

Margaret Naicker

Animal Insights in Contemporary Australian Fiction

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts (Research) in English

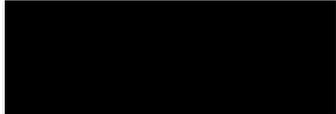
The University of Sydney

2019

Statements

*This is to certify to the best of my knowledge the content of this thesis is my own work. The thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.*

*I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.*



*Margaret Naicker*

*25 February 2019*

**Research Question:** How are animals represented in contemporary Australian fiction and what effects may be achieved by this, central to the global literary environment?

### **Abstract**

This study explores how animals are represented in contemporary Australian fiction. For centuries, the literary representation of animals has been to elucidate and define issues and interests which are exclusive to humans, and often with an overtly didactic or cautionary tone and purpose. This has implied an anthropocentric and hierarchical world view, which critics have traced back to Classical philosophy and literature, through the Renaissance era and into modern literature. Traditional literary representations of animals are anthropomorphic in what, I will argue, is a self-absorbed and limiting way, where the emphasis is overwhelmingly anthropocentric. I will demonstrate that different forms of anthropomorphism, more appreciative of both the radical alterity of animals and recognisant of humans themselves as animals, have emerged from contemporary philosophers. These forms continue to gain recognition and are increasingly reflected in contemporary literature. Against the background of the traditional representation of animals in Western European fiction, I would further contend that contemporary Australian writers raise open or ongoing questions about animal/human relationships and our role in nature, questions where the spirit is one of exploration and the answers not already defined by established moral, cultural, social or political paradigms or values. This stance will be demonstrated with reference to the works of J.M. Coetzee, Ceridwen Dovey, Isobelle Carmody and Sonya Hartnett. These writers represent a spectrum of contemporary Australian fiction including academic, adult, crossover and children's literature. While these categories overlap, the following chapters reflect that sequence to illustrate that changes in the representation of animals can be seen to spread from more overtly philosophical and academic writing to mainstream audiences.

## Contents:

Introduction: Beyond Allegory: Anthropomorphism Redefined	5
Chapter 1: J.M. Coetzee's <i>The Lives of Animals</i> – Academic novella (1999)	23
Chapter 2: Ceridwen Dovey's <i>Only the Animals</i> – Short Story Collection (2014)	59
Chapter 3: Sonya Hartnett's <i>Forest</i> – Novel: Adults, Young Adults and Children (2004)	74
Chapter 4: Isobelle Carmody's <i>The Legend of Little Fur</i> – Four Fables (2005-2008)	87
Conclusion: Towards Harmony	100
Bibliography	104

## Introduction

### Beyond Allegory: Anthropomorphism Redefined

Traditionally the literary representation of animals has been through the perspective of anthropomorphism.<sup>1</sup> This concept is succinctly defined by Robert McKay<sup>2</sup> who gives three somewhat overlapping definitions:

- attributing human form to something non-human (e.g. a God, an animal e.g. in metamorphosis stories)
- attributing supposedly distinctively human behaviours to non-humans (e.g. animal beings in clothes, speaking etc.)
- attributing supposedly distinctive human qualities to non-human animals (reason, self-awareness, intentionality, purpose, volition, imagination (7))

His use of ‘supposedly’ implies a flexibility in interpretation which is also implied by Peter Singer who in *Animal Liberation* (1975) argues for integrity in representing the different interests and qualities of animals, that is; respecting alterity and avoiding distortion. Mary Midgely, in *Animals and Why They Matter* (1998)<sup>3</sup>, interprets anthropomorphism as the literary expression of humans who must use their human faculties to understand others, either their fellow humans or animals. She concludes, ‘that those who try to understand animals [...] often come to understand them quite well. Those who do not, fail, which is also true with human beings’ (133). This viewpoint resembles McKay’s ‘both/and’ position on

---

<sup>1</sup> OED, ‘The attribution of human characteristics or behaviour to a god, animal, or object.’

<sup>2</sup>Robert McKay, University of Sheffield, ‘Approaching Animals in Literature’, [www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.473626!/file/BobMcKay.pptx](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.473626!/file/BobMcKay.pptx), <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/english/people/mckay>).

<sup>3</sup>Midgely explores the implications of the traditional definition of anthropomorphism in her chapter ‘What is Anthropomorphism?’ (1998, 125-133).

literary anthropomorphism (16), where he argues that writers may write from *both* an animal *and* a human perspective empathising while recognising both alterity and common ground.

However, it remains true that until recently animals have been used symbolically in literature with a morally didactic purpose which arguably, and typically, upholds exclusively human interests and perspectives. Examples of this are seen in such well-known works as *Through the Looking Glass* (1865), *The Wind in the Willows*, (1908), *Animal Farm* (1945), and *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956). They may be found as far back in literary history as *Aesop's Fables*. In fact, the anthropomorphic representation of animals is a constant element of folk tales, fairy tales and fables going back to oral storytelling. This reflects an anthropocentric and hierarchical world view where animals have largely been used in literature to illustrate and reinforce cultural, social, political and moral values and perspectives believed to apply exclusively to humans. In his recently published *Animal Fables after Darwin* (2018) Chris Danta demonstrates the subversion<sup>4</sup> inherent in these genres, increasingly recognised in post Darwinian literature.

That this use of animal referencing has been a highly successful literary device is evident in the long history, popularity and breadth of its use. Its success is not least because removing the debate from human to animal characters provides a perceived ideological objectivity which allows for a more extended argument and for principles to be established at a remove from human society. The values and perspectives proposed by the author are, thus, not only reinforced for the reader but would seem to be universalised. Not perceived as subjective or

---

<sup>4</sup> Here Danta argues that fables challenge the metaphor embedded in humans' self-perception, informed by the Greco, Judeo and, consequently, Christian traditions – that humans are 'Godlike Erect' (4) because they can look towards the heavens, whereas other animals must face the ground. Danta effectively demonstrates how deeply this metaphor has also become embedded in our language. He later cites Canetti who points out that gazing at the heavens is, in fact, more effectively done while prone, further debunking the metaphor as self-serving, Canetti also comments that humans erect posture makes them more 'exposed, visible, vulnerable' (Canetti, 1974, 88).

confined to specific contexts, they gain authority for human society in general. McKay uses Orwell's *Animal Farm* to illustrate this point (11-13), Kari Weil<sup>5</sup> uses Kafka's Red Peter in *A Report to an Academy* (3-4). Weil also supports this view of anthropomorphism when, recognising the irony, she argues that empathy must exist before anthropomorphism can be considered (15). The truth of this resonates even more deeply when we consider the consistent and intense presence of animals in our most fundamental stories, folk tales, fairy tales and fables.

The changes in the use of anthropomorphism argued by Bob McKay are highly indicative of the turn to animals in literature identified by many critics, among them Mary Midgely, Peter Singer, Kari Weil, David Brooks and Donna Haraway, as well as A. Marie Houser in her highly intuitive and luminous introduction to the stories in *After Coetzee* (2017). Houser demonstrates, as do the writers themselves, what Weil intimated about our use of language:<sup>6</sup> – that it can develop far beyond the narrow sensory limitations imposed by rationality which have traditionally been accepted as comfortable and self-validating although they limit our perceptions of our own nature and that of other animals:

But the view from our literature has been bipedal, non-ultraviolet; it is often—quite literally—a *view*. We have taken sight to be the rhetorical locus of perception and cognition. [...] A literature without *dog*—a literature without snake and bee—means a whole bright (and scented) spectrum of stories is missing. (Houser x)

Furthermore, Houser sustains the idea that literature about animals now asks questions rather than providing stock answers. She recognises that the newer stories 'invite curiosity, openness and attunement' (xvi). Citing Shklovsky, she states that animal perspectives can 'shake up our

---

<sup>5</sup> Kari Weil, 'A Report on the Animal Turn' *differences* 21.2 (2010)

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Weil who, again, referring to Kafka's Red Peter, argues that his report has taken the place of his former life as an ape and that that 'exists now only as an aporia'. She asks how language may give voice to others or to experiences that seem impervious to our means of understanding', concluding that both Elizabeth Costello and Red Peter 'raise doubts about the efficacy of the academy for dealing with this question' (4).

somnolent automatism' (xxii), concluding with 'I look to a future when as writers we ask different questions and as readers we delight in the answers [...] And go from there' (xxvi).

I would contend that such questions are raised in the works of contemporary Australian writers. Chapter 1 will follow J.M. Coetzee's<sup>7</sup> tightly structured juxtaposition of philosophy and the imagination to expose, but leave unresolved, the limitations which define human/animal relationships. Through an examination of Ceridwen Dovey's<sup>8</sup> finely tuned blend of originality and literary allusions, Chapter 2 will demonstrate the same stark and unresolved limitations in her stories. Chapter 3 will explore how Sonya Hartnett<sup>9</sup> uses her animal characters' quest beyond the known to resonate with the reader, raising awareness of our loss of harmony with nature and ultimately, in stark contrast to Coetzee and Dovey, our ability to regain it. Chapter 4 will examine Isobelle Carmody's<sup>10</sup> different use of the quest structure and a new form of anthropomorphism, blending fable, fantasy and realism to, again, raise such ongoing questions about animal/human nature and relationships which encourage exploration, value alterity and, like Hartnett, illustrate the fundamental integrity in nature.

\*\*\*

### Critical Background:

Australian moral philosopher and animal rights activist Peter Singer (1946-) provides relevant insights in his introduction to *In Defense of Animals: The Second Wave* (2013), a collection of

---

<sup>7</sup> J.M. Coetzee is a South African born novelist, living in Australia, who became the Nobel Laureate (2003) for his contribution to literature. His novels include *The Lives of Animals* (1999), *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and *Slow Man* (2005). The character Elizabeth Costello appears in all three novels. *The Lives of Animals* again appears as Chapters 3 and 5 of *Elizabeth Costello*.

<sup>8</sup> Ceridwen Dovey, *Only the Animals*, (2014) was nominated for several awards and won the Queensland Literary Awards' Steele Rudd Award for a Short Story collection. Originally from South Africa Dovey, a social anthropologist by training, now lives in Sydney.

<sup>9</sup> Sonya Hartnett, author of *Forest*, (2004) is an acclaimed Australian fiction writer whose many awards include the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize and the Aurealis Award for best young adult novel.

<sup>10</sup> Isobelle Carmody is an Australian fiction writer whose books illustrate clearly how the use of fantasy, liminality and mystery although traditionally viewed as characteristic of children's and young adult literature, in effect, make these elements accessible to adults, bridging the gap into adult literature.

essays by contemporary writers on the relationship between animals and humans<sup>11</sup>. Singer discusses the body of writing linking animals, philosophy and ethics. He tracks this from 1970 to the present, showing a rapid global intensification in works written on animals and ethics: ‘In 1970 the number of writings on the ethical status of animals was tiny [...] the tally now must be in the thousands. Nor is this debate simply a recent Western phenomenon’ (2). He cites Paola Cavalieri who, in her essay ‘The Animal Debate: A Re-examination’:

puts the debate about animals into a [...] broad historical perspective encompassing crucial moments in philosophic thought. She starts with Ancient Greece, then moves to seventeenth-century Europe, and finally looks at the last fifty years. Her contrast between the human-centred approaches taken by Heidegger and Derrida and the more egalitarian approach taken by many contemporary English-language philosophers reveals the conventional self-interest that often lurks behind what appears to be deep metaphysics (7).

This represents an obvious challenge to an anthropocentric world view, particularly when taken in conjunction with Singer’s sustained focus on the morality of respecting animals’ interests, and, specifically, in his employment of the term ‘speciesism’<sup>12</sup> which he defines as ‘the idea that it is justifiable to give preference to beings simply because they are members of the species *Homo sapiens*’ (3).

Cavalieri strongly challenges the relegation of non-humans to ‘second-class beings’ terming it ‘like many other historical phenomena, really accidental’ (54). Going back to Classical Greece and Rome, she explains the origins of hierarchy and divisions created based on social need and convenience. Her argument prepares the ground for a radically different interpretation of human and animal nature. She sees hierarchy and anthropocentricity as

---

<sup>11</sup> For clarity, I will refer to non-human animals as animals, as do Singer, (*Animal Liberation*, 1975) and Midgely (*Animals and Why They Matter*, 1998) except when there is a specific need to emphasise that humans are animals too.

<sup>12</sup> The term *speciesism*, and the argument that it is simply a prejudice, first appeared in 1970 in a privately printed pamphlet written by British psychologist [Richard D Ryder](#). It has since been employed to challenge the allocation of worth based on sameness or hierarchical constructs as has occurred with gender or race.

limiting, and advocates a willingness to explore, pointing out that exploration is, indeed, fundamental to human nature. This view is echoed by Kari Weil who emphasises the need to stay open to new discoveries, challenge boundaries and use language in a manner which allows for mystery rather than imposing limits.

In his introduction to *In Defense of Animals* Singer's focus on the philosophy and ethics of animal-human relations is interspersed with anecdotes and metaphors, for example he cites James Jasper and Dorothy Nelkin who, in *The Animal Rights Crusade: The Growth of a Moral Protest* (1991), compare philosophers to midwives. Singer extends the metaphor stating that philosophers ensured the animal rights movement was not stillborn (2), reminding us that storytelling, be it fact or fiction, and figurative language are among humans' most fundamental ways of communicating values and effecting change. Singer's appreciation of this is clearly seen in his reflection on Elizabeth Costello's lectures in Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, where he employs the form of a fictional dialogue between an animal rights philosopher and his daughter, Naomi, to challenge and ultimately support Costello's views. He follows Coetzee in blending fact and fiction, his use of fiction here allowing Singer to operate legitimately on an emotional as well as on a rational level.

Ethics based on an ability to empathise is a characteristic by which humanity defines itself. In *Writings on an Ethical Life* (2001), Singer states: 'Were we incapable of empathy – of putting ourselves in the position of others and seeing that their suffering is like our own – then ethical reasoning would lead nowhere. If emotion without reason is blind, then reason without emotion is impotent' (xix). Linking reason and emotion he shows that fiction, which broadens perspectives and creates empathy, is also a powerful means of effecting philosophical, ethical or social change. Such change in the relationship between humans and animals is reflected and/or advocated in a range of contemporary fictional works, for example Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, Carmody's fables and Dovey's *Only the Animals* among others.

Kari Weil, in 'A Report on the Animal Turn' (2010), also presents a highly relevant discussion on the impact and limitations of the value we place on language, reason, identity, difference and power. She challenges our interpretations of anthropomorphism and the validity of linking language and ethics, raising questions about what it means to be an animal, and, consequently, what it means to be human<sup>13</sup>. She discusses Peter Singer's use of the term 'speciesism' as another form of discrimination, akin to racism or sexism, pointing to 'the recent explosion of conferences, books, discussion and networks on the question of the animal' (1), a parallel also discussed by Midgely and McKay.

Weil questions the process of allocating to animals the 'status of objects' because they cannot represent themselves using human language and reason (2). She argues that the recognition of a 'voice' for animals would result in a broadening of humans' repertoire for communication, not only with animals, but with other humans, freeing us from the constraints of the anthropocentric and hierarchical frameworks embedded in our social and political structures. Weil refers to Cary Wolfe who also challenges humans' embedded anthropocentricity when it comes to the definitions of language (*Zoontologies* 1 qtd. in Weil 5). This viewpoint is illustrated in the works of Australian writers who use language to represent animal perspectives on death, loss, relationship, loyalty and suffering which differ radically from human perspectives, although, by nature, we also experience love, loss and mortality.

In questioning the long tradition in Western philosophy of differentiating animal species based on rational thought and the ability to use language<sup>14</sup>, Weil refers specifically to the 'ways Western educated man is taken as the norm for what counts as human' (2). Houser also strongly

---

<sup>13</sup> In *Animal Fables after Darwin* Chris Danta also shows how reason and language become deeply intertwined, so that they support each other in affirming and concribing moral codes and ethics. He links humans' erect posture with linguistic expressions of morality, upright posture becomes a metaphor for moral rectitude. Thus, human hierarchy over animals is constantly reinforced by our use of language (4-9).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Cavalieri (7).

critiques ‘Western philosophical and socio-political systems’ which have ‘essentialised the white, able-bodied bourgeoisie male into an idea of the universal human subject and operated violently on its behalf’(xii). This discredits hierarchy and strikingly resembles the argument raised by Coetzee through Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals* (31).

Weil, like Midgely, rejects the validity of transferring human paradigms of expression and values onto non-humans, particularly when these are then used to measure status. She advocates a more holistic and harmonious relationship with the natural world, one which is open to growth and discovery rather than one which reinforces traditional boundaries or paradigms. She repeatedly cites Kafka’s Red Peter to illustrate the dangers of using language as an overarching criterion for determining nature, worth and status. Dovey’s story, ‘Red Peter’s Little Lady’ is a metafictional account of Kafka’s ‘A Report to an Academy’, again from the perspective of the chimpanzee, Red Peter, but going beyond the scope of the original and pursuing the experiment to its logical conclusion. It is then seen to be a tragic indictment of Red Peter’s treatment at the hands of humans.

The use of language, often criticised as limiting, is at the centre of this debate, yet, in contemporary fiction we note how language can grow along with human awareness. It may be a case of the tool being as good as the one who wields it, in which case – the power of language remains an open question when not used to impose limits. Recognising language as a human phenomenon and giving space to alternate forms of animal expression is frequently evident in the representation of animals in contemporary literature. Weil characterises this as ‘to attend to difference without distorting it’ (4).

Two elements of Weil’s argument are particularly relevant to this research: her question of how fully words reflect the meaning of the speaker, and her focus on the issues of ‘identity and difference of power and its effects, which have embroiled academic theory over the past quarter century’ (3). The former becomes a touchstone for interpreting the ‘voices’ writers

give to animals and the latter for the gulfs and conflicts they portray between humans and animals. If, as Weil implies, we have created a ‘stance of impenetrability’ (7) for our comfort and protection, perhaps writers, in keeping with their role, increasingly succeed in presenting new perspectives which may challenge this barrier. Humans and animals do occupy the same world and, even when they relate to it differently, may achieve more empathy and common ground in a broader paradigm of relationship. Crucially, Weil focusses on the need to remain open to new understandings and discoveries. Houser characterises this openness as ‘generously agnostic’ as ‘it does not demarcate the ways that encounter may occur or what sort of being the other shows up as’ (Houser xiv).<sup>15</sup> As neither humans nor animals exist in isolation, any discussion of their roles and relationships will incorporate their respective and/or shared environments, with the tensions and shifting boundaries this implies. As Houser states ‘Nonhuman worlds overlap, withdraw from and overtake our own; they are our own’ (x).

Kari Weil refers to the notion of finding an ‘intersection’ (8) between human and animal perceptions of the world. This often presents in contemporary fiction as a transitional existence between worlds or cultures, a concept also discussed by Michael Joseph in his essay ‘Liminality’<sup>16</sup> (discussed below). Fundamental to this is the need to recognise the validity of an alternate way of being. Relations between humans and animals are not seen merely as more limited versions of inter-human relations, but rather as phenomena with their own intrinsic value. The use of language then characterises humans within a new and broader field of awareness. Weil, again, points to the need for humans to abandon some of our chosen ‘impenetrability’ (7), if we seek to explore beyond our current awareness. She cites Stanley Cavell who writes that the horse ‘is a rebuke to our unreadiness to be understood ... our will

---

<sup>15</sup> Houser is referencing Matthew Calarco in ‘Toward an Agnostic Animal Ethics’ (78), in Paola Cavalieri and Peter Singer, eds., *The Death of the Animal: A Dialogue* (Columbia University Press, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Joseph associates ‘liminal’ with psychology and mysticism, stating that it describes the quality of being ‘socially segregated, set apart and divested of status’ (2011, 138).

to remain obscure' (1979, qtd. in Hearne 115), referring to the fact that horses, among other animals, can sense things about humans which the humans do not know themselves, such as illness or emotions (8).<sup>17</sup> Contemporary fiction writers respond to this challenge by using imagination to transcend ordinary human experience and remain open to the persistence of mystery.

In her section on 'Ineffable Animality and the Counterlinguistic Turn', Weil discusses further the limitations of language as a means of representation, be it of the self, or of any experience or knowledge beyond that singular perception, referring to Fredric Jameson's phrase 'the prison-house of language'<sup>18</sup>. In this case, she argues, that the 'turn to animals' may represent an abandonment of poststructuralism's internalising and circular rationale. She asks what we lose when we lose the perception of humans as another species of animal and seek to subvert the animal in ourselves. She again cites Kafka's *Red Peter* and *The Metamorphosis* (1915) where language itself is shown to be a means of subjugation, its meaning arbitrary and imposed. Referring to Deleuze and Guattari, Weil associates this argument with the writing process. She states that 'art's purpose is to undo stable identity' (11). This purpose and the questions raised by Weil are reflected in the works of contemporary Australian writers' representations of animals as will be shown in the following chapters. The challenges posed to the boundaries and norms of identity, self-perception and values can be seen in Hartnett's *Forest* and in much of Carmody's writing. For example, in Carmody's *Billy Thunder and the Night Gate* (2000), Billy alternates between being a dog and being human, depending on which world he inhabits. He retains certain characteristics such as red hair and absolute steadfastness,

---

<sup>17</sup> This is illustrated by Singer, through the behaviour of Max, the dog, in his reflection on Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formation*, (1972).

while others, such as the ability to live fully in the present or the power of speech, depend on his animal or human state, although, significantly, these boundaries also blur over time.

Weil's section on 'Animals and the Ethical Turn' is also particularly relevant in determining that fictional animal characters may be used to inspire readers to think outside conventional paradigms of awareness and interpretation. Weil discusses a growing concern for 'alterity' (13) and a growing awareness in humans that we do not know or understand animals, not only in terms of their nature and value, but also in terms of our own nature and self-awareness:

Rather, the ethical turn that has followed in the wake of deconstruction is an attempt to recognize and extend care to others while acknowledging that we may not know what the best form of care is for another we cannot presume to know. It is a concern with and for alterity, especially insofar as alterity brings us to the limits of our own self-certainty and certainty about the world (13).

This need for an openness to inquiry and exploration permeates the writings of Dovey, Hartnett and Carmody. It is a central focus of Elizabeth Costello's argument in *The Lives of Animals* (Coetzee 1999). Like Singer, Weil draws links between the ability to empathise and ethics which are deemed to be characteristic of humanity. She consistently draws parallels, also drawn by Singer and by Midgley, between female/male and animal/human relationships and power structures, showing similarities and differences in the evolution of these relationships, and evidenced by the power of language and its limitations. McKay also draws these parallels, showing that they impact upon our perception of the role of literature, 'These feed into: 'the kinds of questions we ask about literature' and 'the kinds of literature we think of as important etc.' (McKay 4). A recognition of this link between ethics, animals, language and hierarchy strongly characterises writers' representations of animals in contemporary Australian fiction.

