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Metaphor as contagion: Notes on the postscript of JM Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello

Abstract

This paper engages with the postscript of JM Coetzee's 2003 novel Elizabeth Costello with the intention of introducing the concept that Coetzee's late works act as 'postscripts' to his previous body of writing. It proposes that every act of writing, as particularly demonstrated in the suspended poetics of metaphor and analogy, is an act of sacrifice, as evinced by Lady Chandos in Coetzee's Postscript: 'Always it is not what I say, but something else!' (Coetzee 2003: 228). The paper observes the deficiency of language, the writer's attempt nonetheless, and the inevitable resultant ruptures in text and self. The article pursues these ideas through both critical and creative writing.

Keywords: Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, metaphor, postscript, Lord Chandos

Any banal sentence attests to the despair that exists in the depths of language.

– Maurice Blanchot

2003

Elizabeth was in the middle of reading a new book by JM Coetzee. She thought of this author as John Maxwell Coetzee, South African writer now living part-time in her home town of Adelaide, double-Booker Prize winner, Nobel-prize winner, semi-recluse, author of *Disgrace*. This was the sum of her knowledge of the author. She had read *Disgrace* the year before, immediately after reading Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, and so her impression of the book was one of a distinctly un-American, slightly wan, slow-moving, firmly structured novel involving academia, violence and dogs. She had read the last half of *Disgrace* while in bed doubled over with menstrual pain and nausea in a kind of sleepless empty-stomached dream. Her memory of the scenes in the veterinary clinic and the dog dumping-ground were, therefore, particularly pungent in her mind, mouth and throat. *Those dogs*, she thought whenever the book came to mind, *those burning redemptive dogs*.

The book she was reading now had caught her eye in the new release section of a bookstore. Normally she didn't buy new hardcover books unless it was a particularly favourite author or special occasion, and the first thing she looked at when she picked up this one was the price sticker on the back. The book cost \$32.95. It seemed expensive for such a slim volume. Elizabeth did some calculations in her head, a series of subtractions from the hundred dollars a week she received from study allowance. She then remembered she would be

receiving an extra sixty dollars the next day for some past tutoring work.

She began reading the back cover of the book which listed complimentary quotes from newspapers like the *Guardian*, the *Observer* and the *Sunday Telegraph*. Michelle de Kretser had written in the *Weekend Australian*, 'Coetzee is the vivisectionist of the human condition.' Elizabeth began to think that she would definitely buy this book. Her eyes drifted to the top of the page where it said 'Praise for *Disgrace*'. *Damn*, she thought, *why do they always do that?* She then realised that because the book was brand new, there was probably no praise for it yet.

She opened the front cover of the book and read the blurb on the inside dust-jacket. The last line read, 'JM Coetzee's latest work of fiction offers us a profound and delicate vision of literary celebrity, artistry and the private life of the mind.' *An academic book*, thought Elizabeth, *Perhaps a book about Coetzee himself*. There were two more things to look at. The contents page interested her greatly. The chapters were called 'Lessons'; there were eight lessons followed by a postscript. The lessons had titles like 'Realism', 'The Problem of Evil', and 'The Humanities in Africa'. *A moral book*, Elizabeth thought, *A postmodern self-consciously literary book*. She turned to the first page and read '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. It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge.'

Elizabeth was captivated. She bought the book and tried to convince herself it was because of the book's author, its intriguing blurb, its unique contents page, its exquisite first line, and not because she shared her name with the title and central character of the book, *Elizabeth Costello*.

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The Postscript of *Elizabeth Costello*, the far bank as it were, is a letter written by yet another Elizabeth, this time Lady Elizabeth Chandos, wife of Lord Philip Chandos. Lord Chandos was the author of a fictional letter addressed to Francis Bacon and dated 1603. The letter was actually written by Hugo von Hofmannsthal and originally published in German in 1902. Coetzee's Lady Chandos letter is also addressed to Francis Bacon and is written as a result of her husband's letter having 'come under my sight' (Coetzee 2003: 227).

