

Dogs, Horses, and Red Herrings: The Animal in J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus*

ABSTRACT: J. M. Coetzee's fiction has variously spoken to the idea of the animal, particularly through the figure of the dog, as an object of human empathy. This empathetic engagement with the animal has implications for the relationships between human beings. However, in *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), we see a conceptual shift in which the animal is used to explore an oppositional binary that could loosely be described as the corporeal versus the otherworldly or spiritual.

In *A Countess in Limbo: Diaries in War and Revolution 1914–1920 and 1939–1947*, the Russian Countess Olga Hendrikoff, after having fled from the upheaval of the Russian revolution, experiences the German Nazi occupation of France firsthand. In a conversation with a high-ranking German officer, Von der Dammerau, she is told that the German soldiers aim to exude an “external discipline [...] matched by an inner discipline” (109). He proudly asserts that the German soldiers are polite and respectful toward the French, and kind to animals, especially stray dogs. The Countess decides to resolve this perplexing contradiction by asking the German officer why he and his men should behave so appallingly to certain human beings but retain a consistent level of decorum toward animals. She states, “When I asked [the Nazi] how men who refused to kill animals could kill human beings, he answered that was very different; dogs could not defend themselves. But war could be compared to hunting and all hunting is exciting and should be considered an honourable sport” (109). The German soldier's response is disturbing on a number of levels. On the one hand, it suggests that animals are the most vulnerable of the vulnerable—when confronted with a weapon, or even a sturdy boot, they cannot protect themselves; therefore, killing them would be shameful and heartless. On the other hand, killing a human being—a being “armed” with wit or intellect (if nothing more)—allows the soldier to revel in the “honor” of his “sport.” The murder of human beings becomes an adrenaline enriched chase, a parade of masculine vitality. Of course, the profound irony that the killing of human beings is compared to the aggressive pursuit of animals appears entirely lost on the Nazi soldier. The distinction between the animal and human is blurred, echoing Adorno's chilling observation in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “The Fascist's passionate interest in animals, nature, and children is rooted in the lust to persecute. The significance of the hand negligently stroking a child's head, or an animal's back, is that it could just as easily destroy them” (253). Deeply embedded in the fascist's apparent sympathy toward defenseless animals lies a brutality that could flare up at the blink of an eye. The destruction of the innocent comes at a mere whim.

What is significant about the Countess's chilling anecdote is that the human treatment of animals and how this relates to the relationships between human beings has preoccupied authors and scholars from at least the Middle Ages. Consider for instance, Chaucer's reading of the Prioress in his fourteenth-century celebration of human character and idiosyncrasy, *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer states of the Prioress:

She had small hounds that she fed
With roasted flesh, or milk and white bread,
And she wept bitterly if one of them were dead. (1.A.146–48)

In some ways the image could suggest a supreme kindness, a charity that extends beyond the human toward the animal, but it could also be understood as something suspect: that the Prioress, whose spiritual devotion should be directed exclusively toward the souls of humans rather than “soulless” animals, entirely replaces or substitutes her interest in the human with animal. Jump forward about five hundred years, and we see J. M. Coetzee, the South African (now Australian) author and Nobel Laureate, interrogating the concept of the animal in his books stretching from the apartheid period right up until his most recent novel *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013). His apartheid and post-apartheid fiction explore the idea of the animal, particularly through the figure of the dog, as a conduit or object of human empathy. This empathetic engagement with the animal is understood to have direct implications for the relationships between human beings. However, in *The Childhood of Jesus* there is a remarkable thematic and conceptual shift in the manner in which Coetzee speaks to the animal. In this novel Coetzee uses the animal to explore an oppositional binary that could loosely be described as the corporeal versus the otherworldly or spiritual. In fact, this recent novel may be pointing us in the direction of interesting new trends in his future work.

Flogging a Dead Dog?

Probably the most obvious place to start with a discussion of the animal and Coetzee is *Disgrace* (1999). The novel chronicles the life of an aging professor, David Lurie, past his sexual and physical prime. His Eurocentric intellectual interests—Wordsworth, Byron, opera—in a supposedly “post-Christian, posthistorical, postliterate” (32) South Africa appear increasingly passé. After an exploitative sexual liaison (though Lurie would no doubt call it something more dignified) with one of his students, a woman of color called Melanie, Lurie is taken to task by a tribunal, which in some ways references the larger institutional tribunal, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, that took place during the early years of South Africa’s transition to democracy and attempted to address apartheid injustices. Entirely lacking in contrition, even asserting that he was acting as a “servant of Eros” (52), Lurie is expelled from his position at the university. On deciding to leave Cape Town, he visits his daughter, Lucy, who lives a self-sufficient lifestyle off “dogs and daffodils” (62) on a smallholding close to Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape. Lucy, conscious that Lurie is in a “state of disgrace” (172), offers him refuge (65). When Lucy is raped and Lurie is doused in methylated spirits and set alight by three black intruders, a process of complete unaccommodation (to use the Learian term) begins for both Lurie and his daughter. Both must ultimately negotiate their place as white, and therefore historically complicit, South Africans in post-apartheid South Africa.