Finally, however, Weil's argument is one of 'posthumanism' which challenges the 'exceptional' barrier erected by humans and raises the question of how we employ the notion

of anthropomorphism which has traditionally been interpreted as imposing human characteristics onto animals. If the links between humans and animals are reinterpreted in terms of a non-hierarchical or non-anthropocentric relationship, Weil argues, it has the potential for increased empathy and a renewed appreciation of ‘otherness’. She, further states, again drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, that ‘to deterritorialize is to become aware of the animal-otherness within the human’ (12). This is exactly the subject of Elizabeth Costello’s lectures in Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*. Weil quotes Costello who refers to the faculty ‘some poets have that allows us to share, at times, the being of another’ (Coetzee 79, qtd. in Weil 16). Weil’s conclusion that the questions raised are open and ongoing and that we cannot claim to have all the answers is also reflected in the lyricism and mystery which surrounds animals in the writings of Carmody, Dovey and Hartnett.

Such writers frequently use the liminal to explore new perspectives, beyond defined structures. In his chapter ‘Liminality’ Michael Joseph associates ‘liminal’ with adolescence, later citing Reuven Kahane (1997), who employed the term ‘postmodern liminality’ which Joseph sees as providing ‘a buffer zone in which to move playfully and spontaneously between normative and antinormative behaviours and, thereby, offsetting the tensions of a complex society’ (138). He further states that this liminality frequently occurs in young adult literature which, like fantasy, is a natural forum for the representation of alternative perspectives. Liminality, as defined by Joseph, can be seen in much of Carmody’s writing, Dovey’s *Only the Animals*, and Hartnett’s *Forest*. These writers, among others, use animal characters to facilitate humans’ traversal of boundaries, raise new questions and throw new light on old ones.

In addition, Joseph cites Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) which explores human/animal nature, what it means to be human and the place of humanity in the world. These questions are consistently raised in contemporary fiction. Joseph states that ‘like (literary) monsters, literary children dismayingly breach boundaries, and, in their passage into adulthood

they symbolize both chaos and order, antistructure and structure' (139). Children's, Young Adult or Crossover literature, by their nature, encourage readers' (young or old) complicit exploration of concepts and perspectives outside formal adult literary conventions. Children, as transitional beings, are a natural focus for writers who would explore shifting boundaries. In this context, changes in the relationship between humans, animals and the natural world can be seen to be a compelling focus for a broad spectrum of contemporary writers.

In discussing liminality as moving in and out of conventional structures, Joseph also refers to 'liminal space', 'liminal existence', 'liminal characters' and 'liminal beings' which he compares to 'women, and, potentially, other social categories disempowered or liminalised by normative humanistic values' (140). According to Joseph, such liminality may be permanent or ritual and transitional. Ritual or transitional liminality is where return to order, society or structure is anticipated. In the works of Carmody, Dovey and Hartnett, animal characters and characters with animal affinities are frequently seen to move in and out of a defined social order, inspiring a revaluation of boundaries and perceptions, and questions about reconcilability.

It is important to note that such transitional beings are often depicted in literature by the attribution of animal characteristics, and traditionally it has been the non-human, mysterious or unconstrained nature of certain, at times monstrous, characters which is used to represent threats and maintain barriers between humans and animals. In contrast, contemporary writers often present transitional beings and spaces as potentially benevolent, more in harmony with the broader universe than is achievable within normative human structures. Such creatures are represented as ambiguous, mystical or mysterious, or 'ineffable', as Weil proposes (9). Houser also expresses this; 'Once verboten in mainstream literature, the concerns and prerogatives of non-human animals [...] are now generating lively, innovative and ethically charged works' (xi). This is reflected in the open questions about human/animal relations raised by

philosophers, scientists and literary critics and reflected in contemporary writers' representations of animals.

Prominent among these is Mary Midgely who, in *Beast and Man* (2002), argues the continuity between 'human' and 'animal' nature, establishing a philosophical and moral basis for abandoning previous rationales which ignore the understanding of humans as animals. Fundamental to her argument is a focus on 'instinct' and an examination of 'motivation' within the context of a set of values. For example, like Singer, Weil and McKay, she refers in to 'an explosion of animal behaviour studies which are used to throw light on human nature and which 'have become immensely popular [...] whether he [man] has an aggressive or territorial instinct.' (3). At the heart of Midgely's argument is the recognition that humans are to be understood based on their existence as part of all animal nature, and not just based on their culture (2002, 3-17). She suggests that we 'need new and more suitable concepts for describing human motivation' (14). She recognises the importance of asking new questions which are ongoing, rather than providing definitive answers. This argument, and the need for an openness to new insights, was also recognised years later by critics such as Weil and McKay and is reflected in the works of contemporary fiction writers.

In context, Midgely rejects any form of reductionism, as it tends to distort and serve narrow agendas. Referring to sex, self-preservation and power, she states, 'Comparison with other species shows possible groupings, subtler and more helpful than these flat reductions.' (16). She also highlights how 'our cultures limit so subtly the questions that we can ask and reinforce so strongly our natural gift for self-deception' (16). Recognising the role of literature in this transmission and revaluation of culture Midgely writes: 'To break this cycle [...] fabulists have long used animals. They rely on the stock of a different context to make familiar

patterns visible at last' (17).<sup>19</sup> She acknowledges that the value of this convention depends on the 'fabulists'' imagination and that we are products of our age, what Midgely terms the 'temper' of our times. While, here, she is recognising the role of fiction in effecting cultural change, she also states that, 'The device has a different kind of force when facts are used rather than fiction' (17). It would seem clear from the literary devices they employ that both Coetzee in *The Lives of Animals* and Singer in his reflection on it have an acute awareness of the different kinds of force writers can achieve from the combined use of fact and fiction.

Midgely points to changes in the traditionally anthropomorphic representations of animals in literature. She argues that when evaluating any behaviour in a species one must take it in the whole context of that species (24). From this perspective, when contemporary fiction writers seek to represent animals authentically in their environment and according to their nature, they are arguably recognising the need to gain an insight into their alterity, and to reevaluate this otherness. Midgely continues by stating that although humans have traditionally congratulated themselves on being 'an island of order in a sea of chaos', zoology has discovered that wolves, for example, are nothing like the demonised wolves of folklore and that previous contrasts drawn between animals and humans are now debunked (25-26). Midgely recognises the crucial role scientific research and technology have played in changing human perceptions of the natural world. She refers to the fact that science has demonstrated that animal lives and societies are far more complex, structured and orderly than we have previously understood. She further recognises the irony that we may now be turning to animals in a real sense, to illustrate, clarify and affirm our own espoused values; among these, great courage, great loyalty, harmony, steadfastness, integrity, forgiveness, order and respect for others. The more we do so, the more we recognise that animal behaviour, in fact, does exhibit these qualities and

---

<sup>19</sup> This clearer vision may also be reflected in contemporary writers' use of Crossover literature to challenge existing paradigms.

that, unlike humans, animals do not create conflict between nature and behaviour.<sup>20</sup> Essentially, Midgely is pointing the way to a more holistic, harmonious and inclusive world view without the arbitrary distinctions imposed by hierarchy. Such a view can be discerned in contemporary fiction where traditional anthropomorphism is replaced by an exploration of the extent to which we can, as humans, authentically represent animals when we allow ourselves to be inspired by animals' lives, and how we can reevaluate our relationship with the natural world. Regarding literary anthropomorphism McKay, arguing for the 'both/and' approach rather than the 'either/or' approach, states, 'there is a **tendency to overstate** the way in which literary texts are 'anthropomorphic' (14, original emphasis). He suggests that writers may interpret animals in terms of human values while also recognising and respecting authentic animal concerns and characteristics. He uses the cows in Orwell's *Animal Farm* to illustrate the ease with which common ground is represented – the cows have not been milked and the resulting discomfort is common to all female mammals including humans (15)<sup>21</sup>. Midgely, also, argues this point, recognising that while humans must use human faculties to understand another, animal or human, rather than representing an older habit, it is the purpose of such anthropomorphism which has changed, along with the discernible value writers attach to representing animals authentically (1998, 133).<sup>22</sup>

Midgely brings the idea of discrimination into even sharper focus. She refers to 'social-contract thinking' and links what has become 'the animal question' with other issues of equality

---

<sup>20</sup> Mary Midgely, *Beast and Man*, 'Animals and the Problem of Evil' (18-36). Midgely discusses at length the contrast between seeing animals as they really are and humans' tradition of using them as symbolic externalisations of their own virtues and vices. Like Cavalieri she traces this use of animals as scapegoats back to ancient societies through the Classical and Renaissance ages, and links it to a refusal to accept our own nature. Doniger also argues this in her reflection on Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*.

<sup>21</sup> While Orwell's allegory is usually taken as an indictment of Communism, it is, more broadly, an exposition of the consequences of a society built on hierarchy.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Chris Danta's identification of the subversive role of animals in fables and folklore in *Animal fables after Darwin* (10).

regarding ‘women, slaves, aliens and other beings suspected of not being proper contractors.’ (1998, Foreword), acknowledging that it was ‘neglected by philosophers till quite lately.’ She uses an apt metaphor to convey her meaning in the first chapter: ‘Getting Animals in Focus’, referring to the type of blurred vision or moral confusion people experience when, as often occurs, there is a discrepancy between their declared morality and accepted practice. Thus, Midgley succeeds in establishing that ‘the animal question’ is a moral question no less than any other faced by humans, and one which can no longer be dismissed. Referring to the general population, she states: ‘In the last few decades, however, their imagination has been struck [...] by a flood of new and fascinating information about animals’ (13), adding ‘With the bizarre assistance of TV, Darwin is at last getting through. Town-dwellers are beginning to notice the biosphere’ (14). Midgley may be referring to the increasing proliferation of highly visual media documentaries based on scientific exploration and environmental concerns which effectively refocus our perspective from an anthropocentric to a holistic view of the planet.<sup>23</sup> It is to be expected that what captures the imagination of the public will find expression in the contemporary fiction.

Midgley focusses particularly on ethology, the meaning of animal behaviour and motivation. She explains how ethologists’ findings have led to an increase in humans’ empathy with animals. She states, ‘In doing this they inevitably find and point out many patterns which resemble those in human life’, noting, ‘This is not because they illicitly project human qualities onto animals, but because human life really does have an animal basis – an emotional structure on which we build what is distinctly human’ (14). She specifies that ‘In spite of the differences, quite complex aspects of things like loneliness and play and maternal affection, ambition and

---

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Jenny Diski, *What I Don’t Know About Animals* (Yale University Press, 2011) for a detailed tracing of the growth in public awareness during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries of animals in their real habitats moving from toys to zoos to the wild.

rivalry and fear, turn out to be shared with other social creatures' (14). This understanding is also expressed by Coetzee through Elizabeth Costello (61-66) as we shall see. Midgely, then, has identified and explained a shift in awareness in how humans perceive animals.

Like Singer, Midgely discusses humans' ability to engage in denial or self-deception and the separation of actions from consequences. Regarding humans' traditional attitudes and actions towards animals, she states, 'Many of them have consequences which, when pointed out, scarcely anybody is likely to welcome today' (17). For example, Dovey, in *Only the Animals* and Coetzee, in *The Lives of Animals*, both focus overtly and consistently on the consequences of human behaviour for animals, presenting new and challenging perspectives for readers, as is the role of literature. These perspectives reflect an evolving cultural, philosophical and scientific awareness and a spirit of inquiry which is reflected across a range of contemporary fictional genres.

This, then, is the framework of the current debate about the relationship between humans and other animals and our role in the natural world. Questions centre around new interpretations of anthropomorphism and the ability of language to inspire change rather than to remain confined within existing parameters. Writers encourage us to consider that the divisions of traditional hierarchies may be resolved by empathy leading to integrity and reconciliation with alterity, implying a new acceptance of life and death, nature and instinct, joy and suffering. To illustrate these perspectives in contemporary Australian fiction this study begins with a discussion of Coetzee's use of an academic forum juxtaposing the philosophical and the poetic. It then moves to Dovey's effective combination of originality and literary allusion. In the final chapters similar themes can be identified in the graphic immediacy of loss and triumph in Hartnett's *Forest* and the ageless vision and hope of renewal in Carmody's fables.

\*\*\*

## Chapter 1

This chapter moves from an identification of the questions raised in J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* to his use of an alter ego in Elizabeth Costello to an examination of how Coetzee uses reason and emotion to raise those questions.

### *The Lives of Animals*, J.M. Coetzee (1999)

Coetzee juxtaposes academic debate and family relationships, raising questions central to critical debate on the relationship between humans and animals: Do reason and verbal discourse imply supremacy? What price do we, and the animals, pay for our system of hierarchy? What do we lose when we lose the sense of ourselves as animals? What is the meaning of life, suffering and death for human and non-human animals? What do we not know about animals and, consequently, about ourselves? With whom do we empathise? Or not empathise? Why? Why not? Can empathy be partitioned and still be called empathy? What does it mean to move beyond anthropocentrism to engage with animals? Can language grow to express new experiences and understandings? Or must it be used to confine us within cultural moulds and expectations? Coetzee raises these questions through several characters without overtly declaring what he himself thinks about animals. Providing answers is not the point – rather he ensures that the questions remain ongoing, intense and provocative, both within the narrative and for the reader. Elizabeth Costello states that ‘writers teach us more than they are aware of’ (53). Such is the case with Coetzee who would seem to acknowledge that there is much of which we readers, like the writers, are unaware. Questions persist, breaking the fourth wall, and therefore, challenging the reader to delve more deeply.

Comprehensive as are the issues explored, the novella still gives no account of actual interaction with specific animals. Barbara Smuts discusses this ‘striking gap’ in her reflection (*The Lives of Animals*, 108-109). Purposefully challenging reason only on its own grounds,

the text simultaneously evades accusations of sentimentality in an academic context, sharpening both the satire and the questions raised. Costello's language may become lyrical and emotive but, like the animals, cannot, in this context, become individualised in relation to a specific creature if the questions raised are to retain universal relevance. In effect, Coetzee satirically demonstrates that reason, itself, cannot defeat reason. Personal experience, empathy and engagement become the more significant as Elizabeth Costello highlights their absence. The emotional truce between mother and son at the end acknowledges the failure of debate, providing no common ground. Connection is only achieved on an experiential, familial or emotional level.

#### J.M. Coetzee and Elizabeth Costello:

Coetzee's discussion of animals takes place primarily through his characterisation of Elizabeth Costello, an alter ego, who first appears in his work in *The Lives of Animals* (1999). She is presented as a tired and aging Australian writer who is still a passionately committed animal rights activist. She is celebrated for her past achievements, particularly for her novel *The House on Eccles Street* where she has focussed on rewriting James Joyce's *Ulysses*<sup>24</sup> from the perspective of Molly Bloom.<sup>25</sup> What we see, then, is multiple layers of metafiction: Coetzee writes about Costello who has written about Joyce's novel, which, itself echoes the structure of Homer's *Odyssey*. Following this, Peter Singer; in his reflection on Costello and Coetzee in the same volume also writes in a metafictional manner by creating a fictional version of

---

<sup>24</sup> James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), regarded as one of the most important modernist novels, is loosely based on Homer's *Odyssey*. It is radical in its use of the 'stream of consciousness' dramatic monologue. Further study of Joyce's representation of animals may demonstrate his also radical views on the relationship between humans and animals, views in keeping with those which are conveyed in contemporary fiction, Caitlin McIntyre discusses this in her article: *Humanities* **2017**, 6(3), 72; doi:[10.3390/h6030072](https://doi.org/10.3390/h6030072), accessed 18<sup>th</sup> February 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Molly Bloom is the wife of Leopold Bloom, Joyce's main character. She delivers the final chapter, or episode, of *Ulysses*. She, too, provides an alternative perspective, more emotional and experiential, in contrast to the preceding intellectual perspectives.

himself. The representation of alternative perspectives, facilitated by this technique, is central to Coetzee's construction of Costello's persona. Coetzee has not sought to present a comforting figure. Costello is uncompromising and unequivocal, generating alternatives against the backdrop of strongly opposing views. Through her, Coetzee is raising questions which are not easily answered, and which remain open; conflicts – moral, academic and emotional – remain unresolved – and are, in fact, intensified. As Midgely states, 'a morality which never shocks anyone dwindles into etiquette' (1998, 9). Ultimately, the unresolved conflicts are intended for the reader who is forced to engage with the alternatives which Costello, and through her, Coetzee, presents.

*The Lives of Animals* is based on Coetzee's own 1997/98 Tanner lectures at Princeton University. The Gates Lectures of the narrative represent the Tanner Lectures, as Appleton College represents Princeton University. Coetzee delivers these lectures using a fictional form within which a writer, Elizabeth Costello, herself gives two lectures on humans' treatment of animals: 'The Philosophers and the Animals' and 'The Poets and the Animals'. The book also includes the responses of four prominent commentators: Marjorie Garber, literary theorist, Peter Singer, philosopher, Wendy Doniger, religious scholar, and Barbara Smuts, primatologist. Amy Gutman's foreword provides an insightful analysis of Coetzee's narrative and the four responses. These represent a wide variety of academic disciplines which can benefit from being understood as part of a more holistic perception of human and animal nature and the relationships between them. The purposeful traversal of these boundaries is evident throughout the lectures and repeatedly acknowledged in the commentaries. Coetzee is using a fictitious character within thinly disguised real-life contexts to present wider philosophical and ethical issues. His text uses these situations to demonstrate the limitations and contradictions inherent in the philosophical defences presented to, and discussed by, Costello. Arguments are raised which Costello denounces as blatantly limited, self-validating, reductionist and/or

reactionary. She demonstrates the limitations of these positions, although those who question her remain unsatisfied as, repeatedly, they do not engage with her views, their own having become entrenched and habitual. Midgely discusses this type of entrenchment, characterising it as ‘unimpressive’ (1998, 17). There are also times when Costello herself, as an ageing writer, painfully at a loss as to how to deal with the contradictions and self-absorption of humanity, does not respond intellectually to repeated challenges. Coetzee’s use of the effect of her silence at these times is eloquent – it is one of the parallels Elizabeth draws between herself and Kafka’s Red Peter – it also recalls her reference to the silence of the animals in the face of human exploitation. Coetzee, thus, characterises her as a kind of sacrificial offering, the biblical suffering servant and lamb to the slaughter<sup>26</sup>, the messianic figure who brings the message of salvation but is rejected to the point of death because the message is not in the interest of her audience<sup>27</sup>. The point is reinforced that the questions surrounding human/animal nature and relationships cannot be contained by purely intellectual discourse or divided neatly among disciplines. It recalls Weil’s questioning of the efficacy of the academy for dealing with such questions (Weil 4).

### The Philosophers and the Animals

Coetzee first presents Elizabeth Costello as old and tired, arriving at the airport in Massachusetts. We see her through the eyes of her son, John Bernard, who collects her bags and drives her to his home in the suburbs. She is a renowned Australian novelist, he, an

---

<sup>26</sup> Isaiah 53, Old Testament.

<sup>27</sup> Stanley Cavell also sees Elizabeth as messianic, as exhibiting, virtually, the ‘stigmata of the suffering’, he refers to her as ‘a voice in the wilderness, crying out news that may be known to virtually none, but to all virtually’ (2007, 290). He repeatedly acknowledges that Elizabeth’s voice has a religious and not only philosophical register (288-294). He reinforces this with a comparison of Elizabeth to Hamlet, Antigone, Phedre and Melisandre, that is, messengers, existentially wounded and isolated to the point of death (295).

assistant professor of physics and astronomy at Appleton where she has been invited to give the Gates Lecture. Although she is a novelist, she has elected to speak on what John dismisses as a ‘hobbyhorse’<sup>28</sup> of hers – animals. There is a tension between them. His wife, Norma, a philosopher, and his mother do not get on, and there is philosophical and personal conflict between the two throughout the narrative. Although John is proud of his mother, he is more concerned with being caught in the conflict between her and Norma, usually centred around eating meat and the value of philosophical argument. Significantly, he is not at all interested in his mother’s subject, preferring to give no thought to humans’ use of animals. In this, he represents the considerable number of people who prefer to remain ignorant of the mechanics of meat production, a point which is central to his mother’s argument. John’s role in the narrative is, perhaps, best understood by focussing on his actions rather than on his declared lack of interest, of which we are consistently made aware, for, while the narrative is told in the third person, it is broadly focalised through his perspective. He provides a unifying integrity in that he represents common standpoints in the debate. John defends and supports his mother emotionally – if not her views, her right to hold them – so long as she keeps those views to herself. He is concerned at the price he is paying and thinks that ‘If she wants to open her heart to animals she should stay at home and open her heart to her cats’ (38). This point is also central to Coetzee’s theme, as he has Costello state repeatedly that there is a need to follow your heart in relating to animals. For example, her later response to the questioner who asks for clarity and proscriptions is that he should, instead, listen to his heart (37). This is the point emphasised by Weil regarding Costello in her ‘Report on the Animal Turn’. She identifies Costello’s sympathy as empathy (Weil 16), as when Costello says, ‘There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination’ (35). When John eventually drives his mother to the airport after her lectures, he still avoids any philosophical discussion about animals. When she is feeling upset,

---

<sup>28</sup> This is the first of many animal images used by Coetzee, ironically, to convey human interests.

tired and isolated he says, 'There, there. It will soon be over' (69). These final words of the narrative bring it structurally full cycle and resonate with the frailty and sacrificial nature of her character. The sacrifice is made, and while sympathy prevails in the moment, the questions she raises as well as questions about her own status remain, both within the narrative and for the reader.

Coetzee's characterisation of Elizabeth is fundamental to his stark exposition of the lives of animals at the mercy of humans. As noted, she is old, tired and vulnerable; she is also speaking outside of her acknowledged discipline, as well as lacking that force of delivery which would itself be a type of conformity, refusing to pay the expected tribute to the bastions of Reason and Language. Within a fictional narrative Coetzee has employed Elizabeth, John and Norma, as well as the participants in the various dialogues and debates, to represent a broad spectrum of academic and social perspectives on humans' attitudes towards animals. This, as well as the persistent use of slaughterhouse imagery juxtaposed with images of joy, gives the narrative an inexorable and unfaltering force, raising questions as uncompromising as they are suffused with a sense of pathos. Marjorie Garber echoes this in her commentary<sup>29</sup>. It is also, acknowledged, from an alternative perspective, by Wendy Doniger who, in more affective terms than Garber, begins her commentary with 'It seems somehow reductionist to respond to these deeply moving readings as if they had been dry academic arguments' (93). Doniger praises Elizabeth's 'fine answer to the philosopher Thomas Nagel's provocative question, 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?' (31). She argues that 'language' is to be understood in a much broader sense than verbal discourse. It is to encompass all communication and communion, eye contact, movement, sound, touch, readily occurring between different species of animals,

---

<sup>29</sup>Garber concludes her reflection on Coetzee's academic novella by asking if he is not really questioning the value of language? (84). Cf. Weil, 3-6 on the need for language to be defined more broadly.

as it does constantly between humans and other animals, and that we do not kill or eat that with which we communicate (101-104)<sup>30</sup>.