The original Lord Chandos letter is, by way of introduction, 'an apology to his friend for his total renunciation of literary activity' (Von Hofmannsthal 1986: 11). Lord Chandos has found himself in the unenviable situation of having 'utterly lost [his] ability to think or speak coherently about anything at all' (1986: 19). He describes this situation in two ways, the first being his increasing sense of helplessness, isolation and silence in the face of language, the second his fervent search for revelation in the form of a higher or other language. The former situation is illustrated by a series of losses; departures from Chandos's former 'delirious days' when he wrote prolifically and joyously, 'creating poetry and truth together, a play of eternal forces, a thing as glorious as music or algebra' (15). In those days Chandos could discern no difference between the intellectual and the physical, finding them no more contradictory than 'the life of Court and that of animals, than art and non-art, or than solitude and society' (17). In short Chandos felt a vast unity in all creation and himself at the centre. There was no difference, is the inference, between the natural world and the written world, between milk and the metaphor of milk (17).

Gradually, however, Chandos finds that the words he once used to talk about abstract concepts begin to turn 'to dust in my mouth like decaying mushrooms' (Von Hofmannsthal 1986: 19). On the verge of berating his little daughter for lying, he finds himself rendered speechless as the concepts of truth-telling and integrity begin to blur in front of his eyes until he can no longer see or reach them at all. He describes the situation as a succession of breakages and ruptures: 'Everything fell into fragments for me, the fragments into further fragments, until it seemed impossible to contain anything at all within a single concept' (21). He also uses the image of magnification to express the way in which concepts became enlarged to the point of being invisible: 'Just as I once saw a bit of skin of my little finger in a magnifying glass, and found it to resemble a huge field full of ridges and hollows, so it was for me now' (21). Where previously he felt the world and its mysteries to be a 'single sublime allegory' (18) Chandos now feels the world breaking apart under him, slipping, becoming monstrous, always beyond reach. He cannot even think about the world let alone write or speak about it.

The second and more positive way in which Chandos describes his situation is to speak about a new revelation that seems to come to him miraculously at unpredictable moments and to be caused by seemingly indiscriminate sights or objects. He is at a loss to describe the feeling, writing, 'There is something ineffable, you see, something one could probably never define, that makes itself known to me at such times, filling like a vessel some arbitrary feature of my everyday surroundings with a prodigal surge of more exalted life'. He lists some such objects or vessels as: 'A watering-can, a harrow left standing in a field, a dog in the sun, a rundown churchyard, a cripple, a small farmhouse' (23). As Chandos continues to expound on these moments of intensity, it becomes clear that they are providing him with a return to his former condition of oneness with the world. He writes:

It strikes me then that everything, everything in this world, everything I can remember, everything that my most wayward thoughts might touch upon, is something after all... I have the feeling that my body is made up of nothing but ciphers, and that all things are therefore accessible to me ... that we all might enter into a new communication with the whole of existence if we only began to think with our hearts. (Von Hofmannsthal 1986:27)

Chandos's new revelations and his old delirious feeling differ in two main ways. Firstly, where his previous sense of unity with the world was a constant presence in his life – informing his writing, his interaction with others, his movements, his senses – these new revelations are vexingly transitory and rare. Chandos finds himself actively searching 'for that one object lying or leaning there unnoticed by anyone else, that one object whose unprepossessing form, whose simple, mute existence, can become the source of that puzzling, nameless, but unbounded delight' (29). In other words, formerly his life was full, composed of a vast interconnectedness between nature and culture, between objects and subjects; now, however, his life is an 'almost unimaginable emptiness' (28) with the revelations as extraordinary points spacing out the ordinary blankness.

The other major difference between Chandos's previous and present ecstasies is that rather than compelling or *sourcing* his writing, his new experiences of the revelatory completely silence him:

Once the strange enchantment leaves me, I find I am left with nothing to say about it; I could no more relate in reasonable

terms what it is that constitutes this harmony that weaves through me and the whole of the world ... than I could detail the inner workings of my intestines or the coursing of my blood. (Von Hofmannsthal 1986:27-8)

His chosen metaphor is interesting here, implying that should he have special knowledge or know a special language of his experience, he would be able to speak about it. Or, in fact, if he were *someone else*, a *doctor*, in this case, then the mysteries of the revelation would be clear to him. At the end of his letter, Chandos returns to this point in the passage which Coetzee has quoted for his Postscript:

The language in which it might have been given me to write, and even to do my thinking, is neither Latin nor English, nor Italian, nor Spanish, but one of which I know not a single word, one used by the dumbest of things in speaking with me, and one in which, perhaps, I will someday be called to account for myself from my grave before an unknown judge. (Von Hofmannsthal 1986:32)