Without rehashing many an argument on this theme—the dog is the central metaphor in this act of political, social, and personal reconfiguration, heavily connected with the concept of empathy or ethical responsibility.¹ Indeed, after Lucy’s rape in her home, Petrus proposes that Lucy consider becoming his wife in exchange for his protection. Implicit in the proposal is the expectation that Lucy gives up her land to him and live on the property as a bywoner, a tenant farmer. Appalled at Petrus’s proposal, David tells Lucy to dismiss it, but Lucy makes it clear that as “humiliating” (*Disgrace* 205) as it is, she is willing to accept Petrus’s terms in order to continue living on the farm. Lucy’s pragmatic gesture is significant: she realizes that in order to stay on, she must start “with nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no

¹ Empathy and ethical responsibility are not interchangeable categories, but they are related. Empathy refers to the act of understanding and sharing the experiences of the Other. This act of imagining oneself in the position of the Other may prompt ethically minded behavior toward the Other.

rights, no dignity" (205). Stripped of all these things, Lucy becomes "like a dog" (205). Without being didactic or prescriptive, Lucy's gesture speaks to the manner in which white South Africans must accept the terms of a new status quo. Indeed, in an article largely concerned with the importance of reading novels in an interdisciplinary manner, but still deeply conscious of their literariness or form, Rosemary Buikema reminds us that

Being dog-like, however, does not imply passive resignation as [the esteemed literary scholar] Elleke Boehmer fears, nor a programmatic solution to a problem, an end point, as some white critics inferred from the text. It is an opportunity to remain open to the experience of the present and continue to be orientated on the future. (94)

When Lurie and Lucy are attacked, the details of Lucy's rape are mercifully excluded, but Lucy's dogs' deaths are reported with Coetzee's characteristic clarity. The narrator states,

Now the tall man appears from around the front, carrying the rifle. With practised ease he brings a cartridge up into the breach, thrusts the muzzle into the dogs' cage. The biggest of the German shepherds, slavering with rage, snaps at it. There is a heavy report; blood and brains splatter the cage. For a moment the barking ceases. The man fires twice more. One dog, shot through the chest, dies at once; another, with a gaping throat-wound, sits down heavily, flattens its ears, following with its gaze the movements of this being who does not even bother to administer a *coup de grâce*. (*Disgrace* 95)

The intruder shows no mercy. The narrator continues: "A hush falls. The remaining three dogs, with nowhere to hide, retreat to the back of the pen, milling about, whining softly. Taking his time between shots, the man picks them off." (96). Although Lucy Graham, the literary critic, is correct in her observation that dogs in South Africa have traditionally played the role of watchdogs for what she diplomatically refers to as the "propertied classes" (8),² her assertion that the killing of the dogs should be understood as the criminal's suspicion of the dog is problematic. Coetzee is not merely presenting us with the criminal's wariness of the dog—he is presenting us with a heinous act of gratuitous violence, a complete lack of compassion committed against the real physical body of the dog, not simply a symbolic abstraction, a point reiterated by Laura Wright (15). The dogs are firmly locked away—they pose no threat to the intruders. There is no reason to kill them. And there is certainly no reason to allow them to suffer.³

From this point onward, Coetzee establishes a jarring dynamic: the perpetrators' complete disregard for the dogs operates in sharp relief to Lurie's increased empathetic engagement with the world around him. He begins work at the animal shelter with Bev Shaw, of whom he was initially disdainful. (He initially disparages her good intentions (*Disgrace* 73) and her "dumpy" (72) looks, which offends his sexually objectifying gaze.) As time passes, though, Lurie acknowledges that the shelter's work is indispensable: it offers great relief to a number of unwanted or neglected animals. However, Lurie never glorifies his position at the shelter. He explicitly does not paint himself as the "saviour" (146) of the

² Lucy Lurie reiterates this view when David asks her if she feels scared living without Helen on the smallholding. She responds, "There are the dogs. Dogs still mean something. The more dogs, the more deterrence" (*Disgrace* 60).

