

J. M. Coetzee's Novels of Thinking

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One might almost say, her body thought.

—Donne

IDEAS DON'T COME NATURALLY to the English novel. While dramatists such as George Bernard Shaw and Tom Stoppard have variously thrilled and bored audiences with long dialogues and disquisitions about first things, novelists have tended to leave the philosophical heavy lifting to their Russian or German counterparts, admiring Fyodor Dostoyevsky or Robert Musil from a safe distance. Even the theological reveries of James Joyce or D. H. Lawrence's ideas about sexual drives amounted to no more than occasional flights of theoretical fancy. Only in America, where things have always been a little out of control, could Herman Melville load his novels with theories on whaling, Thomas Pynchon hold forth on the latest advances in communication studies, and Richard Powers expound on the marvels of science. The person whom we have to thank for this suspicion of ideas is strangely enough the American émigré Henry James, about whom his fellow émigré T. S. Eliot recognized that he had "a mind so fine that no idea could violate it." Most English novelists have taken Eliot's quip as a compliment and have tried to live by it. Ideas have been relegated to genre fiction, such as the political allegories of Aldous Huxley, the speculations to be found in H. G. Wells's science fiction, or the theological effusions of Iris Murdoch.

Recently the novel of ideas has received a new advocate in J. M. Coetzee, who has come forward, quite unapologetically, with two novels that can barely contain the ideas presented with such relentless determination by their protagonists: *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2008). In contrast to continental novels of ideas, which revel in intellectual debate among protagonists, *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year* are characterized by the

near absence of this type of philosophical dialogue. *Diary of a Bad Year* opens with an essay on the origins of the state, which is followed by a whole series of similar minitreatises, or rants, on topics ranging from Guantánamo Bay and pedophilia to intelligent design and post-modern relativism. Their style is argumentative and impatient, presenting hard-hitting polemics on current affairs that one might expect to find in op-eds written by a reclusive crank. This impression is reinforced when we learn that the writer J. C., born in South Africa and now living in Australia, has been asked to write on whatever topic he chooses for a collection of essays in German under the title "Strong Opinions." This then is the shrill stuff we have been reading, the opinions of a headstrong writer with a license to hold forth. It is the old dream of the writer as intellectual, the assumption that the litterateur has something to say that the experts don't know. Zola's "*J'accuse*," the established novelist's indictment of the French political system, stands behind J. C.'s attack on George W. Bush, John W. Howard, and the war on terror. In contrast to Zola, however, J. C., who resembles Coetzee without being identical to him (different birth date, no Nobel Prize), is not some kind of political hero, but a disillusioned, aging writer, and no one is going to take much note of his opinions. Even so, the protagonist of *Diary* believes in ideas, defines himself through ideas, and is eager to publish them.

Diary offers the strong and strongly formulated opinions of the protagonist, even though we don't know why and how he arrived at them; we have only the finished opinions themselves. But Coetzee does not leave it at that. Every page is divided into separate sections demarcated by horizontal lines, first one, then two, and each is the province of a different perspective, a different voice, and a different character. The top of the page is reserved for the strong opinions themselves; it is here that they find their exclusive home. The other two parts tell the story of J. C.'s obsession with a much younger female neighbor, whom he hires as his secretary to transcribe his recorded essays into typescript; the middle track gives us his perspective and the bottom one, hers. The secretary does not remain a

passive medium for long. More and more, she comments on and criticizes J. C.'s opinions, which she deems hopelessly removed from life, detached from any reality she can recognize. The novel is devoted to tracking the influence of the secretary on J. C.'s thinking. This interaction is shaped not so much by the force of her critique, or by his argumentative skill, as by the feelings arising between the two persons, his "metaphysical" yearning for her and her growing affection for him. As the novel goes on, we see the strong opinions change, until J. C. leaves his theories of the state, sovereignty, and politics behind and begins a second series, entitled "soft opinions," that abandons abstract ideas for concrete observations attuned to the world around him. *Diary of a Bad Year* starts out as a novel of ideas, a novel that gives ideas their own separate space, but by the end it turns out to be a novel that examines the process of thinking instead. Thinking here is not a purely cerebral activity but entangled with emotions, instincts, and passions.

Elizabeth Costello also presents ideas—strong opinions—but does so in the form of lectures given by the eponymous Australian writer in different parts of the world. Less wide-ranging than J. C.'s, Elizabeth Costello's opinions are nonetheless just as strong, revolving for the most part around animals (a topic also covered by J. C.). The most provocative idea put forth by Costello is that the systematized, industrial mass slaughter of animals is comparable to the Holocaust insofar as our equanimity in the face of this horror is comparable to the willed ignorance of those living unperturbed near the concentration camps.