It is perhaps understood that the condition for this specialised language is death – surely death would close the paradox of a dumb language, an unknown judge, by bringing to life the words that synchronize with Chandos's revelation. Or, even more accurately, rather than pushing time forward to death, Chandos means to revert to a place prior to false and gratuitous language. Italo Calvino, an author whose books are also often preoccupied with the non-place before language writes in his story, 'A Sign in Space':

In my nostalgia, the first sign ... remained beyond attacks of time and its changes, the sign created before the beginning of forms, which was to contain something that would have survived all forms, namely the fact of being a sign and nothing else. (Calvino 1968: 37)

In this case, then, the specialised language belongs to those who have never known the present world, as it is now covered with 'a general thickness of signs superimposed and coagulated ... the universe scrawled over on all sides... There was no longer any way to establish a point of reference' (Calvino 1968: 39). For sentient humans, an impossible dimension.

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Elizabeth felt she was going mad. Could it all be simply a coincidence? The Lord Chandos letter was dated, 'This 22nd of August', the date of her own birthday. Coetzee's Lady Chandos letter was dated 'This 11 September', a date, of course, with spectacular significance since 2001, but with a particular significance to her the day she read it in 2003. The night before, after finishing the final Lesson of the book and deciding to leave the Postscript until morning, Elizabeth had had a dream. It was an apocalyptic terrifying dream from which she had woken breathless, crystal-clear images still playing in the centre of her memory. The images did not fade all day. The images were of New York City and herself at the top of a high rise building, caught in a tremendous cyclone.

And then she had read the Postscript. 'This 11 September, AD 1603'. A chill had run down her spine. It was the sixteenth of March that day.

She had shut the book quickly and gazed at the front cover: the Venus de Milo, framed with only the torso in view, rising from amongst the sea of a blurred

modern crowd with one man's triple-imaged face looking upwards at the unseen head, his own expression caught in bewilderment and scorn.

Normally, when she told her dreams to her boyfriend, they were flat and boring; stupid, even to herself. This morning, he listened, captive. She surprised herself with the passion with which she told it. *I'll write it down*, she thought. But when she did, over a period of weeks, it lost its way. It thudded from her like a dropped sack.

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The Venus de Milo originally had arms, as everyone knows in the backs of their minds. One of Aphrodite's arms rested on a *herma*, or stone pillar, beside her, the other, it is debated, held an apple. However, the statue as it is now, standing in the Louvre museum in Paris, is, as it were, locked in stone in the collective imagination as an armless goddess. Although at the time of its finding in 1820 attempts were made to design new arms for the statue, King Louis XVIII later decreed that the natural beauty of the incomplete image should not be disturbed. In Coetzee's 2005 novel *Slow Man*, amputee Paul Rayment identifies in the statue a difference between art and humanity:

If it were discovered tomorrow that the Venus was in fact modelled on an amputee, she would be removed at once to a basement store. Why? Why can the fragmentary image of a woman be admired but not the image of a fragmentary woman? (Coetzee 2005: 59)

The double-affliction of the Venus mirrors the double-affliction of Lord Chandos, and in turn the coupled torment of Lord and Lady Chandos. Perhaps it is a stretch of analogy, but a connection could be made between this statue and Coetzee's ideas about writing which he presents in his Postscript and elsewhere in *Elizabeth Costello*; ideas which, I would argue, have actually carried through each of his novels so far. The written, sitting locked in its even black lines, gives the impression of belonging, of being primary; if one explores, however, into the region of its making, the situation, the hand, the pen of its origin, we might perhaps glimpse the shadow limbs, the amputated gestures that exist between the lines.

Coetzee's Lady Chandos letter, when read quickly, gives the impression of a desperate breathless back-and-forth motion, an anxiety and intense uneasiness. Again and again she begins to try and describe her feelings about the situation she and her husband are in, and again and again she negates her attempted descriptions as *contagions*:

Into me, soul and body, [my husband] presses what are no longer words but flaming swords. We are not meant to live thus, Sir. *Flaming swords* I say my Philip presses into me, swords that are not words; but they are neither flaming swords nor are they words. It is like a contagion, saying one thing always for another (*like a contagion*, I say)... *Always it is not what I say but something else*. (Coetzee 2003: 228. Original italics)

