mind when one will, and, especially frustrating, cannot be at all communicated. Any object, even a remembered object, can produce one of those “good instants,” all of which sound like the ideal sought in much modern aesthetics, the fusion of subject and object in an impersonal or transpersonal subjectivity, a transcendence of normal time into a kind of eternal *nunc stans*, and the revelation of a kind of truth about all of being that cannot be described discursively without great distortion. In Chandos’s case, though, they cannot be embodied in any such art. (That appears to be what differentiates them from the earlier experiences of unity and fusion just described, but this distinction still remains an open question in the letter.)⁶ So he says about these good instants:

These mute and sometimes inanimate beings rise up before me with such a plenitude. Such a presence of love that my joyful eye finds nothing dead anywhere. Everything seems to mean something, everything that exists, everything I can remember, everything in the most muddled of my thoughts. . . . Or as if we could enter into a new, momentous relationship with all of existence if we began to think with our hearts. (125)

Here again we hear Elizabeth, who, in “The Lives of Animals,” when she is asked from the floor for what she takes to be “principles,” says only, “open your heart and listen to what your heart says” (82). And in “At the Gate,” she tells her judges, her inquisitors, that “beliefs are not the only ethical supports we have. We can rely on our hearts as well” (203). (We should note for future reference

⁶ For more on these characteristics of the “good instants” and their bearing on aesthetics, see again *ibid.* Wellbery suggests that the difference between the earlier and later Chandos involves the difference between overpowering the world aesthetically and the passivity and neutral subjectivity of the “good instants,” the fact that the poetic, impersonal “I” suffers these moments rather than masters them (210).

that the panel responds to this with the same kind of self-satisfied rationalist debater's points that her son's wife, Norma, does in "The Lives of Animals." We get a bit closer to our theme.)

But the deepest connections between Elizabeth and Chandos arise when we consider two sets of images. One is quoted from Hofmannsthal's letter by Coetzee, the author of *Elizabeth Costello* the book, and it is on the facing page opposite the invented letter from Lady Chandos. It is the passage where Chandos says, describing one of these "good instants":

At such moments, even a negligible creature, a dog, a rat, a beetle, a stunted apple tree, a cart track winding over a hill, a mossy stone, counts for more than a night of bliss with the most beautiful, most devoted mistress. These dumb and in some cases inanimate creatures press toward me with such fullness, such presence of love, that there is nothing in range of my rapturous eye that does not have life. It is as if everything, everything that exists, everything I can recall, everything my confused thinking touches on, means something. (226)

Having read the lesson that precedes this quotation, we think immediately of Elizabeth's initial statement of belief, a bit ironic, as if ironizing the passage from Milosz that she quotes, or inhabits (she says that she is "the secretary to the infinite"; John once refers to her as "mouthpiece for the divine" [31]), and especially of her second justification, her story of the buried frogs of the Dulgannon River of her youth. This is her final statement of belief, her final justification in literary form: that she believes in these frogs.

The vivifying flood, the chorus of joyous belling, followed by the subsiding of the waters, and the retreat to the grave, then drought seemingly without end, then fresh rains, and the resurrection of the dead—it is a story I present transparently, without disguise. (217)

The tribunal, again rather like an unimaginative PhD examining committee in philosophy, say they take her to mean that she affirms "the spirit of life," that she "believed in life." She cannot explain to them how "vapid" this is, how she believes in *those frogs*, not such platitudes, even though she cannot yet explain herself. There is something about these frogs, she says, that "obscurely engages her, something about their mud tombs, and the fingers of their hands, fingers that end in little balls, soft, wet, mucous" (219).

But we remember Elizabeth's frogs even more when we read perhaps the most famous account of one of these "good instants." This one concerns rats in Chandos's milk cellar, for whom he had set out fresh poison.

