

As is generally known now, JM Coetzee's new novel is neither new nor really a novel; it is made up of eight "lessons", six of which have been published elsewhere, most notably *The Lives of Animals* in book form (Princeton University Press, 1999). All of them (except the postscript) feature Mrs Costello, a kind of fictionalised alter ego for JM Coetzee – a novelist whose addresses at various international conferences make up the bulk of these pieces.

Indeed, to say that Mrs Costello is Coetzee's alter ego is to simplify a complex technique, whereby she is usually provided with an antagonist, who eloquently takes issue with her, without her point of view being privileged over the others.

There is in fact a problem here of accountability. In the book version of *The Lives of Others*, Peter Singer, the Australian animal rights philosopher, replying to the "Costello" lectures, complains about Coetzee's "marvellous device" of having Mrs Costello come out with some fairly radical and at times untenable opinions "without Coetzee really committing himself to it". More baldly, Justin Cartwright, in a recent review in the *Cape Times*, calls the device "something of a cop-out".

But we can at least assume that the pronouncements given to Mrs Costello, however hedged, are intended to be taken seriously. And tenuously and inconclusively as they are advanced, they do generate a kind of resonance with one another.

The first lesson, *What is Realism?* provides a key to the rest of the collection, in discussing the problem of treating ideas in the realist novel: "Realism," we are told by the anonymous narrator, "has never been comfortable with ideas ... realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things. Characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them. The notion of embodying turns out to be pivotal."

This gives us the clue not only to the technique employed in these lessons, but also to a central concern: "the notion of embodying". That notion turns out to embrace not only the fictionalising of abstract concepts, but also the manifestation in corporeal form of, for instance, sexuality, divinity and life itself.

Mrs Costello herself, ageing and tired, perpetually jet-lagged, is all too aware of "this dumb, faithful body ... she somehow is this body". But if the body limits our humanity, it is also the closest we can get to divinity: recalling her own act of self-exposure to a dying man, Mrs Costello feels: "Through me a goddess was manifesting herself ..."

This memory, from *The Humanities in Africa*, is prompted by her disagreement with her sister, a nun, who in her speech accepting an honorary doctorate for her work among the dying in Africa, denounces the humanities for having "lost [their] way long ago" – in, as she explains later to Costello, adopting Hellenism as an "alternative to the Christian vision". Mrs Costello counters that the Christian vision, as embodied in the crucifix venerated by the Catholic Church, is morbidly Gothic, "a Christ dying in contortions rather than a living Christ ...": "A man in his prime, in his early thirties: what do you have against showing him alive, in all his living beauty?" She insists, in short, on the physical embodiment of the spiritual, rather than the Christian mortification of the body.

In *The Novel in Africa* Mrs Costello meets an old acquaintance, the flamboyant Nigerian novelist Emmanuel Egedu, who claims that "we African novelists can embody these [physical] qualities as no one else can because we have not lost touch with the body. The African novel, the true African novel, is an oral novel." Impatient with what she regards as his swaggering, Mrs Costello silently protests against the privileging of the body: "Always, she thinks, the body that is insisted on, pushed forward, and the voice, dark essence of the body, welling up from within it." But by the end of this section, she is reminiscing about her youth, when she had a short-lived affair with this same Emmanuel Egedu: "'The oral poet,' she said to him teasingly. 'Show me what an oral poet can do.' And he laid her out, put his lips to her ears, opened them, breathed his breath into her, showed her."

Embodiment, the key to the erotic, is also central to the kind of imaginative sympathy that Mrs Costello, in *The Lives of Animals*, pleads for in our dealings with animals. "To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being ..." From this embodiment, then, stems not only pleasure and beauty, but the ethical imperative of sympathy.

But if the human, the animal and the divine all need, for revelation, to be embodied, so does the diabolical, and in *The Problem of Evil* Mrs Costello is confronted with the manifestation of evil in fiction: in this instance a harrowing description of the execution of the men plotting against Hitler: "Why are you doing this to me? she wanted to cry out as she read, to God knows whom."

At this point the reader may recall feeling something similar is reading Coetzee's masterly, but deeply disturbing, *Disgrace*, and no doubt t Coetzee is aware that this connection will be made. Indeed, much of *Elizabeth Costello* by implication takes issue with Coetzee's own fiction: it would be hard, for instance, to find in Coetzee's fiction an unambiguous celebration of the body: its "moderate realism" accommodates at most a grudging concession to the body as the seat of pleasure as well as pain. Perhaps this is what prompted Coetzee to include the whimsical and surprisingly humorous last lesson, *At the Gate*, in which Mrs Costello, arriving at the gate to the Hereafter, is enjoined, as the price of entering, to declare a belief.

Protesting, at first, that "I am a writer, a trader in fictions ... I maintain beliefs only provisionally," she nevertheless is brought to declare, after all, a belief, if only in the little frogs of the Dulgannon mudflats in Australia, which literally go underground in drought, to be revitalised by the rain "and soon their voices resound again in joyous exultation beneath the vault of the heavens". In these frogs, presumably, Mrs Costello finds embodied most purely, unselfconsciously and unthinkingly the great binary of life and death, death and resurrection. Mrs Costello, for all her jet-lagged crabbiness, achieves, like Mrs Curran in *Age of Iron*, a kind of dourly heroic dignity in her acceptance of the diminished returns of age and mortality. In the midst of despair, she speaks for a human potential that may never be realised but remains as an ethical goal: a potential to feel at one with the non-human universe in a non-exploitative relation.