On one level, it could be supposed that Hofmannsthal and Coetzee are attempting a clever irony in that although both Lord and Lady Chandos confess to a deep struggle with language, their respective letters are eloquent, finely-crafted, and stand solidly as statuesque testament to their obvious ability to describe and express. It is the kind of comedy or writerly half-lie that Maurice Blanchot speaks of at the beginning of 'From Dread to Language': '[The

writer] speaks the language of men at the moment when there is no longer, for him, either language or man' (Blanchot 1999: 343). This irony, however, is self-aware, and whatever cleverness or humour such an oxymoronic joke could contain is overridden by the serious distress of the couple's pleas to Bacon. 'Save me, dear Sir, save my husband! Write!' Lady Chandos writes, and later, 'Drowning, we write out of our separate fates. Save us' (Coetzee 2003: 229, 230). Lady Chandos is not only asking for salvation from the first aspect of their affliction, the fragmenting of language, 'where words give way beneath your feet like rotting boards (*like rotting boards* I say again, I cannot help myself...)' (Coetzee 2003: 228). She is also asking for salvation from the second, from the revelatory: '*We are not made for revelation*, I want to cry out, *nor I nor you, my Philip*, revelation that sears the eye like staring into the sun'. It is only for 'extreme souls' to live thus, she writes, and only in a time 'when giants or perhaps angels stride the earth' (Coetzee 2003: 228-9).

What Lord and Lady Chandos are describing, it seems, are the two extremes of the same unbearable silence. On the one hand, language is 'decaying' and 'rotting' on their tongues and beneath their feet when they try to speak of everyday concepts. On the other hand they are experiencing '*presences of the infinite*' (Coetzee 2003: 230), extraordinary and rare moments for which there is no language available at all. In his essay 'Literature and the Right to Death', Blanchot speaks of two similar extremes, describing them as *slopes*. The first is meaningful prose, its goal being to 'express things in a language that designates things according to what they mean' (Blanchot 1995: 332). This process, however, brings about a negation where the 'indeterminate' is 'destroyed in order to be known, subjugated, communicated' (Blanchot 1995: 330). The realisation of this negation, it seems, is what Lord Chandos is battling with when he can no longer speak normally to his daughter. The second slope that Blanchot describes is concerned with 'what things and beings would be if there were no world' (Blanchot 1995: 333), or as Michael Marais puts it in an essay on Coetzee and Blanchot, 'things prior to their negation by language and human systems of order' (Marais 2000: 161). The Chandoses' experiences of ineffable revelation seem to apply to this category or slope. There they are in the valley between the slopes. As Marais goes on to write: 'Literature's treacherous ambiguity derives from the fact that in writing, the writer is caught and suspended between day and night, between two slopes which are both necessary and impossible' (Marais 2000: 62-3).

It is significant that the Chandoses are writing to Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam and Viscount of St Albans, the famous philosopher, statesman and a leading thinker in the new scientific method of analogous induction or 'ampliative inference'. Where previously scientists and logicians practised induction by drawing general conclusions from a particular instance, Francis Bacon's method was to infer by way of analogy, working from similarities within the larger group back to the particular and correcting errors according to experience later. Scientific hypotheses and the advancement of empiricism were greatly improved by Bacon's contribution.

An analogy, as opposed to a metaphor or simile, is not, strictly, a figure of speech. It is something observed rather than interpreted, a direct relation or similarity between two entities rather than a forged link: *the analogy between the heart and a pump*. Where 'scientific' analogies such as this seek to make clear an otherwise obscure, even miraculous, bodily role, metaphors and similes seek to problematise and subvert, to make poetic as it were, the un-miraculous or taken-for-granted. Jacques Lacan insisted on this distinction in his exposition of pathological symptoms as being structured like a language: 'Analogy is not metaphor ... it was by deliberately avoiding analogy that Freud opened up the right way to the interpretation of dreams, and so to the notion of

analytic symbolism' (Lacan 1977: 53). What Lord and Lady Chandos are battling with is a sense that everything is either an analogy or a metaphor. That there is nothing that is not a reference point for something else – whether the language-expression is seeking to clarify or subvert. Lady Chandos is thwarted at every turn, both when she tries to analogise her raptures (as flaming swords, plagues of rats, contagions) and when she attempts to make a metaphor of the ordinary: 'A dog sitting in a patch of sun licking itself ... is at one moment a dog and at the next a vessel of revelation' (Coetzee 2003: 229).