It was all there. The cool and musty cellar air, full of the sharp sweetish smell of the poison, and the shrilling of the death cries echoing against mildewed walls. Those convulsed clumps of powerlessness, those desperations colliding with one another in confusion. The frantic search for ways out. The cold glares of fury when two meet at a blocked crevice. . . . A mother was there, whose dying young thrashed about her. But she was not looking at those in their death agonies, or at the unyielding stone walls, but off into space, or through space into the infinite, and gnashing her teeth as she looked. If there was a slave standing near Niobe in helpless fright as she turned to stone, he must have gone through what I went through when the soul of this beast I saw within me bared its teeth to its dreadful fate. (123–24)

This horrific passage, clearly as much a description of the unadorned post-Baconian human world coming into view as of Chandos's experience, stands in some contrast with the one cited

on the facing page to Lady Chandos's letter, the one that spoke of the presence of love, the unity of life, and the meaningfulness of everything, and it resonates more with Lady Chandos's horror at "rats and dogs and beetles" coursing through her. But it is an appropriate counter and echo because there is of course no life without suffering and death. To be attuned at such a prediscursive level to such an unsayable meaningfulness of being, of life, must also involve the "beast" in Chandos as well as "the presence of love." (To quote Elizabeth, "For that, finally, is all it means to be alive: to be able to die" [211].)

Lord Chandos is in despair because he must simply suffer these episodes, can make nothing out of them, and cannot communicate them in any form, cannot make art out of them. Something has changed in what could be a fit subject for art. And these episodes also cut him off from loved ones and his fellow man in general. "I live a life of scarcely credible emptiness," he says, and he finds it hard to hide "from my wife how hard my heart has become and from the people working for me how bored I am by the affairs of the estate" (125). It is somewhat paradoxical why all of this, this subject-object unity in life (i.e., the closing of this alienating gap), the meaningfulness of everything, and the presence of love, should have left his heart "hard" rather than open, but the solitude it creates for him, the fact that it cannot be shared with anyone, cannot be made art, seems one likely reason. All he can share with Lady Chandos is this solitude and its causes. This is what she calls his "contagion," expressed not in words but in "flaming swords" penetrating and deadening her soul. (Of course, there is irony here too. That the words can be made swords means that the Chandos state of things has been made art.)

And this all certainly brings to mind something similar in the last episode of "The Lives of Animals," a heartbreaking moment of intimacy with her son, John. Like Chandos, she asks herself and him how it is possible that she, virtually alone in the world, sees in so many "normal" human beings "crimes of stupefying proportions." "I must be mad," she worries, yet "every day I see the evidence. The very people I suspect produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to me. Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money." "Everyone comes to terms with it," she asks herself, "why can't you? Why can't you?" To which her son, trying to comfort her, can only say, "There, there. It will soon be over." He probably means the visit, but it certainly must also mean her life, the only true escape for her and for Chandos; to say the least, not much consolation.

IV

This all raises far more than can be dealt with in the next few pages. Let us at least start with the obvious. The reason that the Chandos Letter is so well known is that the crisis Chandos describes is hardly a merely personal, psychological crisis. It is expressive of the sense of crisis in the arts since, roughly, the mid-nineteenth century, more generally known as modernism. That is, it is not merely *Chandos's* language that has grown stale, in the most important instances badly misses its target; not merely *his* everyday world that has grown intolerably boring, without meaning; not merely *his* view of art that now seems impossible. It is typical of a general modernist sensibility in which the value and the very possibility of art can no longer be taken for granted. And if we think of such an aesthetic category as expressive of more than the mere exhaustion of a classical or Romantic style, styles that simply have become mannered, but as a deeper question tied to an emerging, world-historically distinctive form of life, then the questions being raised about what form of art is appropriate to such an age (or *whether* a form of art could be appropriate to such an age—Hegel's question, Nietzsche's question, Heidegger's question, and, as we shall see in a

moment, Kafka's question) are inseparable from questions about just what such a form of life is or demands from us if we are to answer it. It also thereby raises the question of whether there is anything distinctive that such a form of life—a highly commercialized, consumerist, bureaucratically and, in that sense, rationally organized, technology-dependent form of life, the one that produces Elizabeth's massive "factories of death"—demands of us ethically, what demands it might place "on our hearts." The two questions are inseparable, and they are both Elizabeth's questions throughout *Elizabeth Costello*. (Why they are inseparable would be a valuable topic for an independent discussion.)