Despite the strong opinions voiced by his protagonist, Coetzee has been cagey about being drawn into direct exchanges or arguments. Before *Elizabeth Costello* was published, Coetzee gave Costello's two lectures on animals as the Tanner Lectures at Princeton. Rather than present arguments about animals in his own voice, Coetzee availed himself of a persona, and thereby refused to take responsibility for the ideas put forth, such as the comparison to the Holocaust. The respondents to the lecture were understandably

surprised by this strategy. Peter Singer gamely tried to play along by responding in kind, embedding his response in an awkwardly presented scene at a family breakfast.

As in *Diary of a Bad Year*, however, Coetzee does not simply drop lectures, however fictionalized, into the middle of a novel. *Elizabeth Costello* leads us behind the scenes, showing us the travails of conference travel, radio interviews, lectures, and award dinners. Costello's lectures are located in various scenes. When she delivers her theory of animal slaughter at an American college, a Jewish professor objects to the Holocaust comparison and refuses to attend a dinner held in her honor. Another set of objections is voiced by Costello's daughter-in-law (her son happens to be teaching at the college where she is giving her lecture), a philosophy PhD who finds Costello's reasoning logically flawed. The novel thus gives us counterarguments, but it does not stage a debate about ideas: Costello refuses to answer questions after her lecture, professing "impatience" with intellectual dialogue. Her ideas are there, already formed; she strongly believes in them and is not interested in changing them; all she does is put them out there, whether we like them or not. Personal tensions between Costello and her hosts, and of course long-harbored resentments among family members, are ways of embedding the lectures in a world fully rendered by the novel. The narrator calls attention to small, bodily details, signs of aging, and the thinly concealed passions that make up these characters' relations with one another. An early lecture discusses this tension between idea and scenically grounded character as the principal challenge of realism:

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.

Surely, *Elizabeth Costello*, like *Diary of a Bad Year*, is an exercise in realism understood in this way: it embodies ideas in characters and invents situations—lectures given at American universities, books commissioned by German publishers—to occasion their emergence in fiction. The two novels present ideas, and then in a second step show that those ideas have no autonomy; they are novels in which the work of grounding otherwise free-floating ideas is the primary drama we are invited to observe. And yet, both novels are more than simply instances of this type of realism; they are novels that address realism head-on, novels about realism that revolve around “the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence.” One might call them novels of thinking.

In *Elizabeth Costello*, the question of who has ideas, of who is capable of thinking, is also part of the argument about animals. Philosophers, Costello argues, have long claimed that only humans are capable of thinking, excluding others, especially animals, from the domain of thought. While philosophy can deliver only the most restrictive notion of thinking, literature can provide us with a much richer, more nuanced, and more flexible understanding of it, to the point of giving us an inkling of the thought processes of animals. This is, in any case, Costello’s claim, and she puts this claim into practice by providing us with the (hypothetical) thoughts of an ape caught in an intelligence test.

Sultan knows: Now one is supposed to think. That is what the bananas up there are about. The bananas are there to make one think, to spur one to the limits of one’s thinking. But what must one think? One thinks: Why is he starving me? One thinks: What have I done? Why has he stopped liking me? . . . At every turn Sultan is driven to think the less interesting thought.

Like the philosopher, the scientist claims ownership over ideas. The narrowly defined intelligence test, which is only interested in the use of tools, degrades the animal, underestimates the rich complex of thinking and feeling since it is geared only toward a utilitarian mode

of thinking; what one is supposed to think is always less interesting than what one could think. There is no pretense here that Costello actually gains access to the innermost thoughts of the ape through her sympathetic, literary imagination. She is mindful of the objection Wittgenstein would make, that if lions could talk we would not understand them. The passage is designed to show us the limitations of intelligence tests and to suggest a richer world of thought beyond it. Costello wants us to believe that thinking is a kind of creative imagining, something that allows us to leap outside of ourselves. Her claim is mirrored in Coetzee's novel: instead of philosophy, it practices the kind of literature that promotes imaginative, emotive thinking. Philosophy, the discipline of ideas, loses, and the novel of thinking wins.

With *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year* Coetzee turned the project of a novel of thinking into an explicit, thematic undertaking. The expression of ideas, the grounding of them in characters, and finally the process by which they arrive at them, form part of these novels' dramatic action. Their overt treatment of thinking allows us to use them as a lens through which to look back at Coetzee's earlier works, which seem, at first sight, to be devoid of this kind of intellectual interest in ideas and their relation to the novel. And yet, once we recognize the move (within these most recent novels) from ideas to thinking, we can see this theme running throughout Coetzee's entire oeuvre, a continuing project on the topic of thought.