³ There is something extremely poignant in one of Lucy's first gestures after the rape being her checking on the dead dogs. Lurie hears her murmur, "My darlings, my darlings!" over their dead and dying bodies (*Disgrace* 97).

dogs, but he admits that he is “prepared to take care of them once they are unable, utterly unable, to take care of themselves, once even Bev Shaw has washed her hands of them” (146). In fact, toward the close of the novel Lurie comes to tend to the disposal of the dogs’ corpses, which (as mentioned earlier) should be read with an awareness of the dogs’ corporeality. When taken to the incinerator, the dogs—affected by rigor mortis—need their bones broken so that they can be properly processed, a job that Lurie willingly undertakes (144). Coetzee, using the free indirect discourse characteristic of his style, draws attention to Lurie’s thoughts at this point in time:

Why has he taken on this job? To lighten the burden on Bev Shaw? For that it would be enough to drop off the bags at the dump and drive away. For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honour and dishonour anyway? For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing. (145–46)

The dogs do not comprehend the idea of moral integrity or virtue. These human constructs lie entirely beyond their consciousness. Therefore, when Lurie cares for the dogs’ corpses, he functions within a moral universe of which the dogs are entirely oblivious. This leads Lurie to jump to the conclusion that he tends to their bodies for his sake, which has inevitably resulted in rather cynical readings by various literary critics. Lucy Graham, for example, has been quick to suggest the selfishness of his gesture—he uses the dogs’ bodies to shift from disgrace to redemption. However, Graham fails to see that the gesture does not tangibly or spiritually benefit Lurie—in a novel where the grammatical structure of the perfective functions with considerable force to suggest completed actions (“burned – burnt – burned up”) (166), the state of “disgrace,” mentioned in the novel’s title, remains an ongoing state. The novel closes with Lurie changed but unredeemed. Inherent, then, in Lurie’s gesture is the utopian moment—the belief that the world could be otherwise—a world where the supreme value of even the lowly dog is acknowledged. Derek Attridge insightfully comments that Lurie’s act is a “dedication to a singularity of every living, and dead, being” (188). The “service to the dead animals is understood as marking and mourning, that is to say as registering the individuality of each dog’s death, of contesting the reduction of dead animals to mere accumulations of matter” (188).

Acknowledging the singularity of the dog refuses to place animals on a hierarchical grid that views animals as the lowest of the low: mere objects. This acknowledgment ironically safeguards against the mistreatment of human beings in instances when human beings are conflated with the animal for the purposes of political or social exploitation. This mistreatment comes to the fore strongly in Coetzee’s bifurcated novel *Dusklands* (1974), in which he draws parallels between the imperial occupation of modern Vietnam and eighteenth-century South Africa. In the section “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee,” Jacobus Coetzee, a frontiersman on the search for elephants, explicitly links South Africa’s indigenous peoples with animals. He says of the San: “The Bushman [sic] is a different creature, a wild animal with an animal’s soul” (58). He continues, “Heartless as baboons they are, and the only way to treat them is like beasts” (58). By dehumanizing the natives, Jacobus allows himself free rein in his treatment of them. The appropriation of land by colonial occupants is given an air of legitimacy since animals do not own land. Certainly, Jacobus sets up the opposition between European and African women in terms of their relationship to physical property. He states of Dutch women— “[T]hey bring not only so many pounds of white flesh but also so many morgen of land” (61). In contrast, the San woman is “tied to nothing, literally nothing” (61). More importantly, conflating the natives with the animal justifies acts of violence. In the massacre of a Nama village, it is no small point that Jacobus

compares the botched attempt to kill one of his former slaves, Plaatje, to the “dispos[al] of wounded birds” (105).

Jacobus’s reading of the San as animals is reminiscent of Giorgio Agamben’s concept of the anthropological machine, the manner in which humanness is constructed with and in relation to animality, in one of his keystone texts, *The Open: Man and Animal* (2004). Agamben is clear that, historically, human beings have understood various individuals—slaves, barbarians, foreigners—as animals in “human form” (37). This humanization of “animals” undoubtedly contributed to justifying acts of injustice, enslavement, and barbarism. Conversely, the anthropological machine also involves the animalization of humans (37), such as the animalization of Jews during the Holocaust, as noted by Kelly Oliver (229). Of course, Agamben is not interested in effecting a hierarchical distinction between man and animal, nor suggesting a continuity between the two but, instead, offers a dialectical compromise in which the human and animal are caught in “the open,” a shared state that, very simplistically defined, acknowledges neither the closedness of animality, nor the openness of humanity. Indeed, Agamben, drawing on Heidegger, notes that animals are only open to the stimuli of their immediate environments, but closed to the openness of contemplation and reflection upon worldly experience (de la Durantye 329). However, Agamben also makes it clear that the open that he envisages is a space in which “two irreconcilable positions meet—the point at which the animal’s unhindered openness, or receptivity, to stimuli in its environment and man’s openness to the world in all its ungraspable immensity converge” (de la Durantye 330).⁴ It is crucial to note, though, that Agamben’s open does not promote hierarchies—his response to the animal/man relationship is one that acknowledges both the singularity of man and animal and that refuses to place one or the other in a position of conceptual superiority.

