

Towards an Ontology of Corporeal Uniqueness

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Pain, exhaustion, illness, infirmity, racism and sexism are all states in which the body loses its daily familiarity. As Derrida argues, not every experience is an experience of meaning, as phenomenology might suggest (Derrida 1981: 30). The stress is not always on the lived immediacy of a centred subject. Experience can also provoke a loss of identity. Such a non-phenomenological account of experience can be found in Michel Foucault's notion of limit-experience, by which he means an experience that tears the subject from itself in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such; it becomes decentred.¹ In *The Absent Body* Drew Leder contends that such experiences encourage Cartesian dualism because they often result in an apparent cleavage of the self and the body (Leder 1990: 87).² In what follows, I take up the challenge to question this Cartesian mode of thinking through a reading of J.M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*, in particular Lessons Three and Four, 'The Lives of Animals' (Coetzee 2004).³ This choice should be understood in the light of the fact that the language of literature is much less rigid than that of philosophy and narrates particular life stories instead of focusing on abstract and universal categories. Moreover, thanks to its open and polysemous language, literature often provides us with models, expressions and life stories that defy received understandings of important human issues. In this case, the novel reveals something crucial about the complexity of bodily life. Elizabeth Costello is a woman who has trouble accepting that she is getting older. In the west, old age is generally perceived in negative terms in part because of the enormous increase of societal and economic costs arising from the ever-increasing ageing populations in many western industrialised societies. Moreover, ageing is seen as a period of sensory, functional, economic and social decline.

¹ For the notion of limit-experience Foucault is indebted to the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, George Bataille and Maurice Blanchot. See Jay (2005: 361–400).

² 'Surfacing in phenomena of illness, dysfunction, or threatened death, the body may emerge as an alien thing, a painful prison in which one is trapped. [...] these experiences of separation from, and opposition to, the body serve as one phenomenological basis for dualist metaphysics'. This position has been contradicted by Stephen Burwood (2008: 263–78).

³ *Elizabeth Costello* is a novel comprising eight chapters or 'Lessons' (lectures delivered by Elizabeth Costello) and a postscript. Six of the Lessons are edited pieces previously published by Coetzee. Two of them (Lessons Three and Four – 'The Lives of Animals') were delivered by Coetzee as part of the Tanner Lectures on Human Values series on 15–16 October, 1997 at Princeton University. These were later published, with responses by Peter Singer, Marjorie Garber, Wendy Doniger and Barbara Smuts, as *The Lives of Animals* by Princeton University in 1999.

Anthropologists like Sharon Kaufmann and Barbara Myerhoff, working in the field of gerontology, have tried to counter this trend by appreciating the complexity of human ageing and by giving voice to the lived experience of older people themselves (Kaufmann 1986; Myerhoff 1992). However, the ageing process often brings corporeality to explicit awareness and this experience also cries out for meaning. Of course, older people may feel estranged from their bodies because of the objectifying gaze of a society which praises young and healthy bodies but that does not mean that there is some deep sense in which they are not their bodies. On the contrary, the gaze of the other makes them aware of their *particular* embodiment as something that they cannot will away and it is this singularity that weighs upon them.⁴ In what follows I give a close reading of Coetzee's novel to show that the vulnerability of the body is not limited to experiences of exposure to violence and death, but has also something to do with this inescapability of our corporeal uniqueness.

In 'The Lives of Animals' Coetzee tells the story of a fictional Australian novelist, Elizabeth Costello, who is invited to give a lecture at Appleton College, an imaginary American university. Costello is haunted by the pervasive indifference to the terrible way in which humans treat animals in practices such as factory farming, a violence that she compares to the horror of the death camps during the Shoah (Coetzee 2004: 62–66). Costello points out that, just as those living in the neighbourhoods of the death camps knew what was happening but chose to ignore it, so otherwise respectable members of society turn a blind eye to industries that bring pain and death to animals. Coetzee's story has generally been understood as a way of confronting – within a fictional frame – the ethical issue of how we should treat animals. Peter Singer, for instance, takes Coetzee's story to be a way of presenting arguments for a kind of radical egalitarianism between human and non-human animals (Singer 1999).⁵ In *Philosophy and Animal Life* Cora Diamond has criticised Singer's position by asserting that the rights discourse somehow distorts and trivialises Elizabeth's experience of bodily exposure by converting it into a philosophical problem about the moral status of animals (Diamond 2008: 48). For her, Costello is not just a device to put forward ideas about animal rights (Diamond 2008: 48). Rather, she has a significance of her own: the wounded animal at the centre of the story is Elizabeth Costello herself. 'If we see in the lectures a wounded woman, one thing that wounds her is precisely the common and taken-for-granted mode of thought that how we should treat animals is an ethical issue, and the knowledge that she will

⁴ Throughout this article, the term 'the other' is not to be understood in the sense of Lévinas' 'the Other'.