As we have seen, Weil, McKay and Midgely all suggest that perspectives on language remain central to the debate on the relationship between humans and animals, language can be used either to link animals with humans or else divide them in a system of hierarchy.<sup>31</sup> As Jacques Derrida has written in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*:

Men would be first and foremost those living creatures who have given themselves the word that enables them to speak of the animal with a single voice and to designate it as the single being that remains without a response, without a word with which to respond (32).

Derrida, while exploring the relationship between humans and other animals, nonetheless employs a reductionist interpretation of ‘language’ here, one that is linked with reason and anthropocentricity, but which is still widely accepted, as is demonstrable from Coetzee’s narrative (22-23). Weil contends that what she terms ‘the return to animals’ represents a desire or a need to find out what we have lost by representing ourselves exclusively through human language, especially when that is used to determine worth (Weil 11). As with Midgely and McKay, Weil views ‘language’ as all forms of communication, including one where the spoken word continues to develop new subtleties and terms in response to interaction or experience as opposed to theory – as Doniger acknowledges in her accounts of ‘communion’ with animals, which is inextricably interwoven through religious traditions.

Coetzee raises the question of language through Elizabeth, who argues that human language can be used to create or deny empathy: ‘when we divert the current of feeling that flows between ourself and the animal into words, we abstract it forever from the animal’ (51).

---

<sup>30</sup>Donna Haraway also argues the holistic nature of communication in *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Chap1, 2-3 (Chicago, Prickly Paradigm Press. 2003).

<sup>31</sup> McKay’s and Midgely’s definitions of anthropomorphism illustrate this.

As Doniger states, ‘we can understand horses because we love them (and, tautologically, we love them because we understand them)’ (102). The implication is that we can love, empathise with, all with whom we can communicate, even, and perhaps especially, if it is by non-linguistic means. Rather than focussing on the suffering or farming of animals, Doniger traces the relationship between humans and animals back to ancient rituals, including the rules of sacrifice and other rationales to assuage guilt at killing and eating other creatures. She demonstrates that humans are perfectly capable of communicating with other species, stating ‘Only by speaking their language will we really be able to know how we would think and feel if we were fish or horses’. Disagreeing with Elizabeth that animals’ refusal to speak represents a dignity of silence – she says they do speak, it is we who ‘refuse to grant them the dignity of listening’ – she links a narrow interpretation of ‘language’ with a lack of empathy: ‘It is language, not food, that ultimately separates us from the animals, even in myths’ (105)<sup>32</sup>. In fact, Elizabeth has not said that animals’ refusal to speak means they do not speak; she refers to Camus and his memory of the death-cry of the hen.

The death-cry of that hen imprinted itself on the boy’s memory so hauntingly that in 1958 he wrote an impassioned attack on the guillotine. As a result, in part, of that polemic, capital punishment was abolished in France. Who is to say then that the hen did not speak? (63).

Therefore, Elizabeth accords with Doniger – it is our narrow interpretation of ‘language’ which renders animals ‘silent’ in the face of suffering. Humans refuse to hear the animal’s voice. As in her comparison of humans’ treatment of animals with the Nazi death camps (20), it is the innocent, human or animal, who retain integrity, or dignity, and the guilty who lose it. Barbara Smuts, in her reflection, argues that ‘personhood connotes a way of being *in relation to others*’ (original emphasis), and when humans do not respect others as beings ‘it is the human, and not the other animal, who relinquishes personhood’ (118).

---

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Danta (4).

Doniger's assessment arrives at the same point as Elizabeth's and John's: that we kill animals because we can, and it suits our convenience to do so (59). Human language allows us to rationalise this. However, what Doniger calls 'the silent language of the eyes' can allow us to empathise. According to Donna Haraway, even someone as sympathetic to enquiry as Derrida<sup>33</sup> found it hard to abandon his logocentrism in the face of the animal other:

Actually to respond to the cat's response to his presence would have required his joining that flawed but rich philosophical canon to the risky project of asking what this cat on this morning cared about, what these bodily postures and visual entanglements might mean and might invite, as well as reading what people who study cats have to say and delving into the developing knowledges of both cat-cat and cat-human behavioral semiotics. Instead, he concentrated on his shame in being naked before this cat (2007, 22).

Derrida's response here demonstrates our difficulty in externalising our perspective beyond our own cultural or linguistic parameters. Haraway sees the encounter with the cat as a missed opportunity of moving beyond anthropocentricity. Similarly, David Brooks in his article 'Seven Gazes', discussing what is experienced when animals gaze, whether at humans or not, is disturbed by Derrida's response to his encounter with the cat, seeing in it our inability to relinquish 'the power of the discourse' to animals (2017, 138), and another instance of our curiosity drowned by self-absorption. He asks what we might have to change if we abandoned such transference (2017, 145). Yet humans can make this move, if we allow our awareness to expand beyond ourselves, as when Brooks asks, 'What *is* Derrida's cat thinking? – we must realise we do not know, for 'The non-human animal is not a mirror' (2017, 143). Like Weil, Haraway and Brooks show that engagement with animals will bring us into territory, unknown to traditional anthropomorphism, emotionally, philosophically, ethically and culturally. A broader, less self-focussed, scope for communication, as in Brooks' open-hearted gaze (2017,

---

<sup>33</sup> Regarding Derrida, Weil states that 'It is not a denial of difference, by any means, but rather an attention to the construction of difference at the very foundation of the ethical. Derrida argues that because of this (challenge) change will come.' (Weil 18). Haraway also acknowledges this, that Derrida changed forever how perspectives on human/animal interaction are understood (2007, 20).

139) leads away from hierarchy towards curiosity and acknowledgement of the other, as was possible in Derrida's failed encounter with his cat. This is also implied in Coetzee's opposition of reason to the imagination, expressed through Elizabeth Costello.

When Elizabeth does begin her lecture, it is with a reference to 'that great fabulist, F. Kafka' and his 'Report to an Academy' (18), drawing links between herself and the ape Red Peter which she assures the audience are not meant as the usual light-hearted joke to make them feel comfortable. The double irony of ensuring they do not take 'the comparison at face value, that is, ironically', sets the tone with which she controversially draws comparisons between humans' behaviour towards animals and the Nazis' treatment of the Jews. The use of the imagination is fundamental to her argument. She emotively links those who refuse to imagine the realities of animal slaughter with those who lived, wilfully oblivious, near Nazi concentration camps, pointing out that it was this 'willed ignorance', not the waging of 'an expansionist war', which caused that generation of Germans to be seen to stand 'a little outside humanity' (20). She calls it 'a sickness of the soul', 'sin', saying that 'only those in the camps were innocent' (20), their moral integrity maintained. She links this with 'Greek and Judeo-Christian thought' saying that even those who do not overtly 'believe in sin' acknowledge the destructive nature of guilt on the psyche which she equates with 'soul' and the double standards we live by when we wilfully '[do] not know' (19). This theme of moral and spiritual guilt runs as an undercurrent in the narrative. Elizabeth later states that she is vegetarian to 'save her soul' (53). In her commentary, Doniger focusses on this 'submerged guilt at the slaughter of animals' (94), and it becomes one of the unresolved issues in the novella, a conflict which is purposefully explored and intensified as it is fundamental to Elizabeth's holistic rather than hierarchical view of animal/human relationships. No attempt is made to make the audience feel comfortable or to soothe its sensibilities. Elizabeth is aware of the effect: 'I know how talk of this kind polarizes people' (22). She states that she wants to bring enlightenment rather than

the conflict which results from the language of division – righteous/sinners, saved/damned, sheep/goats: religious terminology, as is ‘enlightenment’, only the last suggesting transcendence beyond division and an openness to mysteries yet to be discovered. The language and tone emphasise the messianic nature of Elizabeth’s character. Her essential argument for unity, or integrity, through opening the heart and mind is also introduced here.

Elizabeth maintains this tone and thrust, rejecting traditional philosophical reasoning and the value given to language as reductionist, as merely ‘one tendency in human thought’ (23).<sup>34</sup> She provides examples of the inadequacy of reason as a criterion for superiority, seeing it, rather, as the ‘flowering of a faculty’, ‘a rather narrow, self-regenerating intellectual tradition’ (25). Clearly, when the limitations of reason are thus challenged, so too are the grounds for anthropocentricity, and for the hierarchical divisions which humans have created between themselves and other animals. This is, again, Weil’s ‘stance of impenetrability’ (Weil 7). We are repeatedly reminded that Elizabeth is a writer, not a philosopher, although she states that she has ‘that language available to me’, she abandons the semblance of philosophical argument which may still lull her audience into complacency. While she acknowledges that ‘best way to win acceptance’ would be to ‘join myself, like a tributary [...] to the great Western Discourse of man versus beast, reason versus unreason’, she rejects this, as it would mean conceding ‘the entire battle’. Finally, Elizabeth rejects anthropocentric thinking because ‘reason will validate reason’, ‘what else should it do? Dethrone itself?’ (25). Instead, she will continue to argue that ‘there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination’ (35).

---

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Peter Singer in *In Defense of Animals – The Second Wave* quotes Cavalieri who, in ‘The Animal Debate: A Re-examination’ argues that the relegation of non-human animals to ‘second-class beings’ terming it ‘like many other historical phenomena, really accidental’ (54 qtd.in Singer 7).

Rejecting notions of hierarchy based on limited interpretations of intelligence, Elizabeth points to the narrow and reductive nature of experiments where the animal is manipulated to think the less interesting thought, from the ‘purity of speculation’ towards ‘lower, practical, instrumental reason’ (29)<sup>35</sup>. In effect, the experimental animal is not allowed to explore human motivation but is forced by hunger to access food, going from ‘why?’ to ‘how?’ Elizabeth argues that these experiments are limited and self-validating, ‘sadistic games’, played on a caged animal, where the human has already decided what is ‘the right thought’ (29), disregarding the validity of other understandably ‘right thoughts’ such as ‘Where is home and how do I get there?’ (30). Elizabeth uses this to point to the common ground between humans and animals rather than to the divisions created by our exclusivity or, in Weil’s terms, ‘impenetrability’. She states that imprisonment is one experience to which humans and other animals have a similar response, and should, therefore, inspire empathy. Elizabeth’s use of imagination is, here, juxtaposed with the scientists’ lack of it. She anticipates her second lecture, stating that a poet would have had more insight at seeing chimpanzees dress up in the context of scientific experimentation, would have understood that it was about feeling different, while the scientist, Wolfgang Kohler, in this case, would have cried ‘Anthropomorphism!’ because he could not have the sympathy and insight of a poet to ‘feel for the ape’s experience’ (30).

The question raised, then, is what is the difference between anthropomorphism and empathy? Midgely would say there is, essentially, none (1998, 24), that it depends on the intention; that is, for those who really seek to understand the animal, as opposed to those who seek to prove an existing hypothesis. In her final assessment that a caged animal’s primary interest will be to escape and return to its habitat (30), Elizabeth demonstrates that the

---

<sup>35</sup> This reflects Cary Wolfe’s argument “There can be no science or ethics [...] no ‘calculation of the subject’ whose ethical conduct is determined in a linear way by scientific discoveries about animals (or anything else)” (*Animal Rites* 190, qtd. in Weil 17).

experiments have discounted too much in assessing the animals' motivation and that this is due to a self-validating refusal to empathise. Singer also argues this in *Writings on an Ethical Life*, where he says; 'If emotion without reason is blind, then reason without emotion is impotent'(xix) – a point echoed by the fictitious Naomi, in Singer's reflection in *The Lives of Animals* (88). Animal imagery to describe human emotions forms a recurring motif in Coetzee's narrative, used to emphasise the common ground between humans and other animals. Examples of this are in Elizabeth's description of Kohler's experiment with the caged ape, Sultan (29), the repeated comparison of concentration camps with slaughterhouses, and of Rilke's panther with Ted Hughes' jaguar (50-51), both responding as would humans to being caged. Elizabeth uses these examples to illustrate the continuum between those who can and do 'imagine themselves as someone else', those who have this capacity but refuse to empathise, and those who lack it: 'we call them psychopaths' (35).

Coetzee reminds us we are in a narrative, not only a lecture, when Norma, in the audience, says to John 'She is rambling' (31). Norma, the (normal) rationalist, does not engage because Elizabeth is speaking outside of Norma's scope of reference for an academic lecture. However, the short exchanges such as this, which punctuate the narrative remind the reader of the narrower, more emotive family context in the background. They recall the antipathy between Norma and Elizabeth, and that Norma is likely to represent other hostile members of the audience, and, indeed, in Coetzee's readership, an antipathy perhaps reflected by the sparse clapping at the end of the lecture.

Neither Elizabeth, nor Coetzee, however, is 'rambling'. Having exposed the gulf humans have created between themselves and animals, Elizabeth refers to the American philosopher Thomas Nagel's essay 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?'. Nagel maintains that we cannot imagine

what it is like to be a bat, it is too alien<sup>36</sup>. Elizabeth, on the other hand, suggests another continuum, this time with a Martian at one end and man at the other. She ironically comments that this also presupposes degrees of humanity, with an academic philosopher at the positive extreme. When Elizabeth says that we refuse to think of death or of others unless they are ‘rammed’ in our faces (32), her point is that we need to relate on the level of experience, not on the level of reason. Her language then changes, she now speaks in more imaginative terms about the ‘Fullness of being’ – ‘To be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being. [...] To be full of being is to live as a body-soul. One name for the experience is *joy*’ (33). Weil quotes this in ‘A Report on the Animal Turn’ (16), as does Singer in his reflection (90) to illustrate the power of empathy and the imagination.

This is Elizabeth’s most lyrical or spiritual expression of her main argument: ‘To be alive is to be a living soul. An animal, and we are all animals – is an embodied soul.’ (33); and, ‘To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being’, ‘the flow of joy’ (34), a state which, she points out, is ‘hard to sustain in confinement’ (33) and has no place in zoos or institutions.<sup>37</sup> Her argument echoes that of John Berger<sup>38</sup> on the failure of humans to ‘encounter the look’ caged animals, failure to empathise with those on whom they perpetrate violence, ‘we close our hearts.’ (35). When it comes to those who ‘did not know’ about the atrocities of the Nazis, we think there must be retribution – but, she bitterly points out, the

---

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Lorraine Daston who discusses the ‘impossibility’ of imagining ourselves into the being of another type of being; ‘angelic’, ‘animal’ or ‘human’, yet we have always sought to do so, in all cultures and from earliest times, in fact, the closer we go to our roots as with children or primitive societies the more common are our acknowledgements of our common ground with animals and expressed through our use of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism (2005, 37-58).

<sup>37</sup> Donna Haraway extends the idea of ‘embodiedness’ to ‘embodied cross-species sociality’ (2003, 4), extending Elizabeth’s argument to include the interconnectedness of all creatures.

<sup>38</sup> Berger is illustrating that we have lost the connection with other animals which has been crucial to the development of our own society: ‘Nowhere in a zoo can a stranger encounter the look of an animal. At the most the animal’s gaze flickers and passes on’ (1980, 26).

opposite is true: 'we can do anything and get away with it' (35). With this abrupt moral indictment of humanity, she ends her first lecture.

The audience is unsettled, the applause scattered. Norma says indignantly, 'Not her *métier*, argumentation. She should not be here.' (36). She is about to challenge Elizabeth but desists at John's plea. The issues are mainly left to simmer. Elizabeth has agreed to take one or two questions from the floor, and 'a tall bearded man' wants to know what she is 'actually targeting' and asks for clarity. In effect he is asking for principles or precepts and, for Elizabeth to resort to these, even though she has argued for empathy to inform one's treatment of animals. Her questioner has totally missed the point, representing many who wish to live by general strictures. Elizabeth, who seems nervous, responds 'If principles are what you want to take away from this talk, I would have to respond, open your heart, and listen to what your heart says', and 'I have never been much interested in proscriptions, dietary or otherwise ... I am more interested in what lies behind them' (37). Then, like the animals, she falls silent. The questioner disengages; he and the audience are not satisfied; they require definitive answers.

The formal dinner after the lecture provides a framework for different responses. John is initially nervous at the conflict he anticipates. In fact, the discussion is respectful, if limited, and not adversarial, except for Norma. John is relieved when 'the ambiguous fish' (38) is served as well as a vegetarian option, representing yet another degree of compromise. Only three people order the fish, perhaps in deference to Elizabeth. Coetzee has maintained a discernible contrast between characters' words and their actions, which would seem to support Elizabeth's theme of appealing to the heart and not to reason, as solutions are only ever presented on this level.

Dinner discussion centres on the bases on which humans differentiate themselves from animals. Elizabeth continues to make no effort to placate, on either a personal or academic

level. The conflict between Elizabeth and Norma continues, and when the president, Garrard, seeks to diffuse the tension by declaring respect for her moral conviction, Costello herself points out that she is wearing leather shoes and has a leather purse, calling this ‘degrees of obscenity’ (44) and refusing any attempt at exoneration. She is messianic, will not spare herself at the expense of her message, declaring that her own vegetarianism comes out of a desire ‘to save her soul’ (43), at once evoking a stark depth of moral accountability or guilt, and deflecting possible accusations of moral grandstanding by focussing on herself and her own inadequacies. Looking ‘grey, tired and confused’ (44), she again presents as the sacrificial victim who has given everything. Coetzee has created a palpable tension, only increased by juxtaposition with conventional efforts to diffuse it.

Significantly, no communication or communion has been achieved philosophically, only that achieved through emotional or experiential interchanges – in other words through the affective devices of fiction. Finally, despairing and exhausted, Elizabeth condemns the narrowness of the views expressed, her voice failing on an unfinished question (45). Adding to the rising tension, Norma begins to challenge Elizabeth again, but the president intervenes, this time successfully. He rises, forcing an end to the discussion and praises the lecture, returning, finally, to a comfortable acceptance of respect for all views, although Elizabeth herself rejects any participation in this withdrawal.

Through his characterisation of Elizabeth Costello and her interactions, Coetzee has raised fundamental and ongoing questions about how humans relate to animals. He has challenged the assumption of superiority based on reason, language or consciousness. This, in turn, challenges notions of hierarchy and anthropocentricity. The arguments raised hinge on humans’ refusal to empathise, while claiming empathy as a characteristic of humanity. Such lack of cohesion and disjointed thinking is shown by Costello as common in both the sciences and humanities. Reason and emotion, speech and silence, life and death, joy and suffering,

power and powerlessness have all been starkly opposed and suffused with an undercurrent of guilt and reckoning to illustrate the self-serving interests of hierarchy in the relationship between humans and animals. These concepts and the tone of this lecture set the stage for Elizabeth's second lecture. The questions raised about the nature of our relationship with animals do not merely challenge existing assumptions, they imply an openness to that ongoing sense of discovery also advocated by Weil. Costello's second lecture, 'The Poets and the Animals' further explores these concepts.

Bob McKay's comments are particularly relevant to the issue of empathy raised here. On anthropomorphism in literature, he accords with Mary Midgely (1979, 24), examining whether writers who deal with animals are writing just about humans, or are they giving a value to animals' interests at least equal to their value to humans (McKay 16). Both argue that anthropomorphism can be viewed as humans using their imagination, to understand animals, rather than using them as surrogates for human agendas, disregarding the animals' own concerns. These positions need not be mutually exclusive, hence McKay's both/and position on anthropomorphism, illustrated by his reference to the cows in *Animal Farm* (McKay 12-15). It is the intention which matters, a recognition of common ground, a desire to empathise or a disinterest in doing so. Weil also supports this view of anthropomorphism when, like Midgely, she recognises the irony that empathy must exist before anthropomorphism can be considered (Weil 15). Here, contrasting Rilke's poetry with that of Ted Hughes, Elizabeth states:

That is the kind of poetry I bring to your attention today; poetry that does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead the record of an engagement with him (51).

McKay also states that telling ourselves a story is how we think, because we continually employ narratives as a means of structuring thought. Therefore, fiction would seem to be the

most effective way of developing our thinking and sustaining integrity between reason and empathy, as advocated by Elizabeth. Costello's second lecture abandons the philosophical context of her first lecture, instead contending that poetry has the power to evoke empathy. In context of McKay's both/and position regarding animals in literature, Coetzee's narrative raises questions, which are ongoing, about the value of fiction, poetry and academic debate in human relations, as well as for our relationships with animals; questions repeated by Garber in the final paragraphs of her reflection, questions perhaps inspired and intensified by the absence of answers in Coetzee's narrative:

Poetry makes nothing happen, W. H. Auden once wrote. But is that true?  
And must it be true? What has poetry to offer, what has language to offer,  
by way of solace, except analogy, except the art of language? In these two  
elegant lectures we thought John Coetzee was talking about animals.  
Could it be, however, that all along he was really asking, "What is the  
value of literature?" (84).

Prior to the second lecture, Coetzee returns to that aspect of Elizabeth's first lecture which was considered particularly controversial, the comparison between how animals are treated by humans with the Nazis' treatment of the Jews. This becomes the more controversial, because of the overwhelming consensus that the Nazis' treatment of the Jews was an absolute atrocity and an unequivocal crime against humankind, even to the extent of raising existential questions about the nature of humanity. Such 'willed ignorance' (20) is now universally seen as indefensible. Significantly, this is one of the few times Coetzee allows common ground to be established between Elizabeth and other characters. The audience, usually impervious to Elizabeth's arguments, was provoked to engage. Engagement makes it difficult to suppress the imagination, leading to a more emotive response. Elizabeth has linked self-delusion with rationalism, discrediting the latter. Her imagery and comparison of the Nazi's treatment of the Jews with the ongoing treatment of animals (21), then, becomes more difficult to dismiss, and, therefore, more disturbing. We recall that Elizabeth has repeatedly called for empathy to replace rationalism in our relationships with animals (34-35). The implication is that empathy

cannot be partitioned; we cannot empathise only when convenient and still call it empathy. The atrocities of Nazi Germany would have been prevented by proper empathy.