This perspective also explains the significance of Dostoyevsky, whose own novel of ideas Coetzee took on in *The Master of Petersburg* (1994). Much more dialogic than the two more recent novels, *The Master of Petersburg* is driven by conversations between Dostoyevsky, the principal character, and his two intellectual antagonists, a police inspector and the anarchist Nechaev, about the state, god, and the legitimacy of anarchic violence, and the novel ends, appropriately enough, with Dostoyevsky composing a passage from *The Possessed*. Here, Coetzee creates a universe in which ideas are hotly debated and where a convincing argument can lead to

collaboration, murder, or arrest. At the same time, *The Master of Petersburg* undertakes an orderly retreat from such a dialogic (and Dostoyevskian) treatment of ideas: the character Dostoyevsky is never much affected by these intellectual conversations; he plays a largely passive role; the springs of his actions lie elsewhere, in the mourning for his dead stepson, whom he has come to Petersburg to recover, his love for the stepson's landlady, and his profession as writer. The dialogic novel of ideas à la Dostoyevsky is thus kept at one remove: it forms the material on which Coetzee draws, the literary landscape his characters inhabit, but it is not the kind of novel he himself sets out to write.

Coetzee's two best-known novels, *Disgrace* (1999) and *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), approach thinking and ideas by grounding them more fully in action, indeed by slowly submerging thinking in doing. They both begin with intellectual control and leave us with a mess of instincts: they are novels of thinking premised on the undoing of ideas. *Disgrace* starts out as a campus novel, featuring a professor of literature, David Lurie, who is confident in his intellectual powers and dismissive of the communications classes he is forced to teach. At the outset of the novel, he has an affair with a student and is subsequently forced to leave his post in disgrace, seeking refuge with his daughter, who ekes out a living by farming a plot of land. Lurie gradually loses control over his life, both physically and intellectually, as he moves from an arrogant dismissal of his interlocutors to a humbler attitude that allows him to live with persons he would once have deemed beneath him. More important, the novel gradually moves away from the protagonist's distanced cognition and toward an embrace of barely premeditated actions. Finding no atonement through dialogue and prepared speeches (a visit to the student's parents turns into a disaster), he does find some kind of atonement in actions when he devotes all his remaining energies to an animal shelter and to the task of providing animals with a dignified death—a task he dismisses intellectually at the beginning, but embraces instinctively by the end. Once more, animals are the limit case of Coetzee's approach to thinking. But unlike Elizabeth Costello, who

provides some kind of rationale for animal rights, David Lurie is drawn to this work almost against his intellectual understanding, and we get no rationalization for his actions. Instead the novel leaves the protagonist with a knot of half-realized feelings, dim instincts, and spontaneous actions through which he gropes his way toward the atonement that otherwise escapes him. Thinking, if it still exists, becomes a matter of action.

Humiliation of intellectual prowess—the undoing of intellectual mastery and the move from cognition to action—also stands at the center of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The Magistrate of an outpost of an unnamed empire loses control over his dominion when an expedition force arrives to make war on the barbarians. The Magistrate believes that the threat of the barbarians is exaggerated and refuses to play along. (The title of the novel is borrowed from a poem by the Greek poet C. P. Cavafy, which describes how empires imagine and then call into being an external threat, the barbarians, in order to justify their own existence and extension.) But the Magistrate is not a political hero; his acts of resistance are much more haphazard and ineffective, revolving around a barbarian girl who has been tortured. He takes her in and later seeks to return her to the barbarians, embarking on a poorly planned expedition that seals his fall from power. As he loses power and has to endure hardship and torture himself, the Magistrate becomes a passive, reactive creature driven by a sense of right that now goes unarticulated, hidden from view, which we can surmise only through his enigmatic actions. Like Lurie in *Disgrace*, the Magistrate has come to the end of argument and is reduced to undoing the damage done by him and by his empire by doggedly pursuing a course of action he himself cannot explain.

Within Coetzee's oeuvre, *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) is the most unlikely and also the most extraordinary variation on the novel of thinking, featuring a protagonist who seems barely capable of thought. From the beginning, here, there is no question of strong opinions, lectures, ideas, intellectual control, or hubris. Michael K has trouble speaking, and not only because of his cleft lip. He is

incapable of even the simplest verbal exchanges, cannot answer simple questions, gets entangled in odd constructions, and cannot focus on the topic of conversation at hand. Indeed, the sum of his awkward utterances would amount to little more than half a page. We could not be further from a novel of ideas: this protagonist lacks the basic requirement for communicating ideas.