This very sentiment is fully realized in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), in which the novel’s eponymous protagonist, able to project herself into the life of the bat or chimpanzee (80), places the death of animals on par with that of humans.⁵ Furthermore, this emphasis on the singularity of the animal, with a specific focus on the dog, and its acting as a conduit for human empathy, is a motif in Coetzee’s apartheid fiction. In *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), a novel that deals with the fictionalized death of Dostoevsky’s stepson, Pavel, the dog features as an important marker of compassion. Dostoevsky, in order to unravel the mystery of Pavel’s death, temporarily settles in St. Petersburg. One evening, he hears a dog howling and whimpering. Initially, he is keen to ignore the dog’s calls, justifying this by the fact that he has nothing to do with the dog: “let the dog-father, whoever he is, go out in the cold and dark and gather in his arms his gross smelly child” (80). However, Dostoevsky swiftly comes to the realization that he must not ignore the dog: “Because it is not his son he must not go back to bed but must get dressed and answer the call” (80). When he finds the dog, he unwinds the chain causing it distress and appeases its “rank terror” (81). Although Dostoevsky abandons the dog on acknowledging that it is not the sign—or what Attridge refers to as the arrivant (123)—that will demystify Pavel’s death, it is crucial that Dostoevsky responds to the dog as something owed an “ethical responsibility,” a point reiterated by Laura Wright (47).

⁴ De la Durantye sees Agamben’s open as a space of potentiality, a space in which man and animal meet each other’s “singular potentiality” (331).

⁵ For this reason she is able to make the controversial comparison, in the words of the fictional Abraham Stern, that “The Jews died like cattle, therefore cattle die like Jews” (*Elizabeth Costello* 94).

In *Age of Iron* (1990), Elizabeth Curren is all too aware of this ethical responsibility that conflates the human and the animal. Through the course of the novel, Elizabeth Curren (an academic dying of cancer in a socially fraught apartheid South Africa) becomes deeply attached to a non-white beggar, Vercueil, whom she allows to enter her home and live with her. Vercueil is associated with the concept of the animal—Curren chooses to trust him specifically based on the fact that he has a dog. For Curren, dogs are “sentries,” able to “sniff out what is good, what evil” (85–86). By caring for Vercueil, Curren is, by extension, also fulfilling her obligation toward the animal. Indeed, in this novel the responsibility toward society’s indigent and, crucially, to the animal is inscribed in blood. Elizabeth states, in a letter directed at her daughter, “Why do I give this man food? For the same reason I would feed his dog (stolen I am sure) if it came begging. For the same reason I gave you my breast” (7). What is owed to a biological blood child is owed to all.

However, in Coetzee’s most recent novel, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), Coetzee’s figure of the dog is quite different from that of his previous fiction. The novel, written in the third person, shows Simón, an older man—perhaps in his forties or fifties—caring for a young child, David, who has been separated from his parents. Simón endeavors to reunite David with his mother, despite the fact that her identity is unknown (a point that will be explored in due course). Simón meets David on a ship on a voyage to a new land, a land devoid of passion, salt, and strict social hierarchies—a type of socialist utopia called Novilla—where migrants may construct a new life.

New arrivals to Novilla are given access to various amenities—identity documents, shelter, transport, health care (all free of charge)—by various, possibly state-run, institutions, and they are greeted by the settled inhabitants not with suspicion but with goodwill. However, Simón finds Novilla alienating and strange. He complains, “Things do not have their due weight here [...].The music we hear lacks weight. Our lovemaking lacks weight. The food we eat, our dreary diet of bread, lacks substance—lacks the substantiality of animal flesh, with all the gravity of bloodletting and sacrifice behind it. Our very words lack weight, these Spanish words that do not come from our heart” (*Childhood of Jesus* 64–65). Of course, what Simón finds so “bloodless” (30) about Novilla is its expunging of all biological drives and imperatives—imperatives that should be understood in terms of behaviors or actions that have a deep-seated instinctual basis, which may not necessarily be overcome by the force of will. (These imperatives often promote the continuation and survival of living organisms.) Novilla’s settled inhabitants hold the view that these biological drives and imperatives are pointless and unnecessary. Elena, Simón’s neighbor at the housing center, tells Simón that sexual intercourse is purely gratuitous, and reads it in utilitarian terms, stating, “It doesn’t advance us does, it?” (60). Ana, a young civil servant who attends to Simón and David when they first arrive in Novilla, flatly states, “To me the whole business [of sexual desire] seems absurd—absurd for you to want to perform, and absurd for me to permit” (32). When Simón admonishes Ana, stating, “You live on a diet of bread and water and bean paste and you claim to be filled. How can that be, humanly speaking? Are you lying, even to yourselves?” (30), she demands that he accept that biological urges are insatiable and therefore should be repressed or ignored. She declares, “Adapt to a moderate diet, I mean. Hunger is like a dog in your belly: the more you feed it, the more it demands” (27).