Discussing this comparison with John, and the audience's response to Elizabeth's first lecture, Norma says she could 'feel the hackles rising all around me' (49), another example of Coetzee's ironic use of animal imagery to convey human emotion, evoking common ground between animals and humans, even as Norma questions it. John and Norma agree that the Jewish poet Abraham Stern's absence from the formal dinner is a protest, eloquent in its silence. Stern has read Elizabeth's books but if he was present at the lectures he did not speak. His only reply is a note, in which he rejects Elizabeth's comparison between the atrocities of the Shoah with those of continuing animal slaughter as 'blasphemy', declaring that he could not 'break bread' with her as he could not respect her views. This is the argument later adopted by Elizabeth in her denunciation of the philosopher O'Hearne's refusal to acknowledge the emotional lives of animals (65-66). In fact, Coetzee has characterised both Elizabeth and Stern as sacrificial, suffering, aged, their silence eloquent. So, too, the animals are characterised as silent, suffering and sacrificial. However, it is left to the reader to see the common ground.<sup>39</sup>

We recall that Stern is a poet and Elizabeth, about to give her lecture on 'The Poets and the Animals' has already turned to the imagination for understanding and empathy. This, as well as his claim to the privileges of age, again emphasises their similarities. There is pathos in Stern's evocation of the suffering and sacrifice of the Jews' experience linked with the biblical symbolism of 'breaking bread' which connotes both a physical and spiritual communion on an elemental level (50). Stern's refusal to 'break bread' with Elizabeth and his silence due to the failure of words, reinforce the overall theme of division, intractable in the absence of empathy.

---

<sup>39</sup> The issues of common ground and empathy in the comparison between the Nazis' treatment of the Jews and the continued suffering of animals re-emerge in Peter Singer's reflection implied in his reference to I.B. Singer discussed below.

As we shall see this refusal becomes a recurring motif in the narrative. Elizabeth's call for empathy and her evocation of suffering transcend the logic of the debate. Her appeal rests on such transcendence of the imagination over language and rationalism which does not find expression in the text. Again, Coetzee leaves this to the reader.

In contrast, Peter Singer in his reflection does debate the issue. Addressing his daughter, Naomi, Singer's fictitious professor states 'But a comparison is not necessarily an equation' (86). The use of 'necessarily' is ironic in that it allows common ground, provoking discussion on the differences between sameness and equality. Peter Singer's own stance on this is clear; he argues that while animals do not have the same interests as humans, they deserve equal consideration for the interests that they do have (2006, 5). It is Naomi who more fully defends this position in the reflection than does her father (88-89).

Singer's continuation of Coetzee's use of the academic debate within a fictitious form and family context reinforces its purpose of raising, rather than resolving, controversial questions about the relationship between humans and animals. To further intensify this, Singer has his professor (using an alter ego, as does Coetzee) refer to the Jewish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer, who, he says, also uses fictitious characters to compare the treatment of animals with the Shoah<sup>40</sup>. Naomi links all this together, reminding her father that he has always equated speciesism with racism, each representing self-serving division and a refusal to empathise.

In context, the radically alternative perspective to that presented by Coetzee through Abraham Stern and implied here, but not explained, by Peter Singer's reference to I.B. Singer requires exploration. I.B. Singer's stories are unfailingly stories of empathy and revelation.

---

<sup>40</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, 1904-1991, a Polish born Jewish writer, awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1978. He wrote prolifically and only in Yiddish. His stories are permeated with the existential pain, suffering and transcendence emerging from the Jews' experience during the Nazi persecution. He had no difficulty in empathising with animals, for him the suffering of the animals immediately evoked common ground, 'all people are Nazis; for the animals it is an eternal Treblinka. And yet man demands compassion from heaven' (1968, 271).

For example, in 'The Letter Writer' his protagonist Herman Gombiner, a Jewish translator in New York, who writes many letters to strangers all over the world, communications which we understand contain understanding and integrity. Herman, who is made redundant and is sick and aged beyond his years, by deprivation and by memories of his family in Poland, all dead at the hands of the Nazis, channels all his knowledge of suffering into empathy, he sees 'every person as a new experiment in God's laboratory' (272). His empathy is centred on the little mouse, Huldah, who is the only other resident in his simple but book-lined apartment – every night he leaves bread, cheese and water, or milk, for her, she is not afraid of him. When he falls ill with pneumonia he is visited and nursed by one of his many correspondents, Rose Beechman. On his recovery he is devastated that Huldah will have been neglected during his illness:

Well, you've had your life. You've served your time in this forsaken world, the worst of all worlds, this bottomless abyss, where Satan, Asmodeus, Hitler and Stalin prevail. You are no longer confined to your hole – hungry, thirsty and sick, but at one with the God-filled cosmos, with God himself [...]  
Who knows why you had to be a mouse? (271)

It has been more important to him that Huldah should live than that he himself should. He is willing to die, 'always lowering the wick of life' (263), but he is also willing to live if he has a purpose, is needed to help someone, that is Huldah. He prays – 'I don't need help anymore but don't let that poor creature die of hunger!' (267). When he discovers that she is alive he rejoices, 'Holy creature, have no fear'. Huldah raises her head with a human look of love and gratitude (264). He is grateful to Rose who followed his instruction to feed Huldah without query. Unlike in Coetzee's novella, such immediate understanding between characters is common in Singer's stories as communication is never assumed to depend solely on the spoken word, natural affinity follows generosity, communication is through looks, dreams and writing:

Herman was filled with a love both for the mouse and the woman, Rose Beechman who had understood his feelings, had obeyed his request and given the mouse some milk. "I am not worthy. I am not worthy." He muttered. 'It is all pure grace. [...] Little mouse, hallowed creature, saint (274-5).

Also significant in context of Elizabeth Costello's argument is Herman's ability see beyond physical boundaries, which is common throughout Singer's stories, both Herman and Rose commune with their dead relatives, often in dreams. Likewise, the New York winter snow is blended with the snow of Kalomin, his home in Poland, the past and his memories blend with the present. Herman accepts this as he does when he sees inanimate objects move. He is always open to revelation, imminent throughout the story and culminating in an ending which is rife with biblical imagery and symbolism of renewal, an expression of the poetic imagination which Elizabeth has identified as the gateway to empathy:

The night has ended like a dream and was followed by an obscure reality, self-absorbed, sunk in the perpetual mystery of being. A pigeon was flying through the snowfall, intent on carrying out its mission [...] The books were momentarily bathed in a purplish light illuminating the old bindings and the last remnants of gold-engraved and half legible titles. Sunrise rosy light on the books. It had all the quality of a revelation (276).

The mild tone in which Peter Singer has his philosopher briefly refer to another Jewish writer whose perspectives on the common ground between humans and animals, reason, language and arbitrary divisions are, in fact, the antithesis of those of Stern, but which resonate strongly with Elizabeth Costello's appeal for empathy and imagination deepens the irony inherent in Peter Singer's reflection, exposing the mean-spirited reductionism of Elizabeth's detractors.

Ultimately, Singer's reflection, itself, replicates Costello's argument in that the same questions are raised, and still not resolved through theorising. The fictitious Singer repeatedly stops short of agreement with Costello: 'There's a more radical egalitarianism about humans and animals running through her lecture than I would be prepared to defend' (86). Countering this, Naomi, reminding him that he wrote a book the first chapter of which was 'All Animals are Equal', (Singer 1975, 1-23), points to the limitations of reasoning and theory and criticises the present discussion as 'becoming purely theoretical' (88). Their dialogue does, however, become emotive on the value of Max the dog's life relative to human life: whether it matters,

or not; if he anticipates his death, or the future; if he has value as an individual<sup>41</sup>. The professor, although he has been patting Max, evades the issue, resorting, again, to theory, ‘Let’s leave Max out of it, since mentioning his name seems to excite him and distress you’ (89). Singer, just as Coetzee has done, ironically, shows that theory and practice – or lived experience – often conflict if we attempt to separate reason and emotion (see Midgley 1998, 9-18). We see that the emotional response of neither Naomi nor the dog can be easily dismissed; in fact, the discussion becomes even more emotive. Ultimately, she leaves her father to his ‘lecture mode’ (90) and the questions remain. Singer underlines that reason and emotion are not readily disentangled, as Coetzee has demonstrated through Norma and Stern, and through Elizabeth who continuously argues in the context of a fictional academic lecture for opening the heart, employing the imagination, which will inspire rather than exclude empathy for other creatures.

Reflecting Coetzee, Singer raises all the issues relevant to the debate about the relationship between animals and humans. He explores, particularly, the questions about empathy inherent in Costello’s comparison of the treatment of animals with the Nazis’ treatment of the Jews. If Coetzee’s characters represent conventional views, Stern’s perspective serves to raise ongoing questions about engagement, logic, emotion and empathy in human/animal relations. Singer, through Naomi, delivers a final ‘coup de grace’. In response to her father’s initial dilemma, she advocates fiction as the most appropriate mode of response to Coetzee’s lectures. Singer is, therefore, upholding Coetzee’s use of fiction as a means of reconciling reason and emotion and creating empathy.

### The Poets and the Animals

Another informal family context precedes Costello’s second lecture. While tidying toys with Norma, John attempts to present his mother’s perspective on animals’ experience of the

---

<sup>41</sup> Haraway quoting Derrida, says that he did see his cat as ‘someone’, ‘irreplaceable’, (Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I am*, 378-379, qtd. In Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 19).

world which Norma contemptuously dismisses as ‘easy shallow relativism’ (47). Coetzee is establishing that questions remain and have not been adequately answered by rationality. It is, again, clear from Norma’s indignation and defensiveness that reason and emotion are not easily distinguished. This is also emphasised by a change in John’s role. He now engages more authentically, his attitude towards his mother seeming more empathetic. His actions convey an integrity between reason and emotion, in contrast to the polarised views of others. This role is developed, at times, through the second lecture and is intrinsic to the emotionally charged ending of the narrative.

Coetzee avoids any formal introductions in the second lecture by having John arrive late, establishing a more relaxed tone. It is in a seminar room, not a lecture hall. The mood is less constrained, the terms and language more affective. Elizabeth is now interpreting poets’ use of animals in their poetry. The notion that ‘animals stand for human qualities’ had arisen at the formal dinner, however, ‘the fabulous qualities of animals’ was abruptly dismissed as ‘a different matter entirely’ (39) by ‘the large man’ who is later identified as Thomas O’ Hearne, Professor of Philosophy at Appleton. This reinforces the distinction between traditional anthropomorphism and the recognition of animals in their own right inherent in Elizabeth’s argument. O’Hearne will pose three final questions to Elizabeth after her second lecture. Coetzee uses these to condense the unresolved opposition of reason to empathy, of philosophy to poetry or the imagination. As O’Hearne argues for division and hierarchy we recall that the transcendence of disciplinary boundaries runs as a consistent counterfoil to this throughout both the novella itself and the reflections that follow it.

Elizabeth contrasts Rilke’s poem ‘The Panther’ and Ted Hughes’ ‘The Jaguar’ and ‘Second Glance at a Jaguar’ as a means of discovering the possibilities of human engagement with animals. For Rilke, she says, the animal, the panther, is ‘a stand in for something else’, that is, a law of Physics, centrifugal force, a pressure build-up expressed in scientific terms and from

a human perspective. Elizabeth states that Rilke ‘does not get beyond this point’, does not recognise or empathise with the caged panther whose desperation to escape results in a ‘stupefied, narcotized’ circling (50). This perspective is akin to the scientist Kohler’s experiments on the captured apes (27-30). On the other hand, Elizabeth argues that Hughes ‘is feeling his way towards a different kind of being-in-the-world’ which is ‘held in the collective experience’ and one not ‘entirely foreign to us’ (51), a further reference to the common response of humans and animals to being held captive. As Elizabeth describes Hughes’ poetry, he may be seeking, in Weil’s terms, to ‘attend to difference without distorting it’ (4). Elizabeth claims that Hughes’ poems, here ‘The Jaguar’, ask us to ‘imagine our way into that way of moving, to inhabit that body.’ She emphasises that, with Hughes, it is not a matter of ‘inhabiting another mind’, but of inhabiting another body (51), a matter of bodily experience and not of reason, for ‘we cannot experience abstractions’ (53). His poetry is not seeking to express an idea ‘about an animal’ but to express ‘the record of an engagement with him’, that is of communication (51), although she acknowledges that it does not arrive at the point of anticipating a response, remaining ‘Platonic’ despite its vivid imagery. Hughes’ reasoning, here, still allows him to remain detached from the individual animal’s experience (53-54).<sup>42</sup>

In comparing Rilke and Hughes, Elizabeth has described an interpretation of animal behaviour based on human instrumentality – an older style of anthropomorphism – versus one that attempts to empathise with the animal other. Are we using the animal to express something else, as Rilke does, or to express our engagement with it, as Hughes does, experiencing physically the animal’s confinement? This accords with Midgely’s definition of anthropomorphism: those who are trying to understand the animal will do so, and this is not

---

<sup>42</sup> Barbara Smuts, in her reflection, states that she would ‘phrase Elizabeth’s point slightly differently so that it has less to do with poetic imagination and more to do with real-life encounters with other animals’ (120). In this she expands the discussion to a dimension expressly absent from Coetzee’s narrative.

undermined by the necessary use of one's human faculties to accomplish this (1998, 133). Any creature must use several of its faculties to understand another, even one of the same species. Rather than anthropomorphism, then, it is the deeper question of motivation, of the imagination and the use of language which is at issue, explored through the relationship between the poets and the animals. We recall that by the end of the first lecture Coetzee, through Costello, has positioned us to engage the imagination and empathy in relation to animals. The body/soul dichotomy has been rejected in favour of 'embodied soul' (33). We have been reminded that the imagination does not have such limitations as have, at times, been proposed. Reason and emotion are shown to be not so easily disentangled, and language has been shown to express imagination as well as reason. The second lecture builds on these insights.

Elizabeth acknowledges that when 'we divert the current of feeling that flows between ourselves and the animals into words, we abstract it forever from the animal', as language is 'an entirely human economy' (51). John arrives as Elizabeth is expressing her main argument: that we need to relate to animals on the level of experience, not of language or concepts. She has demonstrated that humans, like any animal, are perfectly capable of relating through experience, and that language may, at times, be a barrier to this. Her terminology has become increasingly affective – 'We have become too many. There is no time to respect and honor all animals we need to feed ourselves. We need factories of death; we need factory animals. [...] it was from the Chicago stockyards that the Nazis learned how to process bodies.' Hughes' jaguar, on the other hand, 'ripples within us, he takes over our body, he is us' (53), implying a linguistic flexibility and potential yet to be explored, linking language directly with experience and empathy, as does poetry and the use of the imagination, rather than through reason or self-interest<sup>43</sup>.

---

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Weil (2-4).

Elizabeth is challenged on her use of Ted Hughes to support her arguments about relating to animals. She acknowledges that Hughes ‘looks at animals much as paleolithic hunters used to do’ (52). She sees him as one of a long line of poets who celebrate the primitive and repudiate the Western bias toward abstract thought, also evident in Hemingway’s interest in hunting and bullfighting. Elizabeth characterises this as ‘deeply masculine’ but, also, acknowledges that there is nevertheless ‘something attractive about it at an ethical level’ (52). For she contrasts this attitude to animals with the contemporary ‘factories of death’ (53), implying that it seems a fairer, more respectful context if animals’ and humans’ interests come into conflict. Elizabeth’s point here is not to align her views with Hughes’ embrace of the pre-modern but to show that ‘writers teach us more than they are aware of’ (53). Garber in her reflection explores the metafictional implications of this – that Elizabeth is referring to Coetzee himself (75). Hughes’ poetry supports the argument here as it demonstrates that we can ‘embody animals’, because ‘breath and sense’ are ‘mingle[d]’ through ‘poetic invention’, so that ‘We are for a brief while the jaguar [...] he is us’ (53)<sup>44</sup>. This resembles Elizabeth’s earlier point about how an understanding of ‘bat being’ might be achieved through creative thinking and poetic language, illustrating Weil’s ‘sympathetic imagination’ (Weil 7). Elizabeth’s repeated reference here to the ‘primitive’ reminds us that human nature is characterised by more fundamental instincts than can be satisfied by ‘abstractions’ (53).

Costello states that Hughes’ poetry is still removed, without a holistic sense of the creature, as he writes only about ‘the’ jaguar as a singular type (53-54). Elizabeth points to the bitter irony that humans, who pride themselves on comprehending the complex nature of the environment and its ecology, should still be satisfied with reducing natural phenomena to an

---

<sup>44</sup> **Donna Haraway shows that this embodiedness is not just imaginative. ‘I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such ...’ (2007, 3-4).**

idea, a philosophy. She further questions why, when we see an animal fighting for its life, we simply say ‘with Aquinas’, it is just programmed to fight, ‘it lacks self-consciousness’ (54) when we ourselves share this instinct. Elizabeth is arguing that resorting to theory is limiting, can never go beyond itself, and is of no use when ‘deal[ing] with alterity’ (Weil 13). Norma, who represents rationality, or ‘normality’, is not present at this lecture to challenge Elizabeth’s stance, consolidating the division between the poets and the philosophers.

John, however, is present. Throughout the narrative he provides a focus for the different allegations and misconceptions that may arise in the minds of the audience. Here, he represents yet another common position in relation to the issue of animal/human relationship. Although she has made no such distinctions, he now thinks Elizabeth is advocating an empathy towards animals based on how attractive they are to humans, such as ‘huggable pandas’. He considers that this is typical of ‘the whole animal rights business’ (55), that it seeks to manipulate the public by appealing to emotions. However, Elizabeth, or Coetzee, has not resorted to any means of glossing over reality and John’s reaction seems emotive and facile, given that ‘his mind has been wandering’ (55) during her speech.

Elaine Marx of the English Department who introduced the first lecture now asks a question which results in efforts at defining human nature; ‘Are you not expecting too much of humankind?’ (55) and declaring it an aspect of human nature to exploit. She uses Swift’s Gulliver as an example of one who is left to yearn for a state they cannot attain. Elizabeth terms this ‘An interesting question’ but she points out that Swift was a ‘dark ironist’ (56) whose fable should not be taken so literally but seen as providing insight into some less than savory aspects of human nature, rather than defining it absolutely. Elizabeth proceeds to emphasise the satirical intent of Swift’s fable, describing the Houyhnhnms as ‘gods of a kind, cold, Apollonian’ (57). To them, Gulliver must be a god, like them, or a beast, like the Yahoos. This test is clearly not appropriate as we know we are like neither of Swift’s categories (57).

Elizabeth argues that were we to pursue Swift's fable to its logical conclusion, accepting Marx's argument that the tendency to exploit is intrinsic to human nature, Gulliver would have demonstrated this from the beginning. He would, then, have brought an army to slaughter or enslave 'a race of divine or divinely created beings' bringing 'down on ourselves a curse thereby' (58)<sup>45</sup>, the horses standing for reason and man for physical force (57). Elizabeth describes the results which would follow on this view of human nature: that the 'curse' would represent the conflict we experience between our declared values and the consequences of our practices, exposing our common unwillingness to pursue our standpoints to their logical conclusion. Such conflict leaves us uncomfortable, with a sense of guilt and a fear of reckoning, as our premises are exposed as hollow. We cannot accept the consequences of our exploitation; we can only cultivate a blindness to it.<sup>46</sup> The persistence of this conflict undermines Marx's argument that exploitation should be accepted as intrinsic to our nature (55). Therefore, the conflicts remain.

At this point, there is a break during which John engages more fully with his mother on the issues she has raised. Again, his actions are more eloquent than his words, particularly in the absence of Norma. We are reminded of Elizabeth's age and tiredness – nearing the end of her life, metaphorical 'autumn leaves are falling' as they walk – still, she answers his questions vigorously, as she did the others. He asks why she thinks poetry could change anything, 'close down the slaughterhouses' (58), since she has argued that talk changes nothing. Elizabeth says, 'I don't know what I want to do. I just don't want to sit silent.' (59). She and John agree that humans have contempt for animals because, like prisoners of war, we have defeated them and

---

<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth refers to the myth of Apollo who cursed Odysseus and his men for taking over the island of Thrinacia, sacred to Apollo, and slaughtering the inhabitants. This also recalls older beliefs of animals as gods, discussed in detail by Doniger in her commentary.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter*, 'Getting Animals in Focus' 9-18. Midgley, also using the sight metaphor, refers to the 'double vision' we experience 'when principles collide, and when principle merely collides violently with practice' (9).

can do what we like with them – a similar conclusion to the first lecture and equally unsettling, although the two differ starkly in their acceptance of this. Intimating a much broader perspective than this closed debate, Elizabeth does point out, and Coetzee through her, that rats have not surrendered, we do not have control of them and, so with insects and microbes, they will outlast us (59).

The final session of the lecture takes the form of a debate in which philosopher Thomas O’Hearne is to ask three questions. O’Hearne was not named at the dinner, remaining enigmatic, not expressing definite viewpoints, rather interjecting calmly, if provocatively (39), Coetzee maintaining our consciousness of his presence. In stark contrast, now, reminiscent of an attack, O’Hearne emerges in the formality of the final session as a forceful channel for the issues raised in the first lecture. His initial question concerns the arrogance of Western thought and the animal rights movement which would seek to impose its newly formed thinking on the rest of the world. Elizabeth points out that ‘kindness’ in the sense that we are all of one ‘kind’ is not the preserve of Western cultures but is more fundamental to human nature than any culture as children will ‘relate naturally with animals’ unless taught otherwise (61). She adds that Descartes’ distinctions do not hold in the light of Darwin’s and subsequent scientific discoveries. Furthermore, Elizabeth states that as the West has pioneered intensive farming it should take the responsibility for re-evaluating it, that is ‘aton[ing]’ (61) for it. The parallels between animal, gender and racial rights are acknowledged by both. Elizabeth has demonstrated that the issue is of global, not cultural, significance – a position strongly highlighted by Doniger in her commentary.

O’Hearne’s second question asks if animals are not better off in a hierarchical relationship with humans as they can only achieve the linguistic expression of a human with severe retardation. What is the point of allocating them rights they cannot defend? Clearly, such a criterion would condemn many humans, as well as animals, to exploitation. Despite

Elizabeth's previous points concerning language, O'Hearne persists in seeing it as the main criterion of worth. In an exasperated tone, Elizabeth returns to her analysis of the scientific experiments on animal behaviour, discussed in the first lecture. She declares that 'It is the experiments themselves that are imbecile' and that she would be insulted were her intelligence to be measured in this way. Contrary to their reductionism, she points out that humans understand by 'immersing ourselves and our intelligence in complexity' (62), but do not acknowledge that animals may also do this. O'Hearne's points are self-defeating in their obvious limitations.