As noted earlier, the citation of the Chandos Letter itself and the letter from Lady Chandos (which makes clear that their crisis not only makes art impossible but also makes their lives impossible, as well as helping to historicize the Chandos moment) alert us to the fact the book itself, and Elizabeth's discourse within the book, are written under the shadow of this crisis, Chandos's crisis, Hofmannsthal's crisis, a philosophical crisis. We also see this simply by the fact that the book begins and ends with meditations on Kafka, who would not be very well understood if we did not take him to be addressing these questions, and this not "philosophically" in the traditional sense but by virtue simply of the unusual form of his works, a form demanded now. We begin in the lesson "Realism" with Red Peter and "Report to an Academy," and we end with the story or fable "Before the Law," which the priest tells K in the "In the Cathedral" section of *The Trial*, a reference so direct that Elizabeth mentions it herself a few times and finds it amusing. ("The Hunger Artist" is also mentioned in the last lesson.) At the very least, the references to Kafka evoke an example of a distinctive aesthetic form required by the world of K.

But it is all much more direct at the beginning of the book and in Elizabeth's prize lecture. One could say that the first lesson instructs us on how to read a book that is unsure that it can even begin. For it opens with two paragraphs ("modernist" paragraphs, we can easily, if not very informatively, say) about the beginning, rather than *with* the beginning of the stories about Elizabeth Costello. It opens with "There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank" (1). We need some sort of bridge from the extrafictional world to the fictional or, we can say, from life to literature or from Coetzee to Elizabeth. We need to know what there is in this form of life that would require, suggest, even demand literature, fiction, and if so, how to satisfy this demand. We are told to simply assume that such a bridge has been built. Perhaps this assumption suggests that we cannot be *told* how this bridge is built, what it involves, even though that does not mean such a bridge is impossible.

It is not unusual, of course, for the "gentle reader" to be addressed directly in modern fiction, but this level of reflection and this formal problematizing of the beginning suggest a new problem and an unsettling uncertainty. I should also note that several times in this lesson, the drama about Elizabeth is interrupted again as we are told that things that happened have been skipped, that they are not part of the text we are reading but part of the "performance"; and we are told once that something was skipped that is (should have been?) part of the text we are reading but not part of the "performance."⁷ This is especially important because the lessons are performances by

⁷ One of many possible ways to understand this distinction: we can understand Elizabeth (ultimately) as pointing out that a great limitation of most philosophical accounts is a lack of appreciation for the enormous difficulty of simply describing what someone is doing in some complicated, morally relevant context, what the relevant act description is, how much it must include to be even roughly adequate. See Iris Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume 30* (1956): 32–58. What we are helped

Elizabeth; they might be connected to her unusual claim that, in fact, she has no beliefs, at least none in a form her judges would realize; and the problem of artist as mere performer haunts her. But we have to press on toward our theme.

And this all becomes more problematic in Elizabeth's prize lecture on realism, comments that we have to keep in mind as we read what she says later about literature and ethical truth and of course as we try to understand the book, or the point of presenting her saying it. When she is talking about all the interpretations possible of "Report to an Academy," she remarks on a time when language functioned like a "word-mirror":

But all that is ended. The word-mirror is broken, irreparably, it seems. . . . The words on the page will no longer stand up and be counted, each proclaiming, "I mean what I mean!" . . . There used to be a time, we believe, when we could say who we were. Now we are just performers speaking our parts. The bottom has dropped out. We could think of this as a tragic turn of events were it not that it is hard to have respect for whatever was the bottom that dropped out—it looks to us like an illusion now. (19)

The fictional Lady Chandos recounts the same experience: "words give way like rotting boards" (228).

If this is so, then Elizabeth faces Lord Chandos's problem. If we can't make any determinate, shareable sense out of, say, "Report to an Academy," why write literature at all? What is it for? Dramatically and psychologically, this question plays out silently, without ever being addressed as such, in John's relation to her, his memories of being shut out of her morning writing life, whining, humming, and singing with his sister outside her closed door, memories of Elizabeth screaming at them that they were ruining her life, destroying her. So here again is the question of justification: is Elizabeth's life, what she sacrificed in her life in order to write, justified, a question always raised together with questions like "what makes any kind of life—a carnivorous life, for example—justified or not?" And others. What justifies writing about horrific evil, showing it to us? But what justifies writing at all if subjects like Paul West's, which make up so much of the twentieth century, are in some way unwritable, unfit for art?