Novilla’s bloodlessness could be seen as the construction of human society away from responding to immediate external stimuli—as animals do (discussed earlier in this article in relation to Heidegger and Agamben). Instead, in Novilla there is a pronounced emphasis on abstraction and philosophical reflection. When Simón questions his fellow stevedores about how they occupy their time, he learns

that they attend classes after work at an institute. Simón is shocked at the popularity of the Institute, commenting, “No wonder the city is like a morgue after dark! Everyone is here at the Institute, improving themselves. Everyone is busy becoming a better citizen, a better person. Everyone save he” (*Childhood of Jesus* 121). Learning through physical or biological experience is largely replaced with contemplative experience. For example, when Simón suggests taking a class in life drawing at the Institute, he is told that the course is popular because “People want to learn about the body” (123). Yet when Simón suggests that the best way to learn about the body is through contact with other bodies—“Won’t ordinary experience teach you that? I mean, won’t spending a few nights with a woman teach you all you need to know about the body as body?” (123), his comment is met by his colleagues with embarrassment and confusion. Indeed, Simón observes that his fellow stevedores “have no secret yearnings he can detect, no hankerings after another kind of life. Only he is the exception, the dissatisfied one, the misfit. What is wrong with him? Is it, as Elena says, just the old way of thinking and feeling that has not yet died in him, but kicks and shudders in its last throes?” (64).⁶

When Simón and David arrive in Novilla, Simón must find David’s mother in this bizarre environment that dismisses and rejects the importance of instinctual drives and imperatives. The letter strung around David’s neck that would have explained to whom he belonged, or what had happened to his parents, has been lost. It is around this lost letter that the novel inextricably turns, for, devoid of explanation, we are left to ponder why it is that David is without parents—is he some sort of messianic figure (as the title suggests), or simply an ordinary orphan? More importantly, the absence of this letter that would accurately identify the child’s mother results in Simón choosing Inés (a thirty-year-old “virgin” he sees playing tennis with her brothers at La Residencia) purely on intuition. Simón says, “I arrived in this land bare of everything save one rock-solid conviction: that I would know the boy’s mother when I saw her. And the moment I beheld Inés I knew it was she” (*Childhood of Jesus* 84). When reproached for following mere intuition, he retorts, “[It was m]ore than that. A conviction” (85).

It is crucial to note that when Simón asks La Residencia’s porter to summon Inés, he struggles to offer a description that distinguishes her from the other women at the resort. He states, “I would say she is about thirty years old, of medium height, with dark hair which she wears swept away from her face” (70). The porter notes dryly, “There are a number of ladies of that general appearance at La Residencia” (70). However, David pinpoints the one thing that differentiates Inés—a dog. Taken at face value, and based on Coetzee’s previous fiction, the dog should suggest a woman who can be trusted, willing to nurture and care for the boy. Simón says to David after their meeting Inés, “You do like the lady, don’t you? You can see how kind she is, kind and gentle?” (76).

But Inés’s dog is far from a fluffy and ineffectual lapdog willing to be pampered. Instead, the dog is a large Alsatian, named Bolivar, described as a “coiled spring” (*Childhood of Jesus* 103) raring to pounce or bite. Simón warns the child to be wary of the dog. Elena points to the dog as the very reason why Inés is not a suitable mother. Elena berates Simón: “Are you sure you have done the right thing, giving your child away to a woman like that? [...] To a childless woman in her thirties. A woman who spends her

⁶ Coetzee does suggest though that Simón is not entirely alone: Inés feels a strong need to have her own biological child (a point discussed in due course), and Clara, the nurse who cares for Simón at the hospital appears to have secretly fallen in love with Simón. Upon his discharge, Simón says to Clara: “I will not easily forget your care. I would like to believe there more than just goodwill behind it. Clara does not answer; but from the direct look she gives him he knows he is right” (247). However, these instances of feeling are anomalies within Novillian society.

time playing sports with men. A woman who keeps dogs” (97). Certainly, Elena may be speaking out of spite: she may feel slighted that Inés forbids David from playing with her son Fidel, or she may possibly feel discarded by Simón. However, as the novel progresses, little is done to change this view of Inés as someone slightly unhinged. Certainly, her allowing David to spend time with señor Daga, who Simón first encounters attacking the paymaster and Álvaro, undermines Inés’s credibility as a responsible mother.