O'Hearne's final question concerns cruelty. He maintains it is licit to kill animals as, he declares, their lives are not as important to them as ours are to us. He opposes gratuitous cruelty, but maintains that, as animals lack the ability to intellectualise, they cannot fear death. He returns to Aquinas for reason, as he did to Descartes for language, to support his contentions. Essentially, he is excluding animals from any kindred concern or empathy as, he claims, they cannot fear or imagine their own death, while he, himself, shows little ability to imagine it either. This is the same self-defeating logic that Elizabeth exposed earlier. Coetzee is clearly using this debate framework as a form of recapitulation on the points presented earlier. However, as he condenses the arguments to their essence in the figure of O'Hearne, their anthropocentricity and deep-rooted refusal to empathise become even more pronounced, to the point of satire. Coetzee has not allowed for any mitigation of direct conflict or polarised opinions in this narrative. No change is seen in the characters or their views. He does not seek to reconcile the conflicts. The effect is, rather, to highlight those conflicts and gulfs created by not engaging authentically with the challenges raised about human and animal relationships.

The heated mood and Elizabeth's increasingly forceful and uncompromising tone, juxtaposed with her age and tiredness, reminds us of the sacrificial element of her character, akin, as she has claimed (18), to that of Kafka's Red Peter both raising 'doubts on the efficacy

of the academy for dealing with this question' of animal/human relations (Weil 4). Repeatedly, she brings the argument back to the need to empathise and imagine, to abandon the body/soul dichotomies which inform hierarchical perspectives: 'If I do not convince you, it is because my words, here, lack the power to bring home to you the wholeness [...] of that animal being'. That is why, she states, O'Hearne must 'read the poets', and understand that, for animals, 'their whole being is in the living flesh' (65). She has reached her height of intensity and exasperation when she dismisses intellectual arguments about animal attachments to their lives or to their mothers, asking if they should have 'to take a course in philosophy' to gain acknowledgement for their attachments, 'What sort of philosophy is this? [...] What good do its piddling distinctions do?' (66). She emphatically rejects these distinctions, likening them to those based on race.

The motif of 'breaking bread' with moral or philosophical opponents has been sustained throughout the narrative, as representing affinity or common ground; for example, Norma's insistence that Elizabeth's grandchildren eat chicken in the nursery, the formal dinner, and the absence of the Jewish poet at that dinner. Elizabeth acknowledges the difficulty such intimacy would present to her, but she points out that opponents may discuss their disagreements when they share reason, by which she means 'common ground', respect, and the ability to engage. Now, referring to O'Hearne, she says 'I am not sure I want to concede that I share reason with my opponent' (66). She condemns O'Hearne's version of reason as entrenched, purely traditional, invalid as it precludes real exchange or empathy. In her fullest and most extreme condemnation she discredits again those previous arguments which Coetzee has condensed in O'Hearne's questions. Elizabeth rejects his resort to the long conventions of rationality stretching back to 'the Stoics and Aristotle'. Decisively and bitterly, she concludes, 'if reason is what sets me apart from the veal calf, then thank you but no thank you, I'll talk to someone else' (67). These are the last words of Elizabeth's lectures, and, clearly, there is a breakdown,

increased hostility and bitterness; further evidence that language cannot, of itself, bridge the gap. There would be a need to incorporate the will to understand, the empathy and imagination for which Elizabeth has argued, clearly missing in the exchange with O’Hearne.

Elizabeth’s final words here are not, however, Coetzee’s final words. Later, past midnight, we return to the family context, in which John defends his mother against Norma’s continued derision. Elizabeth has appealed for empathy. However, Coetzee’s narrative, his choice of form – a novella based on two fictional academic lectures – has shown division to have intensified along the lines of the hierarchical versus the holistic. This irony is deepened by Norma’s emotive expression of a supposedly academic standpoint. John notices this, he says ‘Norma, you’re ranting’ (68). We recall Norma’s earlier comment that Elizabeth was ‘ranting’ (31) during the first lecture. The breakdown at the end of the debate is repeated here, unequivocally, although not acrimoniously. John points out that Elizabeth will be gone in a few hours, a highly significant precursor to his final words to his mother. Norma says, ‘Good, say goodbye to her for me. I’m not getting up early’ (68).

Structurally, the narrative has come full circle, as John takes his mother to the airport next morning. Elizabeth is upset, she cannot identify with humanity. Even though, on the surface, she continues to interact with her fellow human beings, she is horrified at their consumption of ‘Fragments of corpses they have bought for money’ (69). Worse for her is the contrast she sees between this and the kindness in her family’s eyes. She turns ‘a tearful face’ on John, he stops the car and takes his mother in his arms. ‘He inhales the smell of cold cream, of old flesh. There, there, he whispers in her ear. There, there. It will soon be over’ (69). These are the last words of the narrative. We are reminded of Elizabeth’s strength of commitment despite her age and vulnerability, conveyed to us through John’s corporeal experience of it, he inhales it. His response and his language are emotive, comforting his mother without resort to

philosophy or debate. He does not attempt to provide answers, but acknowledges her sadness and sense of isolation, engaging with her in the present moment.

This conclusion to the narrative is highly effective in that it illustrates humans' ability to relate, when reason and language have failed to bring about common understanding. It accentuates the themes of death and reckoning which have permeated the narrative. Coetzee effectively challenges the barriers we have created based on reason, language and hierarchy, showing that these place limitations on our understanding of our own nature, and, consequently, on our ability to comprehend or appreciate the nature and worth of animals. Humans have refused to empathise because we *can* refuse, consciously choose to do so, and this allows us to exploit other creatures, with consequences for ourselves as well as for them. Coetzee implies that we are not comfortable with such uncompromising exposure. Increasingly the tone of those who argue against Elizabeth for the supremacy of reason and language is suffused with emotion, their arguments becoming more reductive and defensive. Therefore, through Elizabeth Costello, we can see that Coetzee exposes the need for ongoing exploration into our own nature, our relationship with animals and our place in the natural world.

We are left with more questions than those explicitly raised, what David Brooks, commenting on Derrida and his cat, has called *l'esprit de l'escalier*: there is always more to be said (2017, 138). The unresolved conflicts are shown to be inherent in humanity's self-perception. Elizabeth and Stern cannot share common ground, yet they share the same silence in response to the failure of language. Neither can bridge the gap. Postmodernist onion layers of meaning emerge from different standpoints and return to the same stalemate. Age, guilt, reckoning and suffering are constant threads in the narrative, with death the only solution in the absence of connection with others, or, in Haraway's terms 'significant otherness'<sup>47</sup>. The

---

<sup>47</sup> Donna Haraway refers to 'the joint lives of dogs and people who are bonded in 'significant otherness' (2003, 16), the unity resulting qualifying the meaning of 'other'. She explains the connection between

final scene between John and his mother is merely a truce. His words of consolation are ominous – implying that death is, indeed, the only solution, Elizabeth has, after all, been presented as a messianic sacrifice. Nothing has changed, the questions remain, no links have been forged, and, therefore, no revelation has followed, only a sense of ongoing incompleteness, in the absence of the grace, forgiveness, redemption and resurrection intrinsic to that metanarrative<sup>48</sup>. Coetzee has not sought to illustrate directly the empathy which Elizabeth has advocated, and, in its absence, there is no possibility of catharsis and no way forward. The authenticity of humans' self-perception is challenged as is our ability to acknowledge what we do not know about ourselves and about other animals. Instead, we exhibit fear and denial of our natural curiosity. Readers are left to ask if 'writers teach us more than they are aware of' (53), what precisely is it? Is the novella about the lives of animals? If so, why are we left with a sense of impending death? What would happen if we did respond to Elizabeth's call for empathy? Who, in fact, are the animals?

If Coetzee's text has succeeded in focussing readers' attention beyond traditional species barriers towards a consideration of empathy with other creatures and an implied acknowledgement of humans as another species of animal, Dovey's stories consolidate this with their unrelenting indictment of the impact of anthropocentricity on animals' lives. Kari Weil refers to two forms of empathy which may be relevant here; empathy based on affinity, recognition of sameness, and that based on appreciation of alterity (16). These are not mutually exclusive as we may experience both – implying an openness to ongoing discovery. The critical anthropomorphism which presupposes empathy identified here by Weil as a mark of

---

herself and her dog Safi – they are 'Significantly other to each other, in specific difference, we signify in the flesh a nasty developmental infection called love. This love is a historical aberration and a naturalcultural legacy (2007, 29).

<sup>48</sup> This is in stark contrast to the joyful acceptance and celebration of life, death and sacrifice for others, leading to revelation, which Singer, in his reflection, evokes by his reference to I.B. Singer's writing. (86).

the ethical treatment of animals demonstrates that definitions of anthropomorphism continue to evolve. By contrasting the gulf between the human characters and the animals with the empathy of the reader with the animal narrators Dovey's stories expose the tensions between our self-perception and the impact of our agency on the animals. As with Coetzee, these tensions raise questions which are not resolved within the text as can be seen from the following discussion.

Dovey may also be building on Coetzee's approximation of life and death for both human and non-human animals. There is an undercurrent of reckoning in Coetzee's narrative – Elizabeth bitterly laments the failure to bring the Nazis to account for their actions, and by implication those who cause suffering to animals (35). She is a messianic figure who is vegetarian to 'save her soul' (43). There is the implication that if there is no reckoning in this life perhaps there will be in the next. Similarly, Dovey's stories are imbued with a sense of reckoning, challenging our perceptions of life, attachment and suffering and our ability to empathise with other animals, as well as raising different questions on the links between life and death than reason or language would allow<sup>49</sup>.

\*\*\*

---

<sup>49</sup> In his essay 'Coetzee's Animal Afterlives' (Southerly, 2009) Chris Danta provides an extensive exploration of the numerous unanswered questions and ambiguities which surround humans and animals and the afterlife in Coetzee's writing.

## Chapter 2

This chapter identifies the unresolved questions raised by Dovey, which, like those of Coetzee, focus on the relationships between humans and animals, again undermining the rationale used to justify assumptions of human hierarchy over other creatures. It then explores Dovey's use of literary devices and allusions to leave the reader with seemingly irreconcilable moral and emotional conflicts.

### **Questions raised in Ceridwen Dovey's *Only the Animals* (2014)**

Dovey recounts the lives and deaths of different animals resulting from their interactions with humans. The stories are focalised through the animals after their deaths, creating an emotional communion between the reader and the animals which is absent from the relationships between the animal and human characters. Even when empathy exists, for example between the dolphin and her trainer in 'A Letter to Sylvia Plath', the human character's respect for otherness and appreciation of alternative interests are absent. Thus, Dovey establishes discord, challenging readers' perceptions from the start. Like Coetzee, she does not set a comforting mood for the reader, the consequences of humans' exploitation of animals are disturbing and, at times, harrowing. The stories provide no consolation or affirmation for the reader. The indictment of human fickleness accentuated by the animals' constancy – in life and, afterwards, as constellations, fixed beyond reach – along with their non-judgemental accounts pre-empt any human redress. Human nature is presented as limited, short-sighted, callous, ignorant, even as the human characters, consciously or unconsciously, assume superiority and self-righteousness.

Through her extensive use of literary allusion and historical detail Dovey casts her net wide to evoke a sweeping pageant of human engagements with animals, adding many more layers to her narratives than could be enlisted through a narrower context. What may be lost in

originality – some of her animals are recruited from literary sources – is gained by the force of authority given to the questions she raises. The alternative voices of Dovey’s animal narrators ensure that the stories, while they may be metafictional, are in no way derivative. They do not entertain or affirm, and the impact on the reader remains unpalatable. We must respond not just to Dovey’s unforgiving accounts of the animals’ lives and deaths, but to the emotions and perspectives of those writers and characters she evokes, which mirror again and again the tragic consequences of humans’ disruption of animals’ nature. The events are left to speak for themselves, invariably exposing humans’ unwillingness or inability to recognise or take responsibility for their actions. The validity of human hierarchy and morality is fundamentally questioned: What understanding of our own nature do we lose when we devalue the nature of other creatures? What are the consequences for the animals of human self-centredness and callousness? As with Coetzee, we must ask if death is the only solution possible in a hierarchical system, the only way to transcend suffering? Dovey’s animals too, are sacrificial in their defencelessness against hierarchy and after death, as constellations, are resigned and silent as are the animals described by Costello, in their transcendence of human betrayal.

***Only the Animals, Dovey (2014)***

*On one side there is luminosity, trust, faith, the beauty of the earth: on the other side, darkness, doubt, unbelief, the cruelty of the earth, the capacity of people to do evil. When I write, the first is true; when I do not the second is.*

Czeslaw Milosz, Road-Side Dog

*Each creature is key to all other creatures. A dog sitting in a patch of sun licking itself says he, is at one moment a dog and at the next a vessel of revelation.*

J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (229).

These visionary epigraphs to Dovey's anthology immediately focus the reader on the ability of language to misrepresent or conceal worth, or else elucidate it. They challenge humans' established perceptions of language and of the nature of animals.

Dovey, uses first person narration throughout *Only the Animals*, effectively capturing the reader's empathy by the poignant tone of the animals' voices. She allows an extraordinary variety of creatures, including a cat, a chimpanzee, a bear, an elephant, a dolphin and a mussel, among others, to tell their stories from their earliest memories to their deaths, evoking their literary, folkloric, and even scientific significance to humanity. The animals speak after their deaths, and Dovey includes a subtitle, their time and place of death, and graphic images at the opening of each story that show they are now constellations, their souls fixed eternally in the firmament, evoking the sense of an afterlife. This ensures that the death, and the circumstances of that death, remain the focus of the story. Dovey maintains the disturbing sense that the stories of the animals' lives have been shadowed and doomed through human agency. This aura of inevitability is deepened by the sustained use of the past tense and the even tone of sadness and poignancy which characterises the stories. There is a general sense that all experiences are over, done with and accepted. There is a remarkable absence of judgement by the animals despite all their deaths being a direct result of their relationships with humans. The reader, however, unlike the animals, may be more inspired to question this inevitability and, hence, the assumptions about accepted relationships with animals. Dovey's writing has an eerie, liminal quality which positions the reader in unfamiliar territory where previously dependable moorings no longer hold, so that other possibilities emerge which transcend conventions of time and place.

In each story humans are central to the animals' experiences: it is they who drive the action. This control is strongly emphasised, leading us to evaluate the choices and imagine alternatives, as these choices invariably lead to the animals' deaths. The stories evoke what are supposed

to be real characters and events, with persistent use of historical and literary allusion, particularly of the documented relationships between writers or historical figures and animals. These allow Dovey to use authentic depictions of accepted forms of human/animal relationships. The references evoke the characters or writers themselves rather than what they wrote. However, the reader will know the writers through what they have written and the emotional impact of this strengthens Dovey's message. Invariably, the hierarchical and limited nature of these relationships leads to betrayal and death for the animals, regardless of individual human intention. This may lead to questions for the reader as to how we may achieve a different understanding of our relationships with animals; or, as Weil states, explore 'how to deal with difference without distorting it' (Weil 4). Each of the stories follows the same theme and pattern. However, owing to limitations of space the discussion, here, shall focus on just one story as highly characteristic of the collection as a whole.

The story, 'Red Peter's Little Lady' is based on Kafka's 'A Report to an Academy'<sup>50</sup> and maintains Kafka's underlying satire of human experimentation on animals. Kafka's story of the transformation of an ape, captured from the West African jungle, to a human is often seen as a satirisation of the Jews assimilation into Western culture with its attendant hierarchical suppression of identity. Kafka's Red Peter suppresses his identity so completely that he can no longer imagine or even remember what it was like to be an ape. He rejoices in his 'humanity' which the reader recognises as tragic disintegration leading to madness. As he addresses the Academy Red Peter emphasises that his own motivation was a desire to escape captivity on the ship, not to become human. Dovey presses this experiment on teaching an ape to be human to its logical conclusion. In her story Red Peter ultimately is held captive despite the sacrifice of his identity, the ironic and bitter result of both his efforts to live as a human and

---

<sup>50</sup> Dovey's story references the experiment described by Kafka, the chimpanzee is, again, named 'Red Peter'. However, the disruption to the animal's nature, implicit in Kafka's satire is, here, brought to a more explicit conclusion.

the betrayal of his human associates. The story stands as an indictment of humanity's assumptions of hierarchy and its consequent efforts to disrupt nature.

The story is set in Hamburg where Red Peter, the trained ape, falls in love with Evelyn, the wife of his trainer, Oberndorff, while the latter is away, fighting in World War I. He has no interest in the female chimpanzee, Hazel, who is being trained to be his companion and who is suffering greatly by being prevented from living according to her own nature. Unlike 'A Report to an Academy', Dovey's story is conveyed through letters written between these characters, Red Peter, Evelyn, and Hazel. She uses this epistolary exchange to avoid any face-to-face encounters, allowing tension and ambiguity to build as the relationship between Red Peter and Evelyn intensifies.<sup>51</sup>

There are three voices and a form of love triangle develops. Indeed, Red Peter's language is more desperately emotive than either Hazel's or others of Dovey's animal characters, emphasising the satire and the grotesque nature of this animal/human relationship. Red Peter has lost sight of his own nature and speaks with an overly stylised and learned human voice, unlike Hazel who continues to exhibit chimpanzee behaviours. At the end of the story, the relationship between Red Peter and Evelyn, which had been progressing on both sides, disintegrates. Due to the hardships of war, her husband's absence and eventual death, abandonment by Herr Hagenbeck, the zoo owner, and the linguistic prowess of Red Peter, Evelyn seems to have forgotten he is a chimpanzee, although she has continued the training of Hazel in her husband's absence without much success. Hazel, whom Evelyn refers to as 'a gentle soul' (57) and who likes to look after small things, such as the cricket she is given, eventually prefers to die of starvation in her cage once she discovers that Red Peter is not

---

<sup>51</sup> I. B. Singer's use of letter writing, by contrast, leads to deeper insights and understanding between his characters, even to the point of supernatural transcendence. It is perhaps Singer's maintenance of an unflinching integrity between the physical and the epistolary communications of his characters which leads to the joyful epiphanies and revelations of his denouements in contrast to the tragic gulfs and irredeemable betrayals at the end of Dovey's stories.

interested in her. She reverts to her nature and dies with dignity as she can no longer be forced to behave by manipulating her food supply.

As a result, we may see Hazel and not Red Peter, as the central character of this story. Her voice is that of the animal who never truly loses sight of her own nature and suffers for this. Both she and Red Peter are constant in their attachments, in contrast to the human characters, however, hers are less misplaced. She is also a foil for Red Peter, reminding us of the extent to which his nature is compromised and the destruction inherent in the humans' experimentation. While she also suffers from this, she does not exhibit his confusion and degradation. Her gentle nature is preserved, as is seen in her care for her cricket. So, too, is her dignity as she chooses to return to her cage, refusing to eat or succumb to human manipulation. In this Hazel reflects the voice of Dovey's other animal characters, such as Collette's courageous cat<sup>52</sup> and the dolphin used in WWII who refused to identify with the name given by humans<sup>53</sup>.

In the epigraph to the story, Dovey quotes Kafka in 'A Report to an Academy': 'For she has in her gaze the madness of a bewildered trained animal. I'm the only one who recognises that, and I cannot bear it' (45). From the beginning a sense of underlying distress is established. Referring to Hazel's training, Red Peter admits to feeling 'unaccountably guilty' (46) in a voice which sounds more like the trainer than the fellow chimpanzee that he is. Both chimpanzees repeatedly express dissatisfaction with their bodies and embrace 'our, new, healthful German body culture' (49). Ironically, he advises Hazel that 'One should only venture into nudity when one has learned to wear clothes' (50). Hazel eventually abandons this perspective. The lines between animal nature and human culture continue to be blurred, to the point of absurdity. Red Peter often speaks poetically, 'My pipe is filled, a book of poetry lies at the foot of my armchair.

---

<sup>52</sup> Dovey, Ceridwen. 'Pigeons, A Pony, The Tomcat and I' *Only the Animals*, (2014, 15-41).

<sup>53</sup> Dovey, Ceridwen. 'A Letter to Sylvia Plath' *Only the Animals*, (2014, 201-230).

I am looking out of my hotel window watching dusk's possibilities evaporate'. We see the irony of his reference to Kafka, watching Halley's comet with him, and his being uncomfortable when Kafka lay on the floor with him to get a better view of the 'sky and the stars' (47)<sup>54</sup>. Evelyn initially keeps her emotional distance in her letters. In an early reply, Red Peter states: 'I see I was asking too much in addressing you with such familiarity' (49). Referring to Hazel, Evelyn states: 'She is quite right about what she can give you. Things that I could not' (60). Hazel, on the other hand asks: 'How will we play bedroom games when I am your wife? She shows confusion about the expectations of her trainers: 'Would you like me to be more human, or less human, or more or less human?' (60). This irreconcilable dilemma emphasises the hybrid, conflicted and impotent results when nature is usurped, as well as the dangers inherent in a dependence on language, emphasised by the epistolary form. Red Peter's letters become increasingly intense in tone. He requests permission to visit Evelyn, supplying food during wartime rationing and expressing a concern for Evelyn and the children not shown by her absent husband who 'puts his own needs first' (61).

Dovey satirically links the use of food as a tool of manipulation in the training of chimpanzees to the allies' blockade of food in wartime Germany<sup>55</sup>. Similarly, Herr Hagenbeck, the zookeeper, has escaped to 'the lush jungle in Africa while we starve in Hamburg' (63). Red Peter was initially captured from these 'lush jungles'. In a continuation of this role reversal, Evelyn, due to the deprivations of war, is depicted as behaving in ways reminiscent, in context, of those of a chimpanzee: 'She runs her fingers through her hair, wipes her nose, yawns with hunger' (63). The letters become more intimate, Red Peter addresses her as 'My Darling Evelyn', and she replies, 'Dear R.P.', and we learn that Hazel has willingly retreated to her

---

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Canetti (qtd. in Danta 4) who points out that gazing at the heavens more effectively done while prone, debunking human claims to superiority over animals based on erect stance.