None of these questions are raised abstractly. They have whatever meaning and force that they do in a way that is inseparable from what they mean to the characters in a context, and this must entail something about the appropriate way to address such questions of justification. Our sense is not that this existential link is an additional dimension of meaning, but that it is the primary one. We wonder at times if Elizabeth's intense passion about the suffering of animals is connected to her guilt about the suffering she was willing to inflict on her children (an unconscious guilt; there is never a hint of anything apologetic about this from Elizabeth). We sense that her own worries about what is an appropriate public role for a writer are not separable from her three-day, youthful affair with Emmanuel Egudu. Her defense of the humanities in Africa is

by with literary thinking is not then the "story" about the characters, the "performance," but the "text," the way what happens is described by the novelist. This cannot but be a recommendation in itself for how to *think* about the issue. It is in this sense that moral thinking must always involve, at its best, aesthetic talent. See also chapter 7, "Meaning and Morality," in my *Henry James and Modern Moral Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 171–80. See also Coetzee's appeal to the distinction elsewhere, as, for example, between the story of Alonso Quixano and the book (or text) that Cervantes wrote about him. J. M. Coetzee, "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech (1987)," in his *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Atwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 99.

not separable from her complex, tense relation with her sister. Her concern with the depiction of evil is not separable from her own experience of sexual predation.⁸

And none of this is reductionist or relativist. The questions are not merely each person's concerns, and that brings us the closest yet to our theme. Any such justification is not just to oneself but to others, especially to others who now cannot do what they would otherwise have been able to do (Elizabeth's children, for example). The "locatedness" of these questions is given expression at one point in the first lesson. "Realism," we are told (apparently by the narrator, not by John or Elizabeth), or the kind of realism that clearly survives Elizabeth's "mirror" doubts, quoted earlier (she still continues to write after all), "has never been comfortable with ideas." For realism "ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things."

And "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 announced" (9). This suggests understanding ideas in a way akin to what we mean when we refer to genuinely understanding a person, and it brings to mind Nietzsche on all philosophy as the confession of its author. So we are now at the heart of the matter. Is there a kind of thinking relevant to the inescapable question of justification, that is, a thinking with one's heart, "in a medium more direct, fluid, and passionate than words," as Chandos says, an always-embodied thinking, one that can inhabit not just the minds of other beings but their bodies, and finally one that accepts Chandos's crisis as genuine but that can somehow transcend his despair, can bear the burden Lady Chandos has found unbearable?

It might be, let us say, "literary thinking," and this in a way essential to that "Lutheran" sense of justification I mentioned before, here not meant religiously (e.g., "does one's justification or salvation depend on good works or faith alone?") but still amounting to a kind of answerability to oneself and to others for what one has done, and depending on the right understanding of what one, or others, actually have done.⁹ I mentioned before that for "realism," any such thinking and answering cannot "float free," have the purely universal form demanded by traditional philosophy, but neither is it the mere expression of unshareable, personal preferences.¹⁰ There is no chance of appreciating the value of such thinking as philosophy, if we think that the task of moral philosophy is, exclusively, to articulate and defend universal principles that will tell us what to do, how to act. Put very simply, if we are interested in whether we should eat animals, we have to first understand something, not only the implications of the fact that we now kill them on the model of massive industrial manufacturing, but also what it means that we do so, what it means to organize the death of sentient beings in such a way, a question that is inseparable from the question "in what sort of a form of life would such a system so easily and, especially, *invisibly* fit

⁸ It would take a separate and lengthy discussion to explore the limitations, possible self-deceit, self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, and so forth of Elizabeth Costello the character. I am concerned here with the book, *Elizabeth Costello*, and its bearing on philosophy. (For example, Elizabeth tells the tribunal in "At the Gate" that she does not believe in beliefs, that she has no beliefs, is not allowed to have them as a novelist. What could be farther from the truth? She has plenty of beliefs and she believes in them [whatever that means] ferociously.)