In fact, Inés’s dog in *The Childhood of Jesus* appears to be the embodiment of natural biological imperatives, which, as mentioned earlier, should be understood in terms of behaviors or actions that are instinctual rather than dominated by logic or will. When Simón takes David on an excursion after Inés has taken over the care of David, David divulges that Inés is forced to keep Bolivar indoors because he wants to “mate with a lady dog” (144). Simón states tongue-in-cheek, “[T]hat is one of the trials of keeping a gentleman dog—he wants to be with the lady dogs. It’s the way of nature. If gentleman dogs and lady dogs no longer wanted to mate, there would be no baby dogs born, and then after a while there would be no dogs at all. So it may be best to allow Bolivar a little freedom” (145). The association of Bolivar with a raw reproductive imperative is reiterated at a later point in the novel when Bolivar “approaches [Simón] magisterially and sniffs his crotch” (179)—in other words, Simón’s genitals.

Notably, Bolivar’s connection with biological urges is not entirely without precedent in Coetzee’s earlier fiction. In Elizabeth Costello, passing reference is made to John and Norma’s refusal to grant their older child’s request for a puppy based on the grounds of an older dog’s sexual needs (61). In *Disgrace*, Lurie meditates on the Labrador in Kenilworth that would become “excited and unmanageable” (90) whenever a female dog was nearby. The dog was punished for such behavior until it eventually began “hat[ing] its own nature” (90). Lurie states that at the “deepest level I think [the dog] might have preferred being shot. It might have preferred that to the options it was offered: on the one hand to deny its nature, on the other to spend the rest of its days padding about the living-room, sighing and sniffing the cat and getting portly” (90). Of course, Lurie’s observations are not without an agenda: still unrepentant about his sexual exploitation of Melanie, he is suggesting that his own libido should be given free rein.

Coetzee’s changing representation of the animal from a conduit of empathy to the site of biological impulses and drives mirrors the multiplicity of conceptual and thematic interests at play within literary animal studies itself. This area of critical study emerged from a 1970s context where animal rights activism had begun to assert its presence in the civic and political sphere. Animal studies is certainly couched within current academia’s democratizing and egalitarian interest in the larger contemporary social discourses of “gender, or race, or sexual orientation” (Wolfe 556) and has had considerable impact in postcolonial or African American studies, where the concept of the animal has often historically functioned to “reinforce the denigration of subjugated people” (DeKoven 363). It has also been useful in exploring issues of sexual identity that have been read in accordance with Darwin’s theory of evolution through a process of natural selection, as Michael Lundblad observes. Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859) resulted in the breakdown of a religious narrative in which man was the apex of a divine hierarchy. With Darwin, man was simply understood as just another animal, neither superior nor inferior to other animals. Man’s sexual urges were thereby read in terms of the animal instinct to reproduce and propagate the species. Therefore, heterosexual relationships were read as “natural” and homosexual relationships as “unnatural.” The adoption of Darwinian narratives that “associate[] animality with [...] supposedly essential, biological instincts” have been used as a means of propping up

the conservative neoliberal argument “for heterosexuality in the name of reproduction and for violence in the name of survival,” despite the fact that humanness is often “defined by the capacity for restraining [...] animal instincts” (Lundblad 499). Interestingly, Coetzee’s *Childhood* expresses an interest in human biological imperatives and the animal in a way that speaks not to sexual identity but to a conceptual binary between the corporeal and the otherworldly.

Indeed, in *Childhood* Inés’s persona is conflated with that of Bolívar. Elena observes: “Inés strikes me as a bit of a watchdog herself, hovering around David, warding off harm” (104). Similarly, David reiterates: “Bolívar only likes Inés. He is her dog” (144). Certainly, although Inés is clearly dedicated to David, whom she describes as the “light of her life” (in an echo of the description of Christ as “light of the world”) the drive toward having her own biological child—a child from her own womb—appears to be an overwhelming force. She befriends the lowlife Daga in order to produce a child. When Daga temporarily abducts David, Inés admits to Simón: “[Daga] told me he would give me a child” (181).

Certainly, Coetzee presents us with a chapter (which will undoubtedly become notorious in Coetzee studies for offending those of us with delicate sensibilities) that speaks to the idea of the human being as a site of biological functions and impulses—a body that reproduces, eats, and defecates. (Lest we forget, in *Doubling the Point* Coetzee describes his aesthetic project as characterized by a “simple standard [...]. That standard is the body” (248).) In the relevant chapter in *Childhood*, Simón has been summoned, out of sheer desperation, by Inés to fix a blocked toilet in her apartment. The toilet is filled with Inés’s waste, but Simón is forced nonetheless to place his hand in the water to investigate the problem. He eventually finds Inés’s sanitary towel, described as a “wad of cloth with plastic lining” (134), as the cause of the problem. The sanitary towel is significant—it reiterates Inés’s connection to a reproductive urge that is mirrored in the more basic but equally crucial function of defecation. The sanitary towel suggests that Inés is a young, fertile premenopausal woman, receptive to having a child, but it also points to the fact that she may, in fact, be a virgin, as surmised by Elena.