⁵ Singer's radical egalitarianism is based upon the notion of sentient beings, beings that can experience pleasure and pain.

be taken to be contributing, or intending to contribute, to discussion of it. But what kind of beings are we for whom this is an issue?' (Diamond 2008: 51).

We are beings who are physically exposed to vulnerability and mortality but who rely on argumentation to deflect the difficulty of what it is to be a living, that is, an embodied animal. Humans are beings who are inclined to mistake the difficulty of philosophy (something which is difficult to substantiate) for the difficulty of reality (something which is resistant to our thinking about it) (Diamond 2008: 45, 57–58). Elizabeth Costello is someone who refuses to speak within the tradition of philosophical argumentation. This is why she does not offer an argument in defence of her vegetarianism and this is also why she is quick to point to the inconsistency of the fact that she wears leather shoes and carries a leather purse. The use of the imagery of the Shoah is part of her aversion for philosophical arguments: she knows that her talk of the Holocaust will offend and not be understood (Diamond 2008: 50). Elizabeth does not want to evade the difficulty of reality but she wants us to see her for what she really is. In this respect it is significant that Costello, at the beginning of her presentation, compares herself with Red Peter, the educated ape of Kafka's tale, *Report to an Academy*, and proclaims: 'I am not a philosopher of mind, but an animal exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes, but touch on in every word I speak' (Coetzee 2004: 70-71).

We should ask ourselves, what exactly is it that wounds this woman? Cora Diamond identifies this wound with the condition of human embodiment; with the physical exposure to vulnerability and mortality (Diamond 2008: 74). For Diamond, Coetzee's lectures ask us to inhabit our own bodies; they invite us to appreciate the difficulty of our bodily lives (Diamond 2008: 59). It is precisely this recognition of our own mortality and vulnerability as shared with other animals which generates our ethical obligations towards them. We are able to extend our moral sensibility to non-human others, not because we think of them as bearers of interests or as rights holders but because we see them as fellow creatures (Wolfe 2008: 15). We imaginatively read into animals a sense of the human: we hear them speak our language, we give them names and so on. For Diamond, the question of the animal clearly requires an alternative conception of ethics to the one that we find in the rights tradition, one in which we do not deflect but receive and even suffer our own exposure to the world.

In his essay, 'Companionable Thinking', Stanley Cavell draws out two key implications from Costello's denoting of herself as a wounded animal (Cavell 2008). He follows Diamond by arguing that Costello's woundedness is identifiable with the condition of human

embodiment. However, for him this woundedness has also something to do with the wound which is present, that is, touched on, in every word she speaks.⁶ To explain what he means, Cavell turns to Ralph Waldo Emerson's 'Self-Reliance'. Every word Emerson hears or speaks is fated to express chagrin because all the words he speaks or hears are 'in essence, to begin with, the words of others, common bread' (Cavell 2008: 115). But, what other words are there? To speak is, in a certain sense, 'to be victimised by what there is to say or to fail to say' (Ibid.). We inherit a language which is always already on the scene before we are and this has profound consequences for what we often too hastily think of as 'our' concepts (Wolfe 2008: 26). Language is never absolutely singular. It is a social phenomenon that needs a certain generality in order to persist in time. Private languages inevitably falter on the edge of silence and the incomprehensible; they are untranslatable and meaningless. In order to make ourselves understood we have to rely on an impersonal language that makes us substitutable. Language is thus unable to house absolute uniqueness. That this can make us feel chagrined is evident from the conversation between Costello and her son John in the novel's first lesson, 'Realism' (Coetzee 2004: 7). Despite her effort not to write like anyone else, Elizabeth has to accept that she is just an example of writing, an instance.