But while Michael K is incapable of sustained dialogue, the novel's free indirect discourse provides elaborate and gripping renderings of his meandering thoughts. While *Disgrace* and *Waiting* modulate thinking into instinctive actions, this is precisely not what happens in *Life & Times*, which by contrast aims at an unusual fusion of thinking and action, an extended meditation on the relation between body and thought. Michael K's thoughts are accompanied by the steady decline of his body. As Michael K wanders through war-torn South Africa from Cape Town to Stellenbosch and beyond, he is thrown into prisons and confined to hospitals and work camps, but he always manages to escape, almost miraculously, into the countryside, where he pursues his dream of "living off the land." This goal is the only idea he formulates (other than his failed attempt to bury his mother, who has died in the early part of the journey); it is the only articulation of an ambition that gives this novel, and K's mind, a trajectory. Intermittently, Michael K puts this ambition into practice and manages to grow a few pumpkins. For the most part, however, he lives as a hunter and gatherer before he is picked up by the police once more. Living off the land turns out to be less an idea than an *idée fixe*, one that can never really be put into practice anyway.

Instead of fulfilling his dream of self-sustaining farming, Michael K begins a long process of starvation. He refuses to take in more and more types of food; he gets thinner and thinner, approaching a state of being almost without a body, a state that Beckett, to whom Coetzee devoted several essays, might call lessness. However, the lesser his body gets the more thoughts run through his head—memories of the past, but also arguments about his present state, his desire to stay out of the camps and to roam freely. "Perhaps the truth is that it is enough to be out of the camps. . . . How many people are

there left who are neither locked up nor standing guard at the gate?" He remembers and examines his life. Increasingly Michael K is hallucinating, but he is hallucinating with clarity, generating images and arguments seemingly detached from his body; it turns out that Michael K is thinking. Paragraph after paragraph starts with the words "He thought." K's starving body is not forgotten, but becomes strangely drawn into the process. Toward the very end, the narrator reports that Michael K "lay on the sand listening to the ringing mount in his ears, the sound of the blood running in his veins or the thoughts running through his head, he did not know which." The blood and the thoughts have become indistinguishable.

The entanglement of blood and thoughts takes on a new form in the final paragraph of the novel, an extended hallucination in which Michael K imagines going off with an old man into the countryside. If the old man asked about water, the scenario, and with it the novel, concludes:

he, Michael K, would produce a teaspoon from his pocket, a teaspoon and a long roll of string. He would clear the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live.

The scene is phrased in the subjunctive, in the mode of "as if," and through this mode we seem to have left Michael K's deathbed and find ourselves in a world of pure imagining. Every detail, from the roll of string to the rubble at the mouth of the shaft, constitutes Michael K's swan song to life. Even this final aria, however, is not entirely detached from his body. The last paragraph begins in the conditional mode, "And if the old man climbed out of the cart and stretched himself," but then Coetzee interrupts the scene with a parenthesis, "(things were gathering pace now)." This interruption grounds the hallucination once more in the tempo of Michael K's

blood or of his thoughts, it is impossible to say which. Thoughts and blood, they are still running through his head with increasing speed, moving toward a climax. This climax, with the search for life-giving water, concerns the possibility of life; the last words of the novel are "one can live." At the same time, this might be the moment when Michael K actually dies. We are in a hypothetical mode, after all, which leaves us in doubt about Michael K's actual state. If one were to characterize Michael K at the end of this novel, one would have to say that his life is no longer actual, but hypothetical. This hypothetical state, the state of "as if," is also the state of the novel as an art form.

There is a predecessor for Coetzee's interest in thinking and its relation to the novel: Plato. As Nietzsche knew, Plato invented the prototype of the novel by mixing the various genres of Greek literature into an unprecedented hodgepodge, a prose genre combining high tragedy with low comedy. This new genre, however, was oriented toward philosophy and ideas. If we accept that the novel was Plato's creation, we should also accept its consequence, namely that it is the genre uniquely devoted to the process of thinking, of making arguments, of debating and presenting and embodying ideas. Two versions of the novel of ideas emerge from Plato. One relies on a single character, Socrates, to present ready-made ideas. Coetzee does this to some extent with J. C. and Elizabeth Costello. There is a more inclusive interpretation of the Socratic dialogues and the Platonic novel of ideas, however, one that is interested in the process of thinking itself. The great theme of Plato's dialogues is the relation between ideas and the body. Plato has often been misunderstood as harboring a simple hatred of the body, advocating the liberation of the soul from it. In truth, he was interested in the seam between thinking and living. At the end of the *Phaedo*, Socrates presents us with a report on his blood running through his veins, the pulsing blood that delivers the poison to his body, thus leaving us not so much with his theories of the immortality of the soul but of his circulation at the moment of death.

Coetzee's entire oeuvre is a new approach to Plato's novel of ideas—minus the dialogue. As in Plato, ideas are sometimes presented as ready-made, but they are also embodied, placed in dramatic scenes and feeling characters who tend to lose control over them sooner or later. What interests Coetzee, as it did Plato, is the generation of thought itself, the situation out of which thinking, both ubiquitous and precious, arises. If *Diary of a Bad Year*, with its theory of the state, is Coetzee's *Republic*, *Life & Times of Michael K* is his *Phaedo*, where thinking happens most intensely at the point of dying.

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