More importantly, though, it links Inés to the Christian concept of original sin, which may add an extra dimension to why, when Inés sees the sanitary towel, she “blushes, standing before [Simón] like a guilty thing, not knowing where to look” (*Childhood of Jesus* 135). The Virgin Mary (in certain Christian traditions, but not all) was devoid of original sin, and therefore could not have menstruated, as menstruation did not exist in a prelapsarian world. Childbearing, and its related “burdens,” is a direct symptom of the Fall. Therefore, Inés’s menstruation wrenches the narrative away from the prelapsarian “paradise” that is Novilla to suggest a world of robust biological drives and impulses. Crucially, Inés’s menstruation places in danger the divinity of the child, David, who (again according to specific Christian traditions) is clearly not born of a similarly divine being. It is to David’s divinity to which we now turn in the next section of this article.

Putting the Horse to Pasture

Using *The Childhood of Jesus*’s title as an explanatory key, we engage with the novel as a retelling of the childhood of Christ. Owing to the title, we search out correlates: Inés’s and Simón’s strange pairing is roughly symmetrical with Christ’s family structure (Inés plays the role of the “virgin” mother and Simón the biologically unrelated Joseph figure); David’s obvious intelligence speaks to Christ’s singularity, and his injuries (supposedly from the barbed wire at Punto Arenas) refer to Christ’s stigmata following the crucifixion. Even David’s misbehavior may be read with an awareness that Christ himself was “no angel”

(to use a colloquialism)—like all children, Christ misbehaved and worried his parents at times.⁷ But perhaps the novel's title is a red herring, a playful Coetzee quip purposefully aimed at teasing its readers? Stripped of its title, the novel certainly leaves us at a significant loss: David simply becomes a clever but overindulged child.

However, it seems that the concept of the animal has interesting implications for how we understand the concept of divinity, and how this may relate (even tentatively) to David as a messianic figure. Where the dog Bolivar expresses a raw and heady primal instinct, some of the novel's other animal imagery speaks to the transcendent spiritual realm. Coetzee establishes a tension, a careful balancing act, between the animal as a sign of biological imperatives and that of otherworldliness. Inés's Three Brothers story, for instance, certainly relates the animal with the spiritual realm. Inés tells David a story about three brothers who are sent on a quest to find a Wise Woman who has in her possession an herb that will save their mother. The first two brothers are unsuccessful in their quest: both brothers are confronted by animals who promise to lead them to the Wise Woman in exchange for food. In each instance, the brothers kick the animals, go into the forest, and are "never heard of again" (*Childhood of Jesus* 146). When the third brother is sent on his mission, he succeeds because he is entirely selfless, and chooses to trust the animal that confronts him. The third brother gives a bear his heart to eat (a flesh sacrifice that speaks to Christ's bodily sacrifice and the Christian concept of communion), who then leads him to the Wise Woman. Here the third brother receives the cure that heals his mother and turns him into a "great light" (148)—a star. The story, more accurately understood as a fable, suggests that a kindness to animals, even at great expense, culminates in a spiritually transcendent state for the human being. The third brother accesses the divine through the animal.

Simón reprimands David for liking the story, telling him that "[t]he ending is too sad" (*Childhood of Jesus* 148), and that he cannot enact the tale because he is an only child. David becomes petulant, insisting that he wants to be the third brother. When Simón reiterates the impossibility of David's being the third brother, David states that Inés has promised him that he may become the third brother by "go[ing] back in her tummy and com[ing] out again" (148). Although Simón observes that David's fixation on the story is based on his wanting to be a "hero" (148), Coetzee may be using David's deep attachment to the fable with its magical animals as a means of expressing David's divinity.

David's relationship with the El Rey, the gentle cart horse, is another significant example of the animal speaking to the transcendental spiritual realm.⁸ David, on accompanying Simón to the docks, befriends the horse, feeding him hay and grain while he waits for Simón to finish work. At some point the horse becomes ill and is put down. Despite the fact that Simón and Álvaro lie to David to spare him the knowledge of the horse's death, he searches it out. He discovers its corpse with a bullet wound in its head behind the grain store. In some ways the child appears oblivious to the horse's death: he tells Simón that he "will be well again in three days" (198). When Simón harshly tells the child, "He is not going to get better. He is dead" (199), the child becomes distressed and attempts to revive the horse.

⁷ This theme of the naughty divine child is present in other world religions, too—for example, the child Krishna stealing butter from the neighbors.

⁸ When Marciano (one of the stevedores) is killed, Simón comforts David by suggesting that Marciano will be transformed into an animal in the afterlife, "He can be a bird. He can be anything he like. [...] A bird or a seal. Or even a great big whale. There are no limits to what you can be in the next life" (*Childhood of Jesus* 157).

David “bends and presses his mouth to the horse’s vast nostril” (199). When Simón reprimands him, the child sobs, “‘I will save him’ [...]. ‘I want him to live! He’s my friend’” (199).