But maybe there is a third kind of woundedness that is also crucial here. The title of the story, *The Lives of Animals*, is significant. Following Cora Diamond, I take the lectures as being concerned with the wounded animal at the centre of the story. Diamond interprets this woundedness as the physical vulnerability that we share with other non-human animals. For her, the central character of the story is a wounded human animal. The question, however, is why Costello needs to conceal this wound under her clothes and why she touches on it in every word she speaks. Cavell follows Diamond's reading but believes that Elizabeth is marked by yet another wound, a linguistic one, one that characterises only human beings. Cavell thus individuates two different kinds of wounds: fleshy wounds and linguistic wounds. However, the problem is that Costello seems to talk about only the one wound. Again, we have to ask ourselves, what is it that wounds this woman? Let us turn to Elizabeth's own words: 'the remark that I feel like Red Peter [...] I did not intend it ironically. It means what it says. I say what I mean. I am an old woman. I do not have the time any longer to say things I do not mean' (Coetzee 2004: 62). She is an animal exhibiting a wound, but exactly what kind of animal is she? What is the primary point of her reference to Red Peter? Let us turn to Kafka's tale in order to answer this question (Kafka 2003).

⁶ For the identification of these two types of vulnerability I am drawing on Wolfe (2008: 25–26).

Red Peter was shot during a hunting expedition on the Gold Coast. He was hit in two different places: below the hip and in his cheek. The first wound was severe and made him limp. The latter one was only slight but left a large red scar which gave him the name of Red Peter. After he was caught, Red Peter was put on a boat and locked up in a cage whose dimensions prevented him standing up or sitting down. He was forced to squat with his knees bent while the cage bars were cutting into his flesh. Unfortunately, Red Peter has little or no memory of his youth and he does not recall what it felt like being an ape. He is unable to give an account of the life he formerly led as an ape, as the academy requested, but has to rely on the evidence of others to tell the story of his capture. He only recalls that he had to fight through the thick of things in order to live. Imitating humans, he submitted himself to language and it was language which gave him an orientation and delimitation in the world of men. Yet this subjection to language has made him also vulnerable to language. Like all human beings, Red Peter bears a paradoxical relation to his name. The tragedy of the name is that 'what' he is called, Red Peter, is indifferent to 'who' he feels he is: 'Red Peter, a horrible name, utterly inappropriate, which only some ape could have thought of, as if the only difference between me and the performance ape Peter, who died not so long ago and had some small local reputation, is the red mark on my cheek' (Kafka 2003). At times, Red Peter is also displaced by the way humans think. He is painfully aware that many people accept the domestication of wild animals while he is haunted by it. This becomes clear when he speaks of the female chimpanzee that waits for him when he comes home late at night from banquets, scientific receptions or social gatherings. He takes comfort from her as apes do but he cannot bear to see her by day because she has the insane look of the bewildered half-broken animal in her eyes. This feeling isolates him and, to a certain extent, Red Peter will always remain an anomaly among human beings, if solely for the unfamiliar figure of his body. In the presence of visitors, Red Peter has a predilection for taking down his trousers to show them the wound in his hip. For him, there is nothing indecent about it and he does not understand why some writers have found a pretext in it to argue that his ape nature is not yet fully under control. But why then does he hide the scar beneath human clothing? In this respect, it may be significant that seeing people is often repugnant for him, not because he has an aversion to human beings *per se* but because they make him feel distant from the sense of his own bodily life.

Red Peter is not an ordinary animal but a wounded animal, not because he was shot – those gunshot wounds healed – but because he stopped being an ape. Like all other animals, apes are instinctively equipped for a specific environment. This means that their instincts give

them a stable structure within which to operate so that they are not overwhelmed by the tensions and the challenges coming from their environment. This is why animals do not need to give meaning to their lives and why they do not really lead a life or have a biography in the sense that human beings have. Animals just live. This also explains why Red Peter does not have any recollection of his life as an ape prior to his capture. Red Peter can no longer rely on his animal instincts because the human smell has contaminated the smell of this native land. As a result, he has to seek for an alternative. It is language that gives him a way out. Still, language turns out to be more precarious than his former animal instincts. There is something that seems to resist language: words cannot help him to deal with the idea of the domestication of wild animals.

Elizabeth Costello is also a wounded animal, not – or at least not solely – because of her physical vulnerability, as Diamond contends, but because animality is no true option for her. This explains why Costello compares herself with Kafka's Red Peter and not with an ordinary animal. Moreover, like Red Peter, Elizabeth is haunted by something that her mind cannot encompass (the way in which we treat animals) and there is nothing that can help her to settle her attitude. Interesting in this respect is that in *The Lives of Animals* Costello not only draws on Kafka's *Report to an Academy* but also on Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (Swift 2010).⁷ In the final episode of his travels, Gulliver reaches the land of the Houyhnhnms, a race of super-rational horses whose refinement contrasts drastically with the life of the Yahoos, naked and deformed human beings over which the Houyhnhnms rule. Gulliver comes to both admire and emulate the cool rationality of the Houyhnhnms, rejecting humans as mere Yahoos endowed with some semblance of reason. One day the Assembly of the Houyhnhnms decides that Gulliver, a Yahoo with some semblance of reason, forms a threat to their civilisation and he is expelled. Gulliver is then rescued, against his will, by a Portuguese ship that brings him back to England.