⁹ If we imagine again the Lutheran sense of justification, one prominent form of it concludes with "Here I stand, I can do no other." If we ask, "what would we have to understand to understand that this was a justification?" the answer would have to be something like "understanding Luther himself," something that would require the "inhabitation" I have been discussing.

¹⁰ See the valuable discussion by Cora Diamond, "Having a Rough Story about What Moral Philosophy Is," in her *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 179–204.

in?” Given that it does, what are the implications for other dimensions of such a form of life? For many, this sort of question will not sound philosophical but sociological or social-psychological and will be available as a question only about individual mindedness, what it means to someone. It will be more recognizably philosophical if the question asked is about the very possibility of such a meaning, but this is also a question that cannot “float free” of the historically embodied dimensions of such a practice and the values that animate it, often in complex, collectively self-deceived ways. Otherwise, we will have no chance of understanding what is involved in even referring to “such a practice.” Only a way of thinking animated at the same time by attentiveness to questions like “what values are expressed by the organization of such a practice?” and “how might it be possible to raise and address such a question?” and “just what *is* the practice, both as it is explicitly understood and as it is actually carried out?” can approach such an issue. My suggestion is that this is happening in *Elizabeth Costello*, the book.

There is an image for this sort of possibility in the lessons, especially in “Eros,” but it is mentioned several other places too. The notion of transcendence, attaining a philosophical register of some generality while remaining embodied, fits the image: it is the image of a human coupling or merging or inhabiting a god or goddess, the union of human and divine. (John calls it “the mystery of the divine in the human” [28].) And what that is, is the bearing of literature on life; that is, the possibility that there can be something of general significance, even universality, yet expressed in all its living, contingent, concrete, and even invented particularity.

I raise the issue of the gods this way because it is of such importance to Elizabeth in “Eros” (not to mention her self-description as “the secretary to the infinite,” or John’s of her as “mouth-piece for the divine”), because the issue of inhabiting gods is of such importance to Lord Chandos and Lady Chandos, as if that is the paradigmatic image for what Elizabeth is struggling with throughout, and because it is an old topic and that tradition might help us with the issue. That old question is whether the gods philosophize. According to Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium*, they do not (203e–204a). They are self-sufficient and immortal, so the most important philosophical question—what is the best life?—does not arise for them. For a god, it is a question that answers itself: their life is the best. (There are passages in the *Theaetetus* [151d1–2] and the *Sophist* [216b5–6] where Plato suggests that there are at least some gods who do philosophize, so we may be hearing only one side of the issue from Diotima.) At any rate, what interests Elizabeth is the gods’ obvious *lack* of self-sufficiency. Why else would they so often want to couple with human beings? Why are they so fascinated by them?

She has her answers, expressed and then qualified with some uncertainty.

Love and death. The gods, the immortals, were the inventors of death and corruption, yet with one or two notable exceptions they have lacked the courage to try their invention out on themselves. That is why they are so curious about us, so endlessly inquisitive. In marking us down for death, the gods gave us an edge over them. Of the two, gods and mortals, it is we who live the more urgently, feel the more intensely. (189)

And later:

We think of them as omniscient, these gods, but the truth is, they know very little, and what they know they know only in the most general of ways. No body of learning they can call their

own, no philosophy, properly speaking. . . . They specialize in humankind because of what we have and they lack: they study us because they are envious. (189)

This, by the way, is so reminiscent of the penultimate paragraph of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (§295) that it seems to me another literary "echo," or another inhabitation. In that paragraph, Nietzsche insists that there is a god who philosophizes, Dionysos, that what philosophy amounts to is an attempt to understand human beings, and he concludes with "but you can also see that there are good reasons for supposing that the gods could learn a thing or two from us humans. We humans are—more human."