That David believes the horse will get better in three days suggests the resurrection of Christ himself after three days, but also Christ’s resurrection of Lazarus. However, the image of the child as Christ is undermined, or at least placed in question, in a number of ways. First, when the child realizes he is too small to breathe life into the horse, he asks Simón to do so. Simón refuses, saying, “I don’t have the right type of breath. I don’t have the breath of life” (*Childhood of Jesus* 199). The child’s request shows that he considers his and Simón’s breath interchangeable—no small point when we consider the religious significance of the breath. (Their breath cannot be interchangeable if David is, in fact, divine. Genesis 2:7 states that God breathed life into Adam. Furthermore, the acts of insufflation and exsufflation feature in important Christian rituals or rites of passage, such as baptism.) Second, we are never told if El Rey does actually resurrect. Later in the novel, influenced by Daga’s jeering at him for his love of Don Quixote and his horse, David tells Simón that El Rey is dead (246). This leaves us pondering the possibility that the child may be an ordinary child after all. Certainly, the motivation of the child for wanting to resurrect El Rey is unclear: on the one hand, we see that he is distressed and considers El Rey his “friend” (198), but, on the other hand, we have seen that the child is driven, in a very un-Christ-like way, by a desire to be a “hero” (148).⁹

However, when David visits Simón in the hospital, and Simón tells him that El Rey is actually alive (in a statement that suggests that El Rey is Christ),¹⁰ David expresses a touching sensitivity. The boy’s “eyes suddenly fill with tears, his lips quiver” (*Childhood of Jesus* 246). This reaction suggests an instance in which the hierarchical binary between animal and human, dealt with earlier in this article, is entirely broken down. By responding to the death as he would toward a human death, David’s shows himself to see the importance of all living beings. David acknowledges the supreme singularity of the animal. If the child is an expression of any sort of divinity, it is in this acknowledgment, in this intensity of feeling for the dead horse. Indeed, Simón, in explaining David’s “difficulty” with numbers to Álvaro, suggests that the child is acutely conscious of the singularity of all things. Simón states: “Put an apple before him and what does he see? An apple: not one apple, just an apple. Put two apples before him. What does he see? An apple and an apple: not two apples, not the same apple twice, just an apple and an apple” (248). For David, each object is understood in its superlative individual form—an isolated unit, “islands floating in the great black sea of nothingness” (249).

Concluding Remarks

In *Elizabeth Costello*, at the dinner following Elizabeth’s controversial lecture on animals, a young psychologist mentions an experiment where a female chimpanzee was reared by humans. The psychologist tells Elizabeth that the chimpanzee would place a photograph of itself among its human experimenters, instead of in a pile with its fellow apes, suggesting that the chimpanzee “wanted to be thought of as one us” (84). Whereas the psychologist reads this gesture as a gesture of solidarity, an

⁹ Of course, this may be a child’s way of expressing that he wishes to save people, but Simón teases his fickleness: “What else are you planning to be, beyond a lifesaver and an escape artist and a magician?” (*Childhood of Jesus* 172).

¹⁰ Simón’s statement “[S]omewhere El Rey is waiting for you to come. If you will search you will be sure to find him” (246) eerily echoes the Christian message “Seek and ye shall find” (Matthew 7.7). The individual looking for the kingdom of God will find it.

identification with human beings, Elizabeth sees the gesture altogether differently. She states that the chimpanzee may be gesturing to “[t]hose who are free versus those who have to stay locked up, for instance. She may have been saying that she preferred to be among the free” (84). Of the various interpretations—much like the unknown barbarian symbol in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), which the magistrate provocatively claims that when turned one way may mean revenge, and turned yet another may mean war—it is impossible to tell which interpretation of the chimpanzee’s gesture is the definitive and correct one. Perhaps the chimp’s gesture “hold[s] no secret at all” (Spivak “Theory”171)—it may be an arbitrary act, entirely devoid of meaning. Perhaps, though, the chimpanzee’s gesture could be read as a symbol of Coetzee’s ongoing and steadfast preoccupation with the place of the animal—whether it variously suggests compassion, identity, or innate impulse— in relation to aspects of human life. Certainly, this latest novel, *The Childhood of Jesus*, shows us that Coetzee’s interest in the animal is moving in new directions, exploring interesting conceptual binaries, such as that of the corporeal versus the otherworldly. In this novel, in a move away from the role of the animal as a site of empathetic engagement in his earlier fiction, to the repository of biological urges, but also as a marker of the transcendental and divine, Coetzee shows the animal to be a multivalent and dynamic symbol in his oeuvre. And indeed, it would not be surprising to find Coetzee exploring the symbolic value of animals to express specific themes or agendas in his work to come. It is safe to say that Coetzee’s interest in the animal will persist well into his future fiction, for, as the saying goes, “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.”

Note on Contributor

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