This is a problem, perhaps *the* problem, entrenched within every act of writing, whether subconscious or self-conscious. What the Chandoses are experiencing, in a desperate physical way, is a central intersection for literary theory that has been felt in different ways during recent periods of literary endeavour: romanticism, realism, Russian formalism, modernism, structuralism, poststructuralism. It is the problem of the relationship between language and the world, also an ancient problem, encapsulated in Lady Chandos's cry of '*Always it is not what I say but something else!*' And this 'something else' has been named and re-named and finally unnamed by the same literary theorists: God, the ineffable, being, the Other, space, silence. Lord and Lady Chandos's aphasic disturbances seem to be concerned with something always overriding linguistic structure. Their struggle with language is not so much a question of *how exactly* language is scrambling in their minds, whether it is some impairment, more or less severe, of the faculty either for selection and substitution or for combination and contexture, as Jakobson writes in his essay on the dual nature of language and aphasia (Jakobson 1987). Rather, their struggle addresses the questions: *why* is this happening; *whether* it can ever not happen.

If metaphor is, as Lady Chandos, baulking, suggests, a state of being, a world – 'All is allegory, says my Philip. Each creature is key to all other creatures' (Coetzee 2003: 229) – then could it be possible for this tortured couple to ever delight in this world, to be sustained by it? Charles Simic, a poet whose metaphors strive to trap the being of an object, and who is influenced by surrealist philosophy, seeks out a space 'below language ... that place of original action and desire ... a world where magic is possible, where chance reigns, where metaphors have their supreme logic' (Simic 1977). Is this the same world that Lady Chandos describes using the terrifying images of giants and angels striding the earth, 'A time when such *extreme souls* as I write of may be able to bear their affliction' (Coetzee 2003: 229). Where Simic and others like fellow poet Vasko Popa and Russian theorist Victor Shklovsky see the defamiliarising nature of metaphor and its all-encompassing quality as something necessary, even beautiful, the Chandoses are horrified at its prospect. They want, and fear, as perhaps people everywhere simultaneously want and fear, a communication with no incalculable gaps between speaker, listener and said; with no innumerable instances of mishearing, misinterpretation, slippage, rupture, displacement. They long with the yen of the falling and dying for this *other language*, for the language of objects, the language of embodiment, the language in which they can call themselves to account.

The Lady Chandos letter comes with all the characteristics of a skilful surprising postscript – it offers a sudden, even jarring, otherness that speaks from a distance to the story, ideas and lessons in the preceding narration. The character, Elizabeth Chandos, is an obscure, but trackable one with a neat trick to her name that gives her an affinity (perhaps she is an historical mirror-image) with the main character Elizabeth Costello. The sentences on the page, though stylistically familiar, are imbued with a sense of exteriority: this is, after all, an addendum, an afterthought. The themes and images also ring bells –

animals, metaphor, visions – but come together here in a strange impassioned way in a voice we do not recognise as Costello's. What does a postscript like this do to the reader? In this case it presents an opportunity for another reading of the text, a rethinking of its themes, character and centre. Also, in its distance, the postscript allows for reflection on not only the writer Costello or the writer Lord Chandos, but on the writer Coetzee who, in paralleling himself with Hofmannsthal, has revealed himself a little. Surely these are the quandaries, like quarries, which the writer treads precariously between whenever she sets pen to paper: why do I write? what good does it do? is there anything outside metaphor? doesn't that dog sitting in the sun tell more than a million pages in a million books? Does *Elizabeth Costello*, a story about an ageing writer reconsidering her life's work, also tell the story of a dying age reconsidering the place, purpose and value of its art?

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2005

Elizabeth was almost finished reading JM Coetzee's new book, *Slow Man*.

This time it had not caught her eye in a bookshop because it was not yet on the shelf; it was, in fact, still out in a back room, boxed, underneath other boxes. She had asked after it, as though it were a sick relative, and the storeperson, delighted, had gone to rummage out the back. Once it was in her hand, Elizabeth had asked, 'How much?' and the storeperson had said, 'Forty-five dollars,' apologetically. Rather than get the woman to go back to the box and replace the book, Elizabeth had bought it and the woman had said, opening the till, 'I'm sure it will be worth it,' with that special smile booklovers give to other booklovers in an inner-city chain bookstore.

Having already read eight reviews of the book, Elizabeth knew almost exactly what to expect as she began reading outside in the new September sunshine. She remembered, with that sudden flash one has when a physical sensation can be so clearly linked to a mental one, the pain she had been in while reading *Disgrace* two years ago. Since then, having begun taking the Pill, her times of menstruation had been hardly noticeable on the physical horizon. In fact, she was bleeding now, and still perfectly comfortable, mobile, alert. Perhaps not running along the beach in a bikini, as they did on the sanitary products advertisements, but still, out here, relaxed, without a sick bowl by her side and a sickly smell wafting around a close room.