But we also do not understand ourselves either, and so we remain "endlessly inquisitive" as well. When a line (or her memory of a version of the line) from Keats's late poem "To Autumn" ("Keeping steady her laden head across a bank") crosses Elizabeth's mind, it helps to remind her and us that we do not easily understand such things as what distinguishes a life in which knowledge of mortality plays the right or balanced or proper role from one in which it does not. (Keats's poem is suffused with what such a proper sentiment might be, and so with images of the beauty of autumn, none of which allows discursive translation.)¹¹ One could put all this by saying we are our own "gods" to our own humanity, endlessly fascinated by and inquisitive about ourselves as well as endlessly perplexed. We do not just inhabit our lives, do not just exist, but in Heidegger's phrase, our own being is always at issue for us, and this in a way that is at once irreducibly about my being, *Jemeinigkeit*, and the meaning of being in general, *der Sinn des Sein*. It strains credulity, seems a cheap paradox, to say that what it is to be a human being is not to know what it is to be a human being,¹² but such a paradoxical formulation helps explain why Elizabeth reports, "Strange how, as desire relaxes its grip on her body, she sees more clearly a universe ruled by desire" (191). For that paradoxical formulation about human being just is the state of desire, the state of incompleteness, dissatisfaction. (There is, for example, no idea of the soul in the Platonic dialogues.)

Now if philosophy is composed exclusively of assertoric propositions and arguments in defense of them (about which Elizabeth asks, "What sort of philosophy is this? Throw it out, I say. What good do its piddling distinctions do?" [111]), then such fictional inquisitiveness has nothing much to do with philosophy. But if it is true that we still do not, and never will, finally understand, such things as what counts as betrayal, as loyalty, what makes for a good parent, what it means to live a free life, and so forth, then we will not gain any illumination from asserting definitions and searching for counterexamples. We need to see such concepts and norms alive, in times and places that can give us some concrete intimation of a possible unity among such diversity. There is no method or theory or rule to tell us when such expressions capture the divine in the human, strike us as recognizably general as well as particular, any more than there is a method or theory that can resolve the question of whether we are living well. Something of this enterprise, though—not avoiding such a task and not too narrowly restricting how we might answer it—is part of a possible "justification." It is certainly a major part of Elizabeth's. (It is also an answer of

¹¹ This is, in effect, to argue that there is an irreducibly sensible-affective modality of intelligibility available aesthetically ("thinking with our hearts," in Elizabeth's and Chandos's terms), and while it is not all we need to understand in order to understand ourselves, it is indispensable. This is a Hegelian idea. See my *After the Beautiful*.

¹² The most thoughtful exploration of this claim and both its ontological and its existential dimensions remains Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1927). See esp. §62, 308ff.

sorts to the Chandos couple; we have no choice but to bear what Lady Chandos cannot bear, and we must make do with whatever disclosive power art has, however inadequate.)

This is all not to assign to literature a nonaesthetic task. It is precisely by its being literature that it fulfills such a philosophical task. Responding to her sister Blanche's withering attack on the humanities (only Hellenism, she claims, had a nonreligious vision of the good life, and Hellenism failed), Elizabeth says about secular literature simply, "For my own part, I would say that is enough to teach us about ourselves." And summing up to Blanche, she returns, surprisingly, to the theme of beauty:

The humanities teach us humanity. After the centuries-long Christian night, the humanities give us back our beauty, our human beauty. That is what you forgot to say. That is what the Greeks taught us, Blanche, the right Greeks. Think about it. (151)

The Greeks may have taught us that, and Elizabeth may have learned the lesson (the ceaseless resurrecting return of the frogs of the Dulgannon River is a response to her judges only in its simple beauty), but Elizabeth's reminder is not a resolution. It is, rather, inspired by, directed to, in Elizabeth's language, "tied" to, responsive to the misanthrope Blanche, her sister (whose very name tells us that everything for her is black or white, fallen or divine). It also reminds us that this moral dimension of the beautiful was alive *in the Greek world*. Has the "centuries-long night" really ended? When did that happen? Is it possible that the Greek sense of human beauty (*kalos k'agathos*) is still visible, still "alive" in our world? Is there not an unmistakable and somewhat-sad pathos to this invocation? We need to note that this is not where we end our journey with Elizabeth. We leave the book and her, not with the Dulgannon frogs, but with the words of Lady Chandos, which have not been resolved or even addressed: "Drowning, we write out of our separate fates. Save us." A