<sup>55</sup> The breakdown of normal structures and social expectations resulting from the wartime setting both parallel and intensify the breakdown in the divisions between animal and human natures – Weil's 'stance of impenetrability' (Weil 7) and 'exceptional barrier' (Weil 12). Therefore, the characters of the story occupy a 'liminal zone' (Joseph 138-9) in a double sense.

cage, rejected and betrayed by those who wantonly disrupted her identity. Evelyn's husband dies in the war and she admits to not missing his 'cold rage' and to being 'distracted by our hunger' (66). Yet we learn that Hazel 'was always partial to him', and his death and her abandonment by Red Peter consolidate her return to her natural state. Evelyn ends this letter with, 'Give me more time, darling, to pull myself together before you visit' (66). Possibly driven by hunger, she forgets, or seems to forget, that he is a chimpanzee and an herbivore, even as the reader is reminded of the gulf between them by Evelyn's acute interest in the 'fatty spoils' of the 'Pig Murders' (67), and her hopes that he, too, has benefitted from this. We remain aware of Red Peter's compromised nature and the gulf which is masked by the epistolary form. Evelyn's intimacy eventually precipitates a visit from Red Peter and the relationship disintegrates. A change of focus is evident in her next letters. Thanking him for the gifts he has brought for the children, she states, 'I can hardly wait to see you again tomorrow' (68). However, considering the ending, we may see her motivation as ambivalent. During this second visit Evelyn persuades Red Peter to return to the cage, ostensibly for his own protection. It becomes clear that illusions developed, even purposefully, through a desire to control and through the manipulation of language and culture cannot overcome nature. This point is also emphasised by Hazel's account of the hunger artist's staged fast.

Dovey uses a biblical allusion to religious fasting leading to transcendence over earthly concerns (69) to provide a stark contrast to the theme of manipulation through food deprivation. She has Hazel draw attention to the inauthenticity of the relationship portrayed between humans and animals – Hazel goes on hunger strike, imitating the 'Hunger Artist' (69) once employed by the zoo as a performance attraction, abandoned when there was no audience. The war has deprived the experiment on the chimpanzees of an audience. The purpose was to demonstrate superior ability, control. Now, like the Hunger Artist's performance, there is no point in pursuing the experiment on the apes. This clearly recalls the motif of hunger as a

performance, recurring in Kafka's stories, but with the essential difference – that Hazel does not require an audience<sup>56</sup>.

We have seen humans and animals respond similarly to love, abandonment and hunger. However, distinctions are shown to be in our motivation, our ability to manipulate and abandon, delude or betray (62). Humans do not appear in a good light. Despite, or because of, the violence with which Red Peter has forced himself to abandon his true nature, he identifies with humans, declaring with pride 'What sets them apart is their talent for masochism. Therein lies their power. To take pleasure from pain, to derive strength from deprivation, is to be human' (52). However, for the reader, the satire is unmistakable. Evelyn still claims that romantic love is the 'shimmering jewel in the crown of human evolution' (52) but the term 'evolution' is particularly ironic here as she does not remain true to her declarations, while Red Peter does. He has ever claimed that his love for her, and not food, was his motivation to become human (53). So, the question is which of the two is the more evolved: the betraying fickle human or the constant ape?

Again, it is Hazel who achieves some transcendence and dignity with, 'only I will have chosen to starve'. Unlike the performer, she makes a personal choice not to stop fasting when the audience loses interest: 'Is that all that lies between the behaviour of apes and humans? A regular supply of hot meals?'. She eschews this type of control over her as she hopes 'they will heat me up and eat me' (69), raising her spirits with:

My thoughts become an endless source of fascination. I can watch them traipse across my own mind in a parade of brilliance. How everything can be ventured; how a fire is ready for all ideas, however strange, in which they burn up and are

---

<sup>56</sup> In Kafka's 'A Hunger Artist' (1922) such fasting becomes 'unendurable' for the protagonist without the acknowledgement of an audience. Unlike Hazel, who seeks to restore her integrity, Kafka's artist seeks public acclamation for his self-mastery and withdrawal from life. Unlike her, his motivation does not lead to revelation at the end of the story. His 'Impresario' only ever allows forty days, as being the limit of public interest. Kafka's artist is frustrated, his pride denied, and motivation seemingly misconstrued. However, unlike the meaning behind the biblical symbolism of forty days or years in the wilderness this 'artist' does not seek to bring his enlightenment back to his fellow human beings: he dies with no recognition, the audience preferring the nobility, life, energy and integrity of the young panther who replaces him in the cage.

resurrected! In the corner of my cage I breath in the sweet rot of leaves. My cricket chirps at the moon from the warmth of his walnut. The light turns blue before the window' (70).

She becomes a celestial constellation, looking down and seeing what endures and what does not, in her transcendence distilling truth from lies.

As with Coetzee, death is presented as the only solution when a system of hierarchy impedes true expression of animal nature. The thoughts which precede Red Peter's final, desperate and degraded plea to Evelyn suggest no such transcendence. Despairing, he eventually understands the gulf between Evelyn and himself and the inherent ambivalence in their relationship, 'You said you wanted to fatten me up. And immediately I knew I had made a terrible mistake getting back into this cage' (71). The cage has been a symbol of hierarchy, control, throughout the story. Unlike Hazel, Red Peter has been duped into returning to it, a place where food can be used to manipulate. He has prided himself on his ability to control appetite, even when humans did not control theirs (50, 58). The impact of food deprivation on humans has been a constant theme (62-64), satirically recalling experiments on animals using food as a motivator.<sup>57</sup> Ultimately, Evelyn is an expression of human duplicity, but also of the vulnerability to hunger which, though it is not overtly acknowledged in the story, is clearly shared with the animals, but which is overcome only by Hazel, a chimpanzee. So, it is, in fact, the chimpanzee who has more control. Dovey's story illustrates a hierarchy undermined on its own terms.

Red Peter has been motivated to commit to the abandonment of his nature by his love for Evelyn. Evelyn has been present throughout his transformation, yet she still encourages the relationship through her letters only to eventually betray this commitment. Locked in the cage

---

<sup>57</sup> The idea that hunger and other forms of physical deprivation leading to greater spiritual insight and transcendence beyond the mundane is also recurrent in I. B. Singer's stories, for example in 'The Letter Writer' (1968) and 'The Yearning Heifer' (2004). However, this serves to underline that it is the self-centred motivation and betrayal of trust in Kafka's and Dovey's stories which dictate the outcome, destruction, and not transcendence.

where Hazel died, Red Peter is repelled by the scent of chimpanzee, Hazel's and his own, eventually understanding their shared nature and the rejection he has suffered. He ends on a tragic plea to Evelyn, 'let me out [...] into your bed' (71). This final note is both tragic and horrific, as the tortured chimpanzee who has completely lost touch with his true nature is abandoned by those who forced him to try to become one of them, but only to the point which would not challenge their own sense of superiority.

Here, as in all Dovey's stories, humans overtly seek to control animals, ignoring responsibility for the implications this has for those animals. Dovey successfully builds on Kafka's 'A Report to an Academy', intensifying its satirical theme. The formality of the letters juxtaposed with the unnatural intimacy between the chimpanzee and human writers, facilitated and distorted by language, contributes to the unsettling impact on the reader. Dovey intensifies the irony through constant juxtaposition of statements, such as Evelyn's writing to Red Peter about the children 'They asked why you aren't writing to them [...] I am having a hard enough time explaining where their father is' (52). Red Peter is often cast as the father figure. Despite this familiarity, the scientific background of experimentation on apes is realistic. We are presented with the grotesque consequences of this experimentation which are acceptable to none, pointless, and speak of irresponsible treachery. We understand the links between the loss of connection with one's nature and madness. This is not the voice that has been traditionally given to animals in literature. It is not in any way edifying, or supportive of the moral principles or empathy regarded by humans as defining their humanity; rather it holds a mirror to the consequences of human choice which may otherwise be overlooked by our ability to justify or ignore what is inconvenient or troublesome to our set parameters, the confusion described by Midgely (1998, 18)<sup>58</sup>. While Dovey is, of necessity, using anthropomorphism to give linguistic

---

<sup>58</sup> In Chapter 1 of *Animals and Why They Matter* Mary Midgely describes the moral confusion which results from the discrepancy between our declared values and common practice. Dovey's story illustrates this by pursuing humans' experimentation on animals to its logical confusion.

expression to the animals, she is doing so in accordance with the definitions of Midgely and McKay when they refer to the intention behind using human faculties to understand another kind of being. She demonstrates significant common ground between human and animal characteristics. Dovey's depiction of inappropriate relationships between humans and animals serves to highlight the need for appropriate recognition of our continuity with nature. We need to understand our own nature in more depth and respect that of other species. Common ground with non-human animals is demonstrated, as is the need to see connections which respect the nature of all species.<sup>59</sup>

While using this innovative style of anthropomorphism, Dovey's 'Red Peter's Little Lady' is highly satirical, as is Kafka's 'A Report to an Academy', which is repeatedly cited by Weil (Weil 3-4)<sup>60</sup> to illustrate the inadequacies of using language and reason as definitions of worth. The validity of humans' adoption of a superior stance or, as Weil says, 'a stance of impenetrability' (Weil 7), is questioned by Dovey, whose title is ambiguous. Who is Red Peter's little lady, Evelyn or Hazel? Are apes human? Are humans apes? Dovey undermines acceptance of humans' willingness to disrupt nature. She questions our wisdom in assuming such invasive measures of control over animals. Humans are presented as too short-sighted and self-absorbed to recognise or care about the consequences of their actions. It is implied that this is the antithesis of wisdom. From such an alternative standpoint Dovey can present animals as transcending the parameters commonly allocated to them by humans.

In leading us to question the validity of our extensive control over animals, Dovey is leading us to explore different possibilities in our relationship with nature, including our own. Can animals remind us of our need to move beyond established boundaries, to transcend current

---

<sup>59</sup> Haraway's image of interrelationships with animals as a 'cat's cradle' (2008, 4, 2016, 9-10) illustrates this as does Midgely's discussion on our continuity with nature (1979, 21).

<sup>60</sup> In the first of several references Weil states that 'Language is at the core of Kafka's critique of assimilation as a process that gives voice only by destroying the self that would speak (3).

limitations? Do we see ourselves differently if we attempt to see ourselves from the perspective of animals? What do we lose when we lose the perception of ourselves as animals? What are the consequences of denying our continuity with nature? These questions reflect issues raised by Mary Midgely in her introduction to the revised edition of *Beast and Man* (1998).<sup>61</sup> Midgely argues the value of ‘Admitting our continuity with nature’, declaring that ‘the fact of continuity itself and the twisting of it to justify abuses is something that I have continually tried to make clear, both in *Beast and Man* and in most other things that I have written’ (xxiv). This argument envisages a perspective which recognises the common ground between humans and other animals, while, also, respecting difference by not presuming a knowledge of, or a right of control over it. Difference does not imply hierarchy. It also reflects Weil’s argument when she states that humans may ‘attend to difference without distorting it’ (Weil 4) recognising, that they may not know the best way of attending to it, resulting in their remaining open to, and interested in, further inquiry beyond current boundaries. As implied above, motivation is central to Midgely’s argument. Dovey’s story demonstrates that an insight into motivation is essential to an understanding of nature, whether human or animal, however, the human characters have no concept of the animals’ motivation, they remain completely focussed on their own interests.

Significantly, many of Dovey’s stories are set during wartime and in war zones: periods and places of social strain and transition. As with the liminality described by Joseph, such settings provide space to challenge conventional forms of relationship and perceptions (Joseph 138-140). Dovey’s use of such liminality is highly effective in delivering her harrowing exposure of the moral conflicts and duplicity masked by human culture or convention. Each

---

<sup>61</sup> Midgely argues against the notion that we are products, solely, of our culture or education. Acknowledging that there is such a thing as human nature implies that continuity with the rest of nature which some considered dangerous when traits, seen in humans, such as ‘aggression, territory and dominance’ (1979, 3), only, were considered. This is the perspective which has traditionally found literary expression in anthropomorphism.

story illustrates the destructive consequences of an over-riding self-absorption and inability to recognise the value of another's nature; among these, a stunting of our understanding of our own nature, a loss of innocence and of our innate spirit of exploration. Despite human intention, conflicts stemming from the misconstruction of nature and the lack of an authentic contract with the animals<sup>62</sup> inevitably bring tragedy. While this remains the focus, there are some significant differences in Dovey's representations of humans. Some stories contain human characters who reflect an empathetic relationship with animals. An example of this is the author Collette<sup>63</sup> who features in 'Pigeons, A Pony, the Tomcat and I': a story, again, based on real historical figures and events. The narrator here is Kiki-la-Doucette, Collette's cat companion, now dead, and speaking as 'Soul of Cat. Died 1915, France'. Sadly, it is due to her independence of spirit and attachment to Collette that Kiki is inadvertently abandoned and shot at the WWI battlefield having seen all the pleasures and beauty of her old life give way to humans' desire for warfare which has destroyed the landscape. Now, fixed as a constellation, immortalised as 'Soul of Cat', we understand that, while Kiki's story is her own, she represents the nature and essence of all cats. Again, too, the epigraph sets the tone of the story, 'O crossing of looks! Bond that the animal tries to tighten, and that man always undoes!' (17) Tragically, Collette, unlike human characters from other stories, has the insight to see such conflict, yet, within her given paradigms, cannot escape its inevitability. We are led to ask if humans, too, are trapped.

The pervasive sense of tragedy, of unresolved moral and emotional failure, in Dovey's stories raises questions which reflect the contemporary debate about the relationship between

---

<sup>62</sup> In her Foreword to *Animals and Why They Matter* Midgely discusses the issue of social contracting which leads to some groups not being seen as proper 'contractors'. Animals and women among others.

<sup>63</sup> Collette, Sidonie-Gabrielle. 1873-1954, French writer and theatre performer. Focussed much on animals in her writing and was known for her love of all animals, especially cats.

humans and animals, and the implications this has for our ongoing exploration of our own nature, that of others, and our perception of our place in the natural world.

\*\*\*

## Chapter 3

### From Coetzee and Dovey to Hartnett and Carmody

Questions which arise from the 21<sup>st</sup> century's turn to animals in literature and ethics may be reflected in contemporary literature reaching readers of very different ages and backgrounds. Chapters 3 and 4 will demonstrate this by exploring Hartnett's *Forest* and Carmody's *Little Fur* series which also challenge the validity of human hierarchy and anthropocentric perspectives on nature. Unlike Coetzee and Dovey, however, as we shall see, Hartnett and Carmody use character and structure to illustrate renewal and the healing power of harmony with nature available to those who choose it.

*The Lives of Animals* is an academic novella that forms part of Coetzee's wider fictional work, the thematic triptych including *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*. All condemn humans' treatment of animals and all have received widespread academic attention and acclaim. Dovey's collection follows closely on Coetzee's theme, marked by the same sense of sacrifice, moral failure and reckoning, self-interest, despair and underlying guilt. While Dovey adopts a different genre, using extensive literary or scientific allusion in a more fictional manner than Coetzee, her arguments are equally uncompromising. The only resolution or redemption is in tragedy and death, transcendence without reconciliation.

Similarly, Hartnett, who has written extensively and is read by adults, young adults and children, exploring nature to its depths, challenges the barriers we have erected between ourselves and nature, our own and that of other species. In contrast, however, she does illustrate resolution through reintegration, but only when the price is accepted and paid. Nature always triumphs, death is accepted as part of an ongoing cycle of life. Her books warn us against the constructs and values which sever our links with the natural world. Similarly, Carmody, also a prolific writer, blends fantasy and realism to show the essential conflicts inherent in

separation from the natural world and the ensuing debasement of human nature. She, too, describes the path to reintegration through a holistic rather than anthropocentric world view.

Despite their differences all these writers share a common thrust – that radical changes are needed in our appreciation of our own nature and of the natural world. Critics from Midgely to Weil, Haraway, Brooks and Houser have argued for a different approach to alterity, respecting our continuity with nature, contrary to traditional hierarchical perspectives. Whether through academic form, fable, fantasy or realism, the structures of hierarchy and anthropocentrism are clearly challenged by a wide range of contemporary writers. This is reflected in new interpretations of anthropomorphism and explorations of the liminal which seek to represent nature authentically.

***Forest, Sonya Hartnett (2001)***

In this highly evocative and poignant novel, Sonya Hartnett brings the reader into ‘the wild’, beyond humanly defined social constructs. It is ironically subtitled ‘a journey from the wild’, hinting, from the start, at the conflict which is inherent in the abandoned cats who are the central characters. The epigraph states that the wild is:

*earth and leaves, sun and shade, feather and blood and bone  
it is the old way, the true way,  
the wild way to live.  
But, for Kian, the wilderness is not home.*

Hartnett raises questions about our relationship with the natural world and our self-perception by demonstrating that true nature cannot be eradicated, it lies deep within all creatures despite imposed conventions and efforts at control. Through her cat characters she brings human civilisation and the wild into stark juxtaposition. The conflicts experienced by the feral cats resonate with us. The very different values placed on life, death, joy, conflict and place in the world, conveyed through Hartnett’s evocative descriptions, leave the reader with an indelible awareness of the wild, understood as both internal and external. Unlike Coetzee

or Dovey, nature does triumph through reconciliation in Hartnett's novel. It may be at a cost, but one willingly paid for peace and integrity with one's own nature and place. While we remain acutely aware of the consequences of disrupting nature, there is an exultant sense of triumph in Hartnett's narrative as she leads the reader to see beyond artificial constructs and conventions which insulate us from our own nature and limit our sense of continuity with the environment.

Kian, a desexed male domestic cat, is roughly abandoned at the edge of the forest with two kittens, Cally and Jem, following the death of their 'sapien', the old woman Ellen. Hartnett writes exclusively from the perspective of the cats. The reader experiences the forest primarily through Kian and we follow him as he develops across the narrative. The domestic cats 'own' the humans who are only perceived from the knees down, or by smell or sound, or by their hard-edged constructs: roads, gates, traps, guns: symbols of division and hierarchy. The forest is the domain of the wild where all things flow and blend together following different rules. With his collar violently removed, Kian is thrown into the forest with the kittens where they are terrified and have no knowledge of the dangers or of how to survive. The novel is structured around Kian's quest to return home and the changes he experiences on that journey. Initially, he believes he wants to return to Ellen, but when he realises that Ellen is dead his territory, still, draws him back. The ways of the wild reawaken in him through his encounters with the feral cats in the forest and he often sees himself as 'a sorry excuse for a cat' (169) owing to his dependence on humans, his 'not-tom' state, his 'shiny' white coat, and his reluctance to fight. There is a subtle transition from Kian's initial rejection of the forest to his final understanding that 'It wouldn't be long before no trace of him remained anywhere in this place – but the forest would haunt him, Kian knew, forever' (191).

Hartnett's representation of animals reflects Midgely's and McKay's reinterpretations of anthropomorphism, which argue that humans, of necessity, use their human faculties of

language and reason to understand animals, but that this does not overwhelm the need, increasingly acknowledged in literature, of achieving an honest, authentic understanding of the animal. The purpose becomes exploratory, venturing beyond common boundaries, rather than being anthropocentric or hierarchical. Hartnett constantly seeks to convey a vivid insight into the animals' experience, while clearly distinguishing perspectives associated with human society. She achieves this by her sustained focus on the exhilarating conflict between the tame and the wild, between the three central domestic cats and their feral opposites. A heightened sense of tension and heart-breaking loss pervades the narrative, accentuated by an acute awareness of the brevity of life and the fight for survival. This is only offset by the kittens' joy at the constant new discoveries and the feral cats' proud triumph in hunting or combat. Everything is immediate in the forest. Awareness of the future and of memory, marks of a longer life expectancy, are primarily evident in Kian, the older suburban cat. That these are ultimately futile reminds the reader that all life, despite our illusions, may well be precarious. As Kian, instincts reawakened by the wild, still clings desperately to his old life, we become aware of the sense of loss and insecurity at having compromised one's true nature. Hartnett's writing is ruthlessly unforgiving, typically revealing the raw and inexorable force of nature. We learn from the abandoned cats the tragedy of avoiding a deeper understanding of ourselves. Nature maintains a balance with merciless integrity, as in the different roles of the female and male cats. The old female cat, Tey, forces the young males Shylar and Janshar to leave, they must seek their own territories or conflict will disrupt the clowder. She is supported by the old spiteful cat Givench. Her orders ensure that the kittens are protected until Jem is grown, then he will have to fight. He later shows himself both inclined and able to do so. Survival is prioritised. At the end of the novel, following Kian's death, Cally, the female kitten leads Jem back into the forest.

Hartnett's cats are not ultimately defined as suburban, abandoned or feral. These are human perspectives, irrelevant to the cats who adapt and survive, as they have always done. In stark contrast to Kian who wishes to return to his territory among humans, Janshar, the wild feral tom who must find and fight for his own territory bitterly evokes the age-old conflict between human and cat, human exploitation undermining possible cooperation:

There's no place that's perfect for a cat – not any more [...] the forest's no more perfect than any other place cats have been since the night we walked off the savannah into the monkeyman's firelight. We've spread and multiplied since that night [...] but we sailed from the savannah on an ocean of blood. The sapien's always treated the cat's life as the cheapest of things. We should have left him to his vermin (85).

Through the powerful imagery of Janshar's speech Hartnett shows that the violence of the cats' quest for survival echoes back through the whole history of humans and felines. We are confronted with the irony of our ability to either deify or vilify animals, rather than seek an authentic understanding of their nature.<sup>64</sup>

In one of Hartnett's harshest descriptions Janshar angrily recounts a 'legend' known to all cats – the violent history of the relationship between cats and humans, from ancient through to medieval times. Humans may have depicted their gods as cats, but this only led to the widespread sacrifice of real cats, their lives 'the cheapest of things' (85):

Ancient Bubastis was the Nile territory of Bast, the sapien goddess with the cat's head [...] but no true cat was ever warm on a stone Bubastis hearth [...] the time came when a pitch cat was a cat who wouldn't breath long (85-86).

Through the ages, humans have sacrificed and slaughtered cats, persecuting them as witches' familiars as they sought to eradicate evil within themselves. This view has been presented by philosophers as a transference of guilt, underlying human violence towards animals.

Unlike Dovey, however, Hartnett is not entirely focussed on condemning humans' anthropocentric and historical disregard and exploitation of animals. Instead, she is

---

<sup>64</sup> Wendy Doniger discusses this at length in her reflection on Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* (93-98). Also cf. Midgely (1979, 18-36).

demonstrating vividly and inescapably the tragedy attendant on a refusal to know and respect nature, our own and that of others. We are positioned to identify with Hartnett's cats, while Dovey, although evoking empathy by writing from the animal's perspective, accentuates the sorrowful gulf between us and them. Furthermore, in Hartnett, nature cannot be eradicated, conflict will end with reintegration and the joyful triumph of nature, regardless of cost. Both writers present death as the only resolution to irreconcilable conflict, but, in Hartnett, the cycle of existence continues, and joy and life are restored when the kittens return to the wild. In Dovey's writing the animals, their lives forfeit, transcend their suffering to become constellations; in Hartnett, death is affirmed because it is followed by renewal.