The forty-five dollar book she held carefully, having removed the delicate dust-jacket and placed it out of reach of the kitten. She turned the pages without cracking the spine, wetting or bending the paper. When she could, she used both hands to hold it. As a bookmark, she was using the pamphlet on changing one's name she had ordered from the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages. Who can change their name? ran one of the Frequently Asked Questions. Why do people change their names? Do I need to apply for a name-change when I get married? I am a child – can I change my name? The procedure seemed fairly straightforward. You simply filled in a form, signed it under the eyes of a Registry official, provided authorised copies of four kinds of identification, handed over the fee and that was that. Within fifteen business days, you were known as something else.

There was a note beside the section 'Reason for changing your name': *Reason MUST be specific e.g. 'personal' is NOT acceptable*. Elizabeth thought most reasons for changing one's name would be personal. One's name is personal. Of course, she had heard of those people, probably Americans, who changed

their name every couple of years as though it were a hair colour. To them, perhaps, the change was not so personal, more fancy or *whimsy*. To her, the reason for the change went back twenty-three years to her birth when her father, perhaps muddled, perhaps shaking with the strain of birth-watching, had entered *Elizabeth Katherine* as his new daughter's Given Names. They were the names, of course, on which he and his wife had decided, sitting in the lounge during the Adelaide winter as the baby filled out, grew rotund. 'Wouldn't it be lovely,' his wife might have said, 'if she were to have names from our mothers. Family names. Your mother's middle name and my mother's middle name. Names that go back into the minds of other mothers in Holland and Scotland. Names that repeat.' And so it was decided. But the spelling of his mother-in-law's middle name was not something Elizabeth's father had thought to check, so *Katherine* he put, and it stayed.

Elizabeth's Oma, her mother's mother, had recently passed. It seemed like the best time to set the records right. So all these processes for a single letter in the end: *K* to *C*. She would have to call the bank and the people who issued driver's licenses and tell them: I've made a slight change to my middle name, will I need to have my identification reprinted? She'd already practised using the *EC* in a signature, but found any join between the two initials awkward, and in the end left them separate.

She is aware of the strange coincidence of the name, the *confluence* of Elizabeths and ECs. They seem to lie in wait for her like mischief-makers. Coetzee's other book about an old woman, *Age of Iron*, had Elizabeth Curren dying of breast cancer. Breast cancer ran in her, Elizabeth Catherine's, family – in fact her grandmother, her father's mother (Adelaide Elizabeth), had survived it ten years ago. A coincidence like this she bore, as a good reader must, with even humour, without sulking. Elizabeth Chandos's letter she has already addressed and has dealt with (*I am not mad*) the coincidences springing from it: the date of her birthday, the dream about New York. And Elizabeth Costello herself, whose appearance in this new book has reviewers up in arms, seems to be meddling, from wherever she lives in Carlton, Melbourne (*just down the road!*), her puppeteering arms securely into her life.

She continues reading from where she left off and finds Elizabeth Costello telling Paul Rayment, the book's hero, a story. Sinbad helps an old man across a river by carrying him on his shoulders. When they reach the other side, the old man, instead of climbing down, starts choking Sinbad by tightening his legs around Sinbad's throat. 'Now you are my slave who must do my bidding in all things,' says the old man, (says Elizabeth Costello, says J M Coetzee). Somehow the image, in its grotesquerie, all its tactile coarseness – *the withered skin of the thighs, the loincloth, the leer* – enters her imagination beyond the call of the book's intention. The two of them grappling at the river's edge, the old man (or woman, as it is now suggested) perhaps gripping the young man's head, covering his eyes, tugging his hair; riding him as he teeters about, flails blindly, hits at her legs, tosses his torso to try to lose her. The two of them, now resigned, continuing on past the water, becoming like one body, she pointing the way, he feeding her morsels. She, Elizabeth, sees the image coming out at her from all directions, the positions and characters swapping: Sinbad and the old man, Paul Rayment and Elizabeth Costello, Elizabeth Costello and JM Coetzee. It is an image, and like all images it fails. Not a deadening failure, not really a loss; that beautiful failure that reaches endlessly for what it knows is there: the end, realisation, God.

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TEXT

Vol 15 No 2 October 2011

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy

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