Like Costello and Red Peter, Gulliver is displaced from his ordinary mode of thinking about the world. All three of them are cut off from their established language games because something has disrupted their pre-given structures of thought. This disruption threatens their identity and their place in the world. What is even more important is that this isolation is felt in their bodies.⁸ Costello is an elderly woman who has problems with her heart and who has difficulty accepting the fact that she is growing older. Red Peter considers himself abnormal

⁷ See especially Part 4.

⁸ Diamond makes a similar observation. See Diamond, (2008: 59).

in the midst of ordinary human beings for the simple reason that he has a furred body and they do not. Gulliver is an anomaly among the Houyhnhnms because his human body turns him into the irregular, the one who does not fit. They all feel disconnected from their bodies because their intentional engagement with the world is disturbed either by a change in the normal functioning of the body – as in the case of Costello – or by a change in the accepted paradigms of embodiment in the social milieu in which one lives – as in the case of Gulliver and Red Peter. In situations of dissociation such as these it is said that one comes to realise that one is not, in some deep sense, identical with one's body. The question is whether such a dualistic reading really captures the true character of these experiences.⁹

Let us explore the situation in which dissociation arises as a result of the fact that one has the wrong kind of body in a given social milieu and is discriminated against because of it. The life stories of Gulliver and Red Peter are exemplary here. They are both treated in such a way that their existence as unique human beings is denied: they are turned into members of a species on the basis of their bodies and are forced to experience themselves through a whole set of negative associations. As long as they are in their familiar environments – respectively among human beings and chimpanzees – Gulliver and Red Peter have little or no occasion to experience this bodily burden. It was only when they are confronted with the appearance of 'the other' – the Houyhnhnms and human beings – that they are somehow turned into mere bodies. Still, the question remains whether these experiences really cause them to think of themselves as essentially separate from their bodies.

Gulliver and Red Peter are hurt because what they are called – a Yahoo or ape – does not correspond to who they feel they are. Still, the pain they feel does not solely come from denigratory speech, because every kind of name-calling disregards to some extent who someone is. In fact, 'the moment we want to say who somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying what he is, we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others' (Arendt 1998: 181), with the result that their specific uniqueness escapes us. Singularity will always exceed what one is called. The proper name Red Peter, for instance, does not designate a unique existent. Red Peter owes his name to his resemblance to the performance ape Peter and to the red scar on his cheek. Likewise, the shock that Gulliver feels when the Houyhnhnms banish him on the grounds that he is a Yahoo gives him the sense that *who* he is does not coincide with what they claim him to be.

⁹ For this reading I am deeply indebted to Burwood (2008: 272).

Gulliver and Red Peter may reject the objectifying gaze of the Houyhnhnms and the humans. They are not forced to recognise themselves in these corporeal descriptions. That does not mean that they can separate themselves from their bodies. On the contrary, their bodies are still the point from which they perceive the world and by which they act in the world and appear to others. Although Gulliver and Red Peter may feel estranged from their bodies because of the objectifying gaze of their ‘antagonists’, it does not follow from this that there is an important sense in which they are not their bodies. On the contrary, the experience of dissociation makes them aware of their particular embodiment as something that they cannot will away.

Dissociation is not always the result of the sudden appearance of the other. Even if one remains among one’s equals, dissociation may arise. Elizabeth Costello feels estranged, not because she is turned into a body by another but because she is growing old. In the normal course of events the body loses sight of itself in favour of the objects of its engagement, that is, it tends to recede from direct experience; it is in a certain sense characterised by absence.¹⁰ In the event of inhibited intentionality the smooth interplay of body and world is disrupted and the body resurfaces in conscious experience. When one grows older, however, one’s appearance and one’s abilities undergo significant alterations. Therefore, greater attention is paid to the body, which is often experienced as an obstinate force interfering with one’s projects (Leder 1990: 84). This is why Costello’s body reveals itself as *unheimlich*:¹¹ it is no longer compliant with her life-world. Far from indicating a separation of self and body, this sense of the uncanny forces her to recognise the inescapability of her particular embodiment. The recognition of her corporeality not only reminds her of her physical exposure to vulnerability and mortality but also, and maybe primarily, of her irreducible singularity insofar as this uniqueness is a feature of her bodily existence. Nobody, in fact, can grow older or die in her place. In this sense, ageing is an almost cruelly private experience. This is why Costello feels lonely. She is imprisoned by her own singularity and she has the feeling of not belonging to the world at all.