Celebrating this natural transition, Hartnett makes extensive use of the liminal intersections between worlds to illustrate both the conflicts experienced by the cats and the cycle of life. Change, life, death and rebirth are the only constants, and are accepted in the forest. Through the conflicts of the displaced cats, we are presented with alternative perspectives on life, death and survival. The cats are abandoned at the edge of the forest to which they ultimately return; much of the narrative occurs at dawn or twilight and at the change of seasons; and we are constantly aware of the passage from youth to age. There is a recognition of the danger and mystery which accompanies transitional or liminal spaces or times. The rat, another feral inhabitant, well camouflaged to survive in the forest still has 'an inborn aversion' to twilight, recognising its dangers:

it had been tracked here by its ancient enemy, the adaptable vagabond.  
This ghostly junction between night and day, a lifeless halt in the living  
flow of time, this was always the terrible time, when the enemy's eyes saw  
most true (171).

This liminality evokes those in-between spaces which allow for change and possibility described by Joseph as raising awareness of nature and its perennial transitions (139, 140). It also reflects Kian's fluctuating sense of identity. Hartnett has him recall his skills as a domestic

cat, which he uses to free the panicking feral cat Shylar from the 'steely cobweb' (175). For a moment Kian is completely present, free of all concerns, a cat in his own territory, he imagines 'a dazzling, dancing, destroyable bird' (183), his pride and predatory instincts fully intact. He swipes and releases the bolt of the trap, but then, realises, grieving and homesick, that this time the door did not open into his own world. We see Kian as a true domestic cat, but one whose essential wildness is also preserved, as is clear from the following passage:

Kian was remembering his home, his grassy garden, his favourite places in the sun [...] he remembered the warm taste of pigeon squab and Ellen asking him to set the downy creature free. Instead, he romped away with the fledgling between his jaws, a gleeful ungovernable beast of a cat (187).

Also, when the ranger approaches the trap, Kian, in an incident which foreshadows the ending, reverts and feels an urge to let the human stroke him. He resists this but, tragically, remembers 'his sundered life' (187). We understand the sadness of the conflict created by attempts to suppress natural instincts for survival and that, while these may be rendered dormant or suppressed, they cannot be eradicated. The price of trying becomes clear in the final chapters.

Hartnett succeeds in presenting the cats as real animals and not as surrogate humans. She achieves this most vividly through her exquisite and evocative descriptions. For example, Shylar's fury at confinement and his desperate efforts to escape the wire trap:

As he fought, a roar came from him which was the sound of every cat that's ever lived, every cougar, lynx and cheetah, every tiger, lion, jaguar and panther, every housecat that is fed and tended, every other that is discarded (174).

Shylar's roar expresses the proud and timeless nature of all cats, as does the silence of his earlier encounter with the rat:

The ancient enemies stared at one another and it was the ancient stare that an aeon has never varied (172).

Hartnett invokes the immediacy and essence of the cats' frequent fights with graphic and vivid descriptions:

He kicked lamely, drained by terror, his mind smogged crimson with fear ...  
The paw felt for the feral's eyes and finding one, unsheathed its talons and  
dug in.

These descriptions are followed, as here, by a soaring sense of accomplishment, such as 'the triumphant bulling of Janshar, the tom bawling ownership of the dead cat's vacated domain' (141). Such descriptions permeate Hartnett's writing and recall Elizabeth Costello's reference to Hughes' poem 'The Jaguar'. Arguing the relationship between the imagination and empathy, Costello refers to 'the faculty some poets have that allows us to share, at times, the being of another' (Coetzee 79).

In this context, via the forest, Hartnett brings us to a liminal space, an intersection of worlds, from which we will not return unchanged. At the end, as Kian and the kittens leave the forest and cross a marsh, they are now without the protection which, without their realising it, had become accepted. The forest with its protective canopy was an environment natural to cats, despite their feral status. Having left the forest, they have become dependent on the road which Kian proudly locates. However, the road presents dangers in the form of men hunting with guns, and this time Kian, in his conflicted state, is not equipped to avoid them. He is neither fully wild nor fully domesticated, and his appearance is ragged following his various battles. The conflict in his character is ultimately resolved for Kian when, injured and seeking shelter, he retraces his steps back to the edge of the forest.

Kian's journey, and his feline nature, have now been crystallised, both for him and for us, as essentially a return to his territory at any cost. Despite that being amongst humans, the connection is primal and unbreakable. A subtle change has taken place in him regarding his relationship with humans and the life of a cat in the wild. His interactions with the feral cats and the forest have forced him to reinterpret his old life and address the imbalance between that and his natural instincts. He now accepts Ellen's death as death is accepted in the wild and sees himself as a strong proud cat who had his own territory and could defend it. This is further

reinforced by his realisation that he never did have to fear that the feral cat Janshar might take his suburban territory from him. At the edge, Janshar turns back into the forest, the human world is an inimical environment which he does not understand. Kian realises Janshar is afraid. Having repeatedly shown contempt, Janshar had begun to respect Kian because of his use of strategy in a staged fight, calculated to ensure that Janshar would acquire his own territory, and in releasing the trap. He finally addresses Kian with respect, he sees that Kian is now on familiar ground, outside the forest. These subtle changes amount to a resurgence of nature in Kian and an integration of his old life with his experiences in the forest: 'Kian looked back at the forest lovingly, now he'd reached its very edge, though within its black depths he had found little to like' (194). Hartnett conveys that, despite the pain and loss attendant on a deeper self-knowledge, there is also appreciation and fulfillment. We understand how Kian can love the forest and still know that his territory among humans is irrevocably where he belongs. He knows himself to be at the intersection between worlds as he ultimately becomes aware of the tragic price of this dichotomy, even as in death he overcomes this to achieve joy and harmony.

A constant thread runs through the narrative, reminding us that our links with nature are intrinsic, felt in the vibrations of the earth and never truly lost (79, 112, 144-5). Kian has always sensed and followed the harmony of the earth, knowing that it was leading him back to his territory. Now, as he breaths his last at the edge of the forest, 'The melody of the earth was a hymn in his feet and he realised, with startled joy, that everything around him was home' (205). Kian has been reconciled with his nature and death is not too high a price to pay, 'He thought distantly of the kittens and remembered he'd once been young himself; a strong recollection of wildness went through him, and a puzzling need to be somewhere' (204). He dies feeling joy and fulfillment, and his death also frees the kittens to return to the forest. There was no other solution. They would have stayed with him, showing a loyalty contrary to the laws of the forest, but now the kittens quickly move on, as survival dictates.

The journey to and from the wild has been presented as a metaphor for an internal journey towards reconciliation with one's nature. Kian's experiences resonate with the reader, yet this does not diminish Hartnett's authentic focus on the trauma of a domestic cat forced to survive in the wild, and on solutions found only in the wild.

Therefore, alternatives to traditional or conventional human perspectives are presented, on survival, relationship, loyalty, the passage of time, youth, age, death and the place of all things in nature. For example, Ellen loved the cats, respecting their nature and privacy (121). Aware of her failing strength she tried, unsuccessfully, to relocate them for their protection, but after her death they were left defenceless in the world of humans. However, Tey, the mysterious old feral cat who rules the clowder succeeds in protecting the kittens by integrating them into the structure of the clowder. Tey's mother lived the harsh and short life of an abandoned cat but her offspring lived to rule in the forest. There is a sense that those who survive into old age in the wild blend harmoniously with nature, as when they were young, and that death is the culmination of this. It is the cycle of life. This concept foreshadows the novel's ending, the young survive by adapting instinctively to their environment, accepting life, death, hunger and triumph, without conflict – 'being hungry is part of being alive' (150). Acceptance of the passage of time, inbuilt in nature, is key to the harmony ultimately achieved by Kian as he takes his last breath:

It was a dragonfly that swooped Kian, the last dragonfly of the season [...] It had fulfilled all the small requirements of its existence and its flying had a lax purposelessness (205).

The harmony and integrity of purpose of the dragonfly, 'left to skate the sunshine without reason or pause' is clearly in tune with nature. In contrast, Jem, on finding dead Kian's body, feels insignificant, lost and confused but regains his bearings when he finds his sister Cally. There is intense pathos in the scene where the kittens discover Kian's body under the peppercorn at the edge of the forest: 'They saw the quiet, shining body, saw how he did not

swot the dragonfly when it dodged within reach'. They now seek the sights and smells of humans only in order to avoid them, instinct leading them to hide in the shadows. They return 'without hesitation' to the cool forest with 'the last sun of the season'. They become 'furtive and soundless, their ears listening to the forest, their eyes dilating to its gloom' (206). The feral cats are waiting in the shadows, now hidden from us, seen only as 'the tabby stripe' and 'the ashy flicker' (206). Hartnett has broken our link with the wild with the death of Kian. His domesticated perspectives allowed us to share his experiences. In this liminal space, we have been abruptly cast as external observers to the kittens return to the wild. Their actions only are described from this point, not their perspectives, which will now be fully those of the wild. We feel the loss of this disruption and yearn for the mystery we experienced on the journey with Kian and the kittens in the forest.

The narrative does not, however, end with the cats' return to the forest. Hartnett takes us back to Kian's territory, where, significantly, the laws of the wild also apply. Kian will not be returning. The boundaries are open to the neighbouring cat. We know now that this speckled, middle-aged cat whose claws are clipped would not survive long in the wild. Kian's disappearance described as 'sinister' (209) contains a threat to the speckled cat. On the surface, many of the elements of the wild are still present – cats defend their territory, an opponent is needed to maintain tension – but here these are limited and prescribed. There is much that domestic cats may sense but have not experienced. However, the reader understands that in a world governed by cars, petrol, walls and roads, a sense of security is deceptive, for humans and for cats. The speckled cat wonders 'could it happen to any cat? To him?'. Presented with the vacant lot that was Kian's territory, the speckled cat's natural instincts reawaken: 'As he'd patrolled his new dominion [...] he had felt some of the hot-blooded vainglory of the young lion [...] usurps the pride' (211). His eye view shows 'stumpy sapien legs' (210). As Ellen's 'territory' is also taken over, her house violently demolished, we are reminded that we, too, are

animals. Paradoxically, the wooden frame of the new house becomes the forest for the speckled cat, where he now prowls as a predator, his prey a chip bag blown in the breeze. (214) Hartnett's metaphor shows him following his instincts but only experiencing a pale imitation of what Kian experienced. Despite the cost, Kian's fate respects the cat's proud nature. The speckled cat feels his loss when his 'sapien' calls him for his kibble, 'For no good reason, he hated her [...] He looked back at the forest, felt its dark promise of a savage world' (215) and promises himself that one day he will return to the wild. The destruction of Ellen's house has opened a door which cannot be closed again.

Hartnett's *Forest* clearly reflects the issues surrounding human/animal relations which have been identified by Weil, Midgely, Cavalieri, and Joseph among others. Weil refers to the growing concern for 'alterity' (Weil 13), 'the need to attend to difference without distorting it' (Weil 4), and the 'stance of impenetrability' (Weil 7) which humans have erected between themselves and other animals. Like Joseph on the use of liminality in literature, Weil advocates the recognition of an intersection between human and animal perceptions of the world', asking what we lose when we seek to subvert the animal in ourselves. Hartnett relentlessly challenges the divisions humans have created between themselves and nature, their own and that of other animals. A broader paradigm is needed which would reflect a deeper appreciation and acceptance of the mystery and interconnectedness of all things in nature

Like Coetzee and Dovey, Hartnett challenges our presumptions in suppressing nature, our own and, consequently, that of others. Integrity is required if peace and reconciliation are to be achieved. Rather than using academic discourse or literary allusion to challenge the disruption caused by hierarchy Hartnett uses an anthropomorphism which reflects McKay's both/and definition, both the human and the animal perspectives are constantly blended, strongly emphasising their reconcilability. *Forest* is permeated with vivid descriptions and the immediacy of stark conflict which reflect a universally and physically experienced reality,

resonating with readers of widely different ages and backgrounds. Her evocation of the precariousness of life exposes our underlying sense of loss and disconnection emphasising our essential need for harmony with nature. Unlike Coetzee and Dovey, Hartnett does allow redemption and reintegration with nature to occur, through reconciliation with the cycle of life. Similarly, Carmody, who is also widely read by all age groups, uses realism, fable, fantasy and a new form of anthropomorphism to challenge humans' treatment of the earth and its animals.

\*\*\*

## Chapter 4

### Isobelle Carmody: Beyond Allegory

This chapter explores Isobelle Carmody's use of fantasy, realism and anthropomorphism which recognises the integrity of nature and bridging the age gap most notably through her use of the fable. It will be demonstrated that Carmody's fables are not anthropocentric in the manner of traditional allegorical fables, rather, their simplicity evokes an innocence and reintegration which is fundamental to a holistic world view. This development in the fable genre is effectively traced by Chris Danta (2018)<sup>65</sup>. In the context of Danta's arguments, fables, with their historically didactic, as well as subversive purpose, their often grotesque use of metamorphosis and humour, are seen to be well placed to challenge anthropocentrism by giving fundamental value to both human and non-human perspectives. In fact, contemporary writers can be seen to go further than this in that they reach towards integrity in nature by showing the common ground between humans and other animals, different species may contribute differently but the overall vision, is empathetic, holistic and harmonious. As Danta demonstrates, fables, through their blending of the animal and the human, have always shown that the dichotomy of reason and emotion, the basis of hierarchy is artificial.

Few writers explore in more depth the shifting perspectives on animal/human nature, the relationship between those realms and their place in the environment than does Carmody who has written across several fictional genres. She may be best known for her seven-part series, *The Obernewtyn Chronicles* (1987-2015). Her settings range from contemporary realism to the post nuclear apocalyptic, to the timeless landscape of fantasy, yet her themes are constant:

---

<sup>65</sup> In *Animal Fables after Darwin* (2018) Chris Danta demonstrates a gathering momentum of change in the nature, purpose and interpretation of allegorical fables after the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). He argues against the view that fables are, or have ever been, allegories for exclusively human values and perspectives but are 'a subversive and ultimately antitheological genre' (10) in their unarguable disruption of the hierarchical stance and anthropocentric world view of humans.

that peace is found through the harmony of all things in nature; the empathetic links between animals, humans and the environment; and the consequences of breaking these links. Included in her vision of all nature as organic and holistic is an understanding of dreams and animals as channels which blend the metaphysical and physical planes. Harmony is achieved through the integration of all dimensions, time, nature and possibility. Carmody's animal characters illustrate the value of harmony with nature, their own and that of others. Agendas specific to human society, and which exclude or fear mystery, are shown to conflict with nature, resulting in external and internal discord. Embracing the mysteriousness in our own nature and that of others is pivotal to Carmody's message, just as is the imagination in Coetzee's argument, both leading to empathy and the exploration of unknown possibilities. Consequently, Carmody questions our commitment to hierarchical and anthropocentric divisions in our relationships with other creatures.

***The Legend of Little Fur, Isobelle Carmody (2005-2008), Book 1 Little Fur (2005)***<sup>66</sup>

This can be demonstrated most concisely from Carmody's four-part fable, *The Legend of Little Fur*. Little Fur is an elf troll, the only one. She knows only that her father was an elf and her mother, a troll – creatures of the age before humans, the 'last age' (126). The setting is contemporary, an inland urban environment within which survives a remnant of ancient forest. At its centre are seven giant trees, the 'Old Ones', whose roots are deep in the earth and whose 'earth magic' (2) protects them by deflecting the attention of those humans who would destroy them. Unlike Little Fur, most humans are not connected with the 'earth spirit' (10). As she is part troll, she believes her feet must always touch the earth, water or green growing things (Bk.3, 19), lest she lose this connection. The forest is her home, only those connected with the 'earth spirit' come there, the animals, and, sometimes, creatures from the 'last age'. Little Fur

---

<sup>66</sup> References are from Book 1 of *The Legend of Little Fur* (2005), unless otherwise indicated.

is a healer, she uses herbs and communes with the animals to heal the injuries they sustain in the human world or resulting from natural forces. Her healing is understood to be both spiritual and physical (95). She also communes with the trees through touch, thought and dreams. The Old Ones who once sang, now only whisper. They tell her of the world outside and have been as parents to her since she awoke beneath them. They have forged a bond between her, Crow and the cat Ginger. Her history is revealed in the final book. In this otherwise realistic world, trolls, who could once wield magic and create art and beauty have become degenerate, severed from the earth spirit. They dwell deep in the underground city of Underth, seeking only to destroy the 'earth spirit', Little Fur, who has elf blood, and, ultimately, humans. Also, in this world there exists 'still magic' (51-54), found in the ancient places of worship where humans still gather, intensified by their collective singing. One such place is the 'beaked house' (22), now a church whose steeple, from the animals' perspective, resembles a bird's beak, the cross on top, twigs destined for a nest (52). This 'still magic' of the humans is passive and without direction, it must be channelled through the Sett Owl who lives in the rafters (68, 71). All creatures may bring questions and offerings to the Sett Owl whose dreams and predictions carry wisdom and answers shrouded in riddle (69-71). Little Fur must leave her beloved Old Ones, following rumours of human 'tree burners' (18), to seek advice from the Sett Owl and protect her wilderness. She learns that, if her forest is to be safe, all trees must be protected and that she must plant seeds in the city to strengthen the earth spirit and help humans reconnect with it. This establishes Carmody's theme that all nature is integrated, and healing always found in reconnection with nature, as 'still magic' and 'earth magic' are blended through the Sett Owl.

Each of the books is structured around such a quest, begun by questions brought to the Sett Owl, with allusions to elements reminiscent of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*<sup>67</sup>. For example, Book 2, *A Fox Called Sorrow* (2006), sees Little Fur travel with eight animal companions deep into Underth, a quest instigated by the Sett Owl to discover the troll king's plot to destroy the 'earth spirit'. One of her companions is the fox who has been the subject of laboratory testing all his life. They foil the troll king's plans to use biological agents from such testing to destroy the earth and humans, and the fox's spirit triumphs over all the pain inflicted on him. In Book 3, *A Mystery of Wolves* (2007), the cat, Ginger, has been captured by wolves whose alpha male has been turned from his true nature, again by human experimentation. Ginger is used as bait to draw Little Fur high into the wolves' icy mountain lair. She is always accompanied by her animal helpers without whom she would not succeed in defending the 'earth spirit'. Little Fur begins to discover her own story, the riddle of how an elf and a troll could possibly have had a child together, again a story of reconciliation leading to healing. This forms the basis of Book 4, *A Riddle of Green* (2008), where Little Fur's connection with the earth spirit has been severed. The old and tired Sett Owl who, in this book is at last free to leave this life and pass into 'the world's dream' (81, 94), is replaced by Gem, an owlet rescued by Little Fur after a storm, and who sees Ginger as his protector and Crow as his brother. Although he yearns to, Gem can never 'soar' like the other owls who abandoned him when he fell from the nest. Little Fur does not understand this rejection at first but later sees the necessity of it in nature, as owls need to move on at the loss of a fledgling. Carmody opposes this acceptance to humans' fear of death (175, 183, 185), which is presented as the root of their desire to destroy and control nature. As Gem eventually sees his future is as a seer, he may soar in spirit, higher than any owl, he replaces the Sett Owl, beginning his role by providing a riddle for Little Fur and her

---

<sup>67</sup>J. R. Tolkien. *The Lord of the Rings*, 1954 -1955. Allusions include: nine companions set out on the quest; the 'Tree Guardians' which exist in ancient folklore but here recall Tolkien's 'Ents' and their lost wives; and references to a magic ring and halflings.

companions to follow on her final quest in Book 4. Little Fur finally learns about her origins, how her father died saving her mother who then acted as a channel, turning ‘wild magic’ into ‘earth magic’, and how all who desire it may connect with the healing power of the earth spirit through reconnection with green growing things, following the animals who have never lost this connection. The ‘wild magic’ of the ‘last age’ has passed and we are left with the need to blend ‘earth magic’ and still magic’, both occurring in the natural world. Little Fur, a healer, learns that humans, too, are part of nature. Although some may have become degenerate, it is consistently emphasised that humans have the same power of healing as Little Fur, only caring is required.

Degenerate humans are presented as ‘greeps’ because of their unbridled ‘appetites’, smelling of fermented, ‘rotten fruit’ (88-90), yet animals who live close to humans know that sometimes humans can be caring and protective of the environment (191-194). Little Fur, in her forest, had only a negative perspective on humans. During her quests she learns that healing must encompass all of nature and that humans are ‘mysterious’, as well as capable of wonder and gentle curiosity (170, 171). Her deepening perspective on humans is in keeping with her role as healer which expands throughout the fables, going beyond healing the animals and trees, willing subjects, to encompass the healing of all nature.

The elements established in Book 1 are strongly intensified through the following books; different perspectives on humans (Bk. 2,1); the suffering of the fox and the guard dog (Bk. 2. Chap.1); and the personification and power of nature (Bk. 2, 1-6). Carmody’s use of anthropomorphism frequently blends or opposes animal and human perspectives with an authenticity which highlights both conflict and affinity. The hope and beauty of human transcendence, centred around the places of worship is intensified, showing an empathy between ‘still magic’ and ‘earth magic’ (Bk. 2, 5-8, 79, 285). New animal characters are introduced in each fable; foxes, wolves, dogs and lemmings among others. Carmody seeks to

represent them authentically in their behaviour, motivation and interaction with humans. Human characteristics may emerge through their spoken language, however, Carmody seeks to preserve animal characteristics such as predatory and survival instincts, timidity, pack behaviour, scavenging and acceptance of nature and death (Bk. 4, 81). She also uses the traditional characteristics humans attach to certain animals, such as wisdom to owls or secretiveness to cats. Clearly, she is representing both animal and human perspectives, showing what we can learn from animals, rather than using them to serve exclusively human interests which conflict with nature. Nor are animals seen as a homogenous group, they are differentiated as species and as individuals. For example, the cats Ginger and Sly both hunt, frequently disappearing in 'cat shadow' (38, 74), but Sly revels in antagonising the dog and would devour birds, including the Sett owl – 'I like owls' (52) – while Ginger is kind and gentle (75), even tolerating the devotion of the owlet, Gem. Carmody's representations strongly reflect Midgely's discussion of animals in literature and her conclusion that 'those who try to understand animals [...] often come to understand them quite well. Those who do not, fail, which is also true with human beings' (1979, 133). Like Hartnett, again bridging the gap between different perceptions and dimensions, Carmody demonstrates that, with empathy, human and animal characteristics are more reconcilable and comprehensible to each other than is allowed by the antipathy of hierarchy and exploitation.

Carmody's allegorical fable, then, is one where healing comes, not through sameness, but through harmony with nature, and illness and depression, come from disharmony and fear, resulting in humans' need to dominate and exploit their environment. She maintains a distinction between Little Fur and the animals: their perspectives and values are closely aligned yet there are differences. For Little Fur is a liminal character: as an elf troll, representing rival races from the 'last age', her origins may be fantastic, but she is essentially a blend of human innocence (2-4) and animal instinct. Like wild animals, she constantly uses smell to detect

thoughts, feelings or illness (126, 139, 150). Little Fur believes that animals who live close to humans lose their sense of smell, and to her they smell 'salty' and 'sour' (6, 9). Once again following Weil (2-3) this may link humans' loss of instinct to divisions resulting from an over commitment to the abstractions of spoken language. Like humans, Little Fur experiences conflict and change (160-167). However, the animals' perspectives are instinctive, constant, unchanging, and ultimately shown to contain enduring truth and wisdom. The animals may use human speech but Carmody dramatically modifies this with tone, alternative perspective (34, 128) and grammatical traits (32, 117). Their voices blend language with senses, such as smell. Their responses are instinctive, successfully conveying their different attitudes to humans as realistic (111, 122, 191).

We recall that writers will, of necessity, continue to use human faculties to represent animals. According to Midgely and McKay, more recently the purpose behind this has changed from that of traditional anthropomorphism. Despite her own use of anthropomorphism, Carmody retains a primary focus on the real and differing nature of animals in their relations with humans, and on what humans may learn from this when we seek to understand them properly; in Midgely's terms a recognition of the 'continuity' between human and animal nature. Weil also argues that when we 'deal with difference without distorting it' (Weil 4), we gain from acknowledging the limitations in our understanding of animals and the environment and, consequently, come to appreciate our own nature and role. Carmody seeks to avoid such distortion by casting animals as friends and guides, motivated only by their native instincts and bonds. Their animal perspectives on human society are provocative and unsettling: motor vehicles are threatening 'road beasts/monsters' (30, 32, 45), electric light is 'false light' (34) and glass is 'unmelting ice' (102), raising our awareness of our own boundaries. The animals suffer when humans disrupt their nature by capturing, abusing or exploiting them, instinctively returning to harmony with the 'earth spirit' when healed. It is implied that humans, too, suffer

from such disruption and fragmentation in their lives, without understanding why. Little Fur comes to believe that their resulting sadness and anger can be healed by restoring harmony (148-150).

While Carmody may use anthropomorphism in her representation of animals, she reserves fantasy for characters like Little Fur and other creatures of the ‘last age’. The ‘wild magic of ‘the last age’ does not survive in Little Fur’s world, only ‘earth magic’ and ‘still magic’, terms used to describe empathy and connection with the earth and with others, and which bring healing. Carmody’s themes and solutions are firmly rooted in the challenges facing the contemporary world: destruction of the environment, exploitation of animals, human violence, illness and misery. Some creatures attribute Little Fur’s healing to the magic of ‘the last age’ but she denies this (75), saying that it is open to all those connected with the ‘earth spirit’, where it is also accepted that death, joining ‘the world’s dream’, comes to all, in time – a perspective like that of Hartnett’s in *Forest*. Solutions presented rest on a renewed appreciation of mystery, and empathy between humans and the natural world. Humans are shown to be capable of imagination and empathy beyond established limitations as with the human child who perceived Little Fur in the dusk because of his openness to possibility. However, his wonder was suppressed by his mother who hurriedly brought him back to the brightly lit house. It is implied that humans have lost their ability to live in harmony with the environment because of a lack of empathy or imagination and are divided and closeted by their fear of the unknown, in Carmody often represented by the liminal. This resembles Elizabeth Costello’s calls for us to use our imagination, to empathise. Carmody may use fantasy to inspire us to high idealism and a holistic vision of our place in nature but she clearly demonstrates that these are elements intrinsic to human nature with the power to resolve conflict and degeneration in the modern world.

Little Fur is a liminal character linking all dimensions and bridging gaps between ideals and reality. Significantly, her troll part, initially seen as bad, is necessary in resolving every quest (158, 162-3). This represents the possibility of a redemptive integrity in the human spirit, reconciliation within themselves and with nature would save humans from degenerating into ‘greeps’ (69, 88-89). In contrast, the animals’ lives have remained intrinsically part of nature never seeking to dominate it. Humans may choose to protect the environment like Little Fur who plans to continue her seed planting trips into the human world (195). The ancient forest remains a secret at the heart of the city, only accessible to those connected with the ‘earth spirit’. Yet what may seem to be fantasy, is also based on reality as remnants of ancient forests still exist, protected by those who value them, just as Little Fur’s hope and innocence exist in humanity, as is demonstrated by the child’s wonder at seeing her. The elements of fantasy recede with Little Fur and the creatures of ‘the last age’ because they were meant to crystallise and inspire. We are left with the natural environment and the recognition that harmony with this brings healing. Hope is in the knowledge that small things, such as a child’s wonder, human singing, seeds and small animals such as lemmings (Bk. 4, 8, 83) can make a difference, often when greater things cannot. (177, 178, 194).

In contrast, conflict or threats come only from outside the protected wilderness, ‘most of the creatures who came to her [...] blamed their hurts on humans or on their devices [...] so Little Fur sometimes wondered if the damaging of small creatures was their sole purpose and delight’ (5). Little Fur fears humans as the main threat to the trees (13). She cannot understand why the pony, Brownie, happily returns to his human after his visits to the forest. He presents a more positive perspective on humans, which also proves valid. Ironically, Brownie first thought Little Fur bad because she smelled of troll (6). Brownie and the wild animals become Little Fur’s sources of information about the outside world. It is Crow, contemptuous of humans – ‘All humans *stupid*’– (21), who first brings news of ‘the ‘tree burners’ (18). The

animals can also speak with creatures from the ‘last age’ and Brownie’s recount of his encounter with a sea sprite (7, 8) foreshadows the final quest in Book 4. As Brownie learns about the wilderness, we see it through his eyes, yet his responses remain that of a pony, he joyfully follows his instincts, constantly excited by his surroundings ‘it was enough for him to know such trees existed’ (12, 17). Carmody has established differing perspectives on humans, distinctions between wild animals and those close to humans, effectively conveying not only harmony and discord but a sense of wonder or mystery.

This is seen in the character of Crow whose bond with Little Fur highlights her affinity with animals rather than attributing human qualities to him. Like the other wild animals, he is clearly not a vehicle for any values solely associated with human culture or society. Crow has contempt for humans, regarding them as no more than a source of crumbs. His language, with its raucous tone, his dramatic squawks and constant flight, and his lack of interest in human concerns serve to maintain a wild dimension to his character. Yet he is also proud, boastful, disdainful, startling and easily affronted, which are human characteristics (53). He regularly falls silent or screeches off with the word ‘Nevermore’ (20), echoing like a refrain through the fables. Crow’s cry recalls Edgar Allan Poe’s raven<sup>68</sup> accentuating his mysteriousness. Crow-like, he flies away, forgetting what is not of immediate concern to him (23), returning later, drawn back through his bond with Little Fur and repeatedly saving her from humans. Like Brownie, he has a little more than ‘food and mates’ (17) on his mind. Crow maintains his central role as messenger through the fables. His language has its own original abstractions and grammar; for instance, ‘All wanting answers must coming to Herness in beaked house.’ (22). Only birds use this type of language, and only crow has this bossy tone: ‘You just jealous

---

<sup>68</sup> In Edgar Allan Poe’s narrative poem ‘The Raven’ (1845) Poe’s raven ‘said’ no other word besides ‘Nevermore’, the metaphysical darkness associated with that raven emanates from the narrator, a case of transference. What is relevant here is the similarity in sound between the call of a crow and the word ‘Nevermore’, and the trace of mystery from the evocation of Poe’s raven.

because it not being your idea she seeking advice of Sett Owl' (27). This lends his character an unpredictability which punctuates the narrative as he comes and goes in his chosen role of messenger and storyteller. It is perhaps these absences and sudden reappearances which most effectively maintain Crow's character as a real crow. He remains mysterious and has minimal interaction with the human world. With other animals he remains aloof, a messenger whose embellished stories eventually give rise to the legend of Little Fur (192). His crow-like character retains a wildness, accessible to us through an estranged use of language, modified to inspire us to think outside conventional paradigms and beyond 'the limits of our own self-certainty and certainty about the world' (Weil 13). This alternative perspective and sense of mystery are also seen in the other animals' understanding of the human world, such as Sly's confident interpretation of roads and cars – roads are to summon cars, living 'pets' which humans bathe (39, 40), exposing the gap between human and animal perceptions of the world.

The natural mysteriousness of the animals – ineffability in Weil's terms – is distinct from the fantasy in Carmody's fable. This distinction is fundamental to Carmody's vision of harmony with nature. Mystery is present in the fantastic creatures like Little Fur whose mysteriousness, nonetheless, is a blend of human and animal qualities. Her solutions come from the natural world. This, and the mystery which resides in the reality of the wildness, the secrecy of the animals, their ability to become invisible to observers, and their startling perspectives (38, 74, 132) capture the readers' imagination. Despite Crow's unforgiving attitude to others he has a silent respect and awe for the Sett Owl. The chapel setting links this awe with that of the humans' whose singing is described as 'still magic'. The Sett Owl herself is mystical, a channel for both the 'still magic' of humans, and 'earth magic'. Her dreams and predictions are 'riddles' (Bk 4, 76), requiring trust in the 'earth spirit' yet solutions are always found in the real world. While mystery may surround Carmody's use of fantastic creatures from the 'last age', it is not confined to it. The animal characters are mysterious because of

their connection with the earth; in contrast to humans, they live close to nature and follow instinct, they have lives beyond Little Fur's quests, centred around shelter and survival. They evoke life beyond human language or civilisation. The forest, and other wild places, such as the icy mountains, are mysterious and a sanctuary for wild creatures, remote from humans and their constructs. Carmody is identifying different kinds of mystery. Mystery will always be intrinsic to the unknown and is a natural dimension of human as well as animal nature as seen in the humans' singing and the animals' communion with the natural world. For humans this mystery can be distorted by fear and alienation from nature. The Sett Owl states, 'One does not need to create the illusion of mystery when true mystery exists' (66), explaining that her knowledge comes from natural sources, from animals she has helped. Clearly, we are challenged to acknowledge and value the existence of alterity in nature and continue to explore and wonder, like the child whose wonder allowed him to see Little Fur (104-106).

Carmody's *Little Fur* fables reflect that 'intersection' between the human and animal perceptions of the world which Kari Weil describes as possible only if 'we relinquish that stance of impenetrability' we use to protect ourselves from being known by animals (Weil 7, 8). This is often represented in literature by transitional beings who challenge existing paradigms of relationship, identity and hierarchy. Weil further states that 'art's purpose is to undo stable identity' (Weil 11). Similarly, Joseph describes the function of liminal characters in literature as 'offsetting the tensions of a complex society' (Joseph 138), that is, by creating new kinds of harmony. Free of conventional structures, they become ambiguous, mystical or mysterious. Weil describes this as 'ineffable' (Weil 9). The *Little Fur* fables evoke a sense of mystery experienced through the intersection of worlds and insights into what humans may gain from acknowledging uncertainty and possibility in both their own and animal nature, such as, the renewal of innocence, trust and wonder.

Carmody's fable questions the divisions created by anthropocentricity by portraying a vision of harmony between humans, animals and nature. Different perspectives on humans are presented emphasising our ability to choose, and the consequences of our choices. She advocates empathy between humans, animals and nature to bring healing, requiring an openness to mystery and an ongoing exploration of our own nature and that of others. Carmody has structured her fable around Little Fur's quests which have culminated in an understanding of the reconcilability of all elements of nature and that this will bring healing of social and environmental ills. Animals remain integrated with nature and are guides who point the way back for those who have lost this connection. Through their communal singing and ancient places of worship humans can reconnect with the spirit which unites all things, and which is channelled through the animals to bring healing.

\*\*\*

## **Conclusion**

### **Towards Harmony**

We can see then that Coetzee through his use of an alter ego in Elizabeth Costello set in an academic forum has brought into stark and unresolved conflict the different, views, stereotypical to the point of satire, which represent the controversy surrounding human/animal relations. Specifically, he has opposed reason and the imagination, implying that rational argument can provide no answers to the underlying conflict and guilt accompanying humans' treatment of animals, the existence of which goes unchallenged in the lectures but is explored in the reflections which follow. The validity of hierarchy is undermined on its own terms and self-interest masquerading as reason is exposed, as Costello calls, instead, for empathy from her listeners as, we may say, does Coetzee from his readers. We are positioned to continue to explore, through imagination and empathy, what writers may teach us beyond what 'they (or we) are aware of' (Coetzee 53) (my parenthesis).

Dovey, using a structure which combines a potent mixture of creativity and extensive literary allusion, exposes our ignorance or indifference to the impact of our actions on the lives of animals. Like Coetzee she ensures that no comforting affirmation is given to any aspect of our treatment of animals, it is the established paradigms of hierarchy and exclusivity which are questioned and condemned, forming a web in which humans, too, are caught. Through her use of tone and graphic imagery conveying the animals' eternal constancy Dovey immediately positions us to empathise with the animal narrators, even as we are made aware of the tragedy and inevitability of their fate, invariably as a result of human agency. As with Coetzee, there is no reconciliation, no redemption or renewal within the text, merely a sense of harrowing moral and emotional failure. The reader is left to contemplate what changes are needed to

resolve the unacceptable gulf between our values and the consequences of our actions in our relationship with animals.

Hartnett's evocative descriptions of the natural world from the perspective of abandoned domestic cats and their encounters with wild cats in the forest resonates with readers of different age groups at different levels. It brings us to an intuitive awareness of what is essential in nature: survival, shelter, a sense of place and acceptance of the cycle of life. We are reminded that we share common ground with other creatures in this, as the cats' need for internal and external harmony is a metaphor for our own. In contrast to the enduring gulf between humans and animals described in Coetzee's or Dovey's writing, Hartnett's cats do achieve harmony by reintegration with the cycle of life in the wild. There is also the suggestion that the young may be closer to such harmony, not yet being deeply entrenched in divisive cultural barriers. Hartnett's intense evocation of our sense of the precariousness of life and the need for harmony challenges those illusionary barriers, both concrete and abstract, with which we have surrounded ourselves. We are left with the ongoing question of what we can learn from animals and from the wild, and how can we regain internal and external integrity with nature.

Carmody's fables, too, are accessible to all ages. Their use of allegory is neither anthropocentric or divisive, rather they challenge the divisions which result from anthropocentricity, using a blend of reality and fantasy to show how such divisions bring destruction and misery to humans, animals and the environment. Carmody presents an alternate vision of healing and hope for all by seeking to represent real animals as guides leading the way back to reconciliation with the natural world. This vision drives ongoing questions about changes needed in our relationship with animals and with the environment.

Clearly, then, a wide range of contemporary Australian writers, reflecting critics' views and an increasing growth in social and scientific understanding, effectively question the validity of established hierarchical stances in humans' relationships with animals and the natural world. The more we learn about the natural world the more we realise it is not constructed hierarchically, nor are we the centre of it. Writers employ a wide range of genre and literary devices to expose the destruction resulting from humanity's disconnection with nature. Instead they advocate a holistic rather than hierarchical paradigm of relationship with animals, one which is empathetic to others, accepting that the imagination and a spirit of exploration are essential elements of humanity and that we have a deep-seated need to live in harmony with the rest of nature.

There is a common thrust to the questions raised by Coetzee, Dovey, Hartnett and Carmody despite the different genres employed: What are the consequences for us and for other animals when we lose sight of ourselves as another species of animal? What are the effects of narrowing our definition of ourselves to spoken language and reason? What fears cause us to insulate ourselves from the natural world, refusing to empathise? What is the role of literature in effecting social or ethical change? Does truth have resonance regardless of whether it is presented through realism or fantasy? We cannot reconcile with the negative perspectives on humanity or the consequent descriptions of misery and dislocation with which writers present us. They challenge us to consider what we can learn from the natural world by sharpening our awareness of the limitations we have established. We are consistently urged to explore beyond these confines and to adopt different criteria for the value and worth we place on animals.

That writers have established these questions as open and ongoing is evidenced by the residual impact on the reader. We are unavoidably positioned to continue to move beyond anthropocentrism, reevaluate our perception of other animals and acknowledge the need for harmony with the environment in a world where destruction, dominance and discord have

become the norm. These questions continue to gain momentum in the ever-increasing volume of writing on the ‘turn to animals’, most definitively in the collection of short stories edited and collected by A, Marie Houser in *After Coetzee* (2017). She and the story writers demonstrate a purposefully evocative and luminous evolution in language to convey non-human animal perspectives:

More-than-human words are fluttered through with communication, from the syntactical complexity of birdsong to the waggle and sickle dance of bees (xx).

As the title demonstrates the questions raised by Coetzee continue to find fertile ground in contemporary fiction, they are ongoing. Writers continue to use a new form of anthropomorphism which seeks to represent an increasingly authentic understanding of animals, as described by, Peter Singer, Mary Midgley, Bob McKay, Kari Weil and others. Such different forms of anthropomorphism which demonstrate a greater appreciation of and respect for the radical alterity of animals and are also recognisant of humans as animals have been demonstrated in the writing of contemporary Australian writers such as Hartnett and Carmody. This also reflects the global literary environment: When Houser was asked ‘Why so much dog?’ she replied:

A literature without *dog*—a literature without *snake* and *bee*—means a whole bright (and scented) spectrum of stories is missing (x).

\*\*\*

## Bibliography

- Berger, John, *About Looking*, New York, Pantheon, 1980, 26.
- Brooks, David. 'Mixed Messages' *Southerly*. 77.3, 2017, 138-145.
- Camus, Albert. *The First Man*. Trans. David Hapgood, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1995, 181-83. 'Reflections sur la guillotine'. In *Essais*. Ed. R Quilliot and L. Faucon, Paris: Gallimard, 1965,'1019-64.
- Carmody, Isobelle. *Little Fur: The Legend of Little Fur, Book 1*. Melbourne, Victoria: Penguin, 2005.
- Carmody, Isobelle. *A Fox Called Sorrow: The Legend of Little Fur, Book 2*. Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin, 2006.
- Carmody, Isobelle. *A Mystery of Wolves: The Legend of Little Fur, Book 3*. Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin, 2007.
- Carmody, Isobelle. *A Riddle of Green: The Legend of Little Fur, Book 4*. Hawthorn, Victoria: Penguin Viking, 2008.
- Carmody, Isobelle. *Billy Thunder and the Night Gate*. Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 2000.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1993.
- Cavaliere, Paola. 'The Animal Debate: A Reexamination'. In *In Defense of Animals: The Second Wave*. Ed. Peter Singer. Carlton: Blackwell, 2006.
- Cavell, Stanley. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Cavell, Stanley. 'Companionable Thinking'. In *Wittgenstein and the Moral life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond*. Ed. Alice Crary. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007.
- Canetti, Elias, *Kafka's Other Trial: The Letters to Felice*, trans. Christopher Middleton (London: Calder and Boyars, 1974, 88).
- Coetzee, John Maxwell. *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Coetzee, John Maxwell. *Elizabeth Costello*. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- Collette, Sidonie – (pseud. Collette). 'Looking Backwards: Recollections'. London: The Women's Press, 1987.
- Danta, Chris. 'Coetzee's Animal Afterlives' 69.1 *Southerly*, 2009.
- Danta, Chris. *Animal Fables after Darwin*, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

- Daston, Lorraine. 'Angelic, Animal, Human'. In *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*. Columbia University Press, 2005.
- De Grazia, David. 'On the Question of Personhood beyond Homo Sapiens'. In *In Defense of Animals: The Second Wave*. Ed. Peter Singer. Carlton: Blackwell, 2006.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. D. Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Dickinson, Peter. *Eva*. Open Road Media, 2015.
- Diski, Jenny. *What I Don't Know About Animals*, Yale University Press, 2011.
- Dovey, Ceridwen. *Only the Animals*, Melbourne, Victoria: Hamish Hamilton, 2014.
- Grahame, Kenneth. *The Wind in the Willows*, 1908. Saffron Hill, London: Usborne Publishing, 2012.
- Haraway, Donna. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.
- Haraway, Donna. *The Companion Species Manifesto*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003.
- Hartnett, Sonya. *Forest*. Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin, 2004.
- Hearne, Vicki. *Adam's Task: Calling Animals by Name*. Pleasantville: Common Reader, 2000.
- Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Isaiah 53, Old Testament NIV.
- Jasper, James. and Nelkin, Dorothy. *The Animal Rights Crusade: The Growth of a Moral Protest*. New York: Free Press, 1991.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Prison-House of Language: A critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formation*. Princeton University Press, 1972.
- Joseph, Michael. 'Liminality'. In *Keywords for Children's Literature*. Ed. Philip Nel. & Lissa Paul. New York University Press, 2011.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Norwood, Pennsylvania: Norwood Editions, 1975.
- Kahane, Reuven. *The Origins of Postmodern Youth: Informal Youth Movements in a Comparative Perspective*. Vol. 4. Walter de Gruyter, 1997.
- Kafka, Franz. *A Report to an Academy. Collected Stories*. Ed. Gabriel Josipovici. New York: Knopf, 1993, 195–205.

- Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphosis*. Modern Library, 2013.
- Lewis, C. S. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. New York: Scholastic, 1995.
- Lloyd, Suci, et al. *The Carbon Diaries, 2015*, 2008.
- McKay, Robert. University of Sheffield, 'Approaching Animals in Literature', [www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.473626!/file/BobMcKay.pptx](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.473626!/file/BobMcKay.pptx), accessed January 2017.
- McKibben, Bill. 'The End of Nature'. 1989. New York: Anchor, 1990.
- Midgely, Mary. *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*, London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002.
- Midgely, Mary. *Animals and Why They Matter*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998.
- Milosz, Czeslaw. 'Road Side Dog'. (1997). New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 1998.
- Orwell, George. *Animal Farm*, London: Secker and Walburg, 1945.
- Poe, Edgar Allen. 'The Raven' New York, 1845.
- Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein, Or, The Modern Prometheus*, 1818. Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin, 2009.
- Singer, Peter. *Animal Liberation*. (Updated Edition) Broadway, New York: Harper Collins, 2009. First published 1975.
- Singer, Peter. *In Defense of Animals: The Second Wave*. Carlton: Blackwell, 2006.
- Singer, Peter. *Writings on an Ethical life*. London: Harper Perennial, 2000.
- Singer, Isaac Bashevis, 'The Letter Writer', 1968, 'The Yearning Heifer', (1904) 'A Friend of Kafka' (1968) in *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York, 1982.
- Tourtel, Mary. et al. *Rubert Bear*. London: Daily Express, 1920.
- Van Gennep, Arnold. *The rites of passage*. University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Weil, Kari. 'A Report on the Animal Turn.' *differences* 21.2: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies (2010): 1-23.
- Wolfe, Cary. *Animal Rites*. University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Wolfe, Cary. *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003