¹⁰ For this description of the body I am deeply indebted to Leder’s analysis of the disappearing body, but I draw different conclusions from it.

¹¹ ‘Uncanny’ is a Freudian concept (*Das Unheimliche*, 1919) indicating that something can be familiar and strange at the same time, resulting in an uncomfortable feeling. For this reading I am deeply indebted to Burwood.

The concept of corporeal uniqueness confronts us with the ambiguous meaning of the notion of vulnerability.¹² This has to do with the fact that as embodied beings we are exposed to the wound that the other can inflict and the care that the other can provide (Cavarero 2009:20). Yet, as evidenced by the above example of growing older, the vulnerability of the body has not only a passive but also an active dimension. This means that we are not only vulnerable in our bodies in the sense that our bodies are exposed to others but that we are also vulnerable to our body, that is, exposed to it. Being-this-singular-body, in fact, has no definitive content and this indeterminateness makes us anxious; ‘it wounds us’. The burden of this corporeal uniqueness is a condition that all human beings share as embodied beings. Of course, there are people who are more likely to be confronted with the burden of their corporeal singularity because they have, for example, the ‘wrong’ kind of body in a given social milieu and are discriminated against because of it. Still, a confrontation with corporeal uniqueness can arise independently of the other’s gaze, as happens in the case of pain, exhaustion, illness, pregnancy, infirmity and old age. This means that bodily vulnerability is not necessarily something relational; it can also be something very intimate. In such situations the heightened awareness of our bodies cannot be undone by changing the norms of bodily acceptability. People of colour, for example, will have little or no occasion to experience the bodily burden of their skin colour in an African society. It is only when they are confronted with the gaze of the ‘white other’ that they are somehow turned into a mere body. Things are different in the case of sick people whose illnesses are acted out within themselves. That is not the same as saying that experiences such as illness or ageing take place in a vacuum or that they are free from the objectifying gaze of a young and healthy society. The point that I wish to make is that in these cases the painful body can emerge as a thematic object for the sufferer and become the object of an ongoing interpretative quest, even without the gaze of the other. Of course, the awareness of one’s body is a profoundly social thing but corporeal awareness does not come to be *solely* through the social confrontation (Leder 1990: 92–93). Moreover, even if the apprehension of the body is provoked by the gaze of the other, this gaze confronts elderly people with their *particular* embodiment as something that they cannot will away and it is this singularity that weighs upon them.

¹² For the notion of corporeal vulnerability I am partially drawing on the work of Adriana Cavarero (Cavarero 2009) and Judith Butler (Butler 2004). By linking the concept of vulnerability with the notion of corporeal uniqueness, my perspective is more in line with Cavarero than with Butler, who uses the notion of bodily vulnerability to describe our *physical* dependency upon others. Yet, unlike Cavarero I understand this vulnerability not, or at least not primarily, in terms of exposure to the other.

If we understand Coetzee's 'The Lives of Animals' in relation to our own lives, then what can we deduce from all of this? Our bodies are intimately attached to us, they have something to do with who we are and this explains why we cannot will them away. The body singularises us, it renders us unique and irreplaceable. This singularity is characterised by the exposure of being this and not another singular body and has no other content other than the irreducibility of this exposure, with the result that we never truly know who we are. Singularity is thus not something that we can grasp or possess but rather is something that possesses us. Although the notion of singularity is often bound up with existential romanticism and with a claim of authenticity, there seems to be no interior or inviolable core to it. Limit-experiences such as growing older expose us to a direct confrontation with our bodily uniqueness. This threat places upon us the existential demand to reintegrate our bodies into a system of meaning where it becomes intelligible again. When I argue that the human body is uniquely vulnerable, I am not making an essentialist claim. On the contrary, the ontology of corporeal vulnerability is an emptied ontology which does not focus on the 'what' of identity, but on corporeal uniqueness.¹³ Such an ontology severely challenges dualistic modes of thinking and places before us another kind of vulnerability which I will call 'symbolic vulnerability'. For reasons of space I am unable to develop this argument any further. Let us conclude by returning to where we started: 'I am an animal exhibiting a wound which I cover up under my clothes, but touch on in every word I speak' (Coetzee 2004: 71). In the light of what has just been said about corporeal uniqueness, we can thus interpret Costello's assertion as follows: she is an ageing woman who is left alone with the burden of her corporeal singularity because she is unable to put this experience into words.

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Further Reading

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