

## **Authors and Others:** The Ethics of Inhabiting in J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*

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### **Background**

J.M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) interrogates the problem of alterity or "otherness" so central to both twentieth century ethical theory and literary studies. In the following discussion I pursue this cross-disciplinary preoccupation by putting Coetzee's text into dialogue with prominent theorists of otherness, such as Emmanuel Levinas, Geoffrey Harpham, Judith Butler, and Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>1</sup> I begin by pointing out that the relationship between an author and her fictional character bears much in common with the ethically fraught encounter between a subject and other. More specifically still, ethical and literary conceptions of the other revolve around a distinct language and model of *inhabiting*. I trace how language of space, place, territory, and architecture helps to establish authorship as a consistently spatialized act of inhabiting (not just imagining) the other. Inhabiting pushes imagination beyond familiar models of sympathy and perception by demanding a more radical sort of investment in other bodily, affective, proprioceptive, and environmental spaces. It

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to gratefully acknowledge the guidance of Dorothy Hale, whose work and class on ethics and narrative first introduced me to these works.

follows that for an author, character-drawing becomes a kind of world-making. In this way, the formal work of the author has much in common with what a range of twentieth century theorists propose as a distinctly ethical sort of action – movement into foreign spaces. In Coetzee’s novel, this precise process of inhabiting emerges at the heart of the most ethically productive *and* transgressive acts. I point to the centrality of inhabiting in such sharply divergent moments throughout the text in order to make the case that a spatialized ethics of inhabiting functions not as a straightforward moral prescription but as the fundamental mode through which authors encounter literary “others.” I argue that inhabiting emerges as a privileged term because it uniquely accommodates conflicting demands recurrent across a range of twentieth century theory in ethics as well as narrative. In what follows, I provide some broad theoretical background on the significance of space in the ethics of alterity; in the second section of this article, I offer my own specific intervention through the lens of Coetzee’s novel.

The sheer frequency and consistency with which ethical and literary theorists employ the language of “inhabiting” would hardly be important if the particular use of the word did not reveal something crucial about the problem at hand. I believe it does. In *Love’s Knowledge*, Martha Nussbaum portrays reading itself as an ethical act. In the case of both the reader of fiction and the fictional Jamesian characters she discusses, perception emerges as a crucial ethical good. Yet even Nussbaum’s privileging of perception reveals a mode of engagement that extends well beyond a conventional subject-object divide. Nussbaum’s “perception” seems to be a placeholder for a more radical form of imaginative access. By turning to the language of “inhabiting,” she is able to articulate a three dimensional mode of perception. In a discussion of two characters in Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl* (1904), she writes:

We see them drawing close in understanding by seeing where they come to share the same pictures ... we discover all at once that we cannot say whose image for their situation this is. We can only say that it belongs to both of them: each *inhabits, from his or her own point of view*, the world of the same picture...the same created world ... separated by an 'exquisite tissue' (Nussbaum 1992, 153; added emphasis).

In this passage, to share a perceptual experience is to inhabit a common space. What the two characters truly share is not an object to be perceived but a multidimensional structure to inhabit. Importantly, while the picture is shared, the "point of view" is not. In other words, these subjects share a structure for viewing; they do not, however, view from identical standpoints. We should pause here to recognize that shared space does not automatically engender a common point of view or erase perceptual differences between subjects. In fact, there is a sense that this particular mode of sharing space *preserves* distinct points of view: "an exquisite tissue" sustains difference. What is more, the picture is a creation – a fiction – a "world." Instead of perceiving the picture from a distance, these characters *inhabit* the picture. This term redirects us from the transience of perceptual impressions to a structured space in which one presumably takes up residence. Interestingly, then, Nussbaum lingers on this visual image only to subtly *reject* visual aesthetics as a model for ethical action. It is not perception in and of itself so much as the possibility of subsequent active engagement it provides that Nussbaum wants to point out. Thus the kind of acute and penetrating perception that Nussbaum hails as ethical requires a commitment to inhabiting a world rather than mere awareness of it.

Significantly, the space that James's characters come to share is jointly created. In this way the picture is constructed by a process of imagination akin to joint authorship: "we cannot say whose image this is." Thus co-inhabiting draws very close to the notion of co-authorship in the sense of two subjects sharing a world that

they have created. Spatially entrenched lines of ownership dissolve even as an “exquisite tissue” continues to sustain some sliver of distinction. Nussbaum expands upon this idea when she notes how the characters

[f]ill, by an effort of imagination, each other’s gaps. And they move from contiguity in images to the inhabiting of a shared picture that expresses a mutual involvement ... A short time later she presents him with a picture into which he ‘could enter’ (ibid., 159).

This is a model of communal imagination that preserves distinctions, in fact *requires* distinctions so that individual subjects may “fill in the gaps” of others. What is more, the shared picture is not held at a distance but is instead a space to “enter” into. The sequential progress implied here – “*they move from contiguity in images to the inhabiting...*” begins to suggest a distinctly *narrative* trajectory that extends beyond the single image. While the first description evokes two spectators standing in front of a work of art (“contiguity in images”) the move to inhabiting signals a more radical form of shared experience (“mutual involvement”). The spectator of visual art begins to look more like the reader of narrative.

Nussbaum’s model of inhabiting shared pictures reveals an attempt to accommodate what at first might seem conflicting impulses: the desire to unite subjects in a shared space *and* the need to preserve the distinctions between them. This problem of safeguarding distinctions between subject and other resonates across the work of twentieth century ethicists with radically different theoretical commitments. Levinas, for example, develops a theory of alterity in which the “other” is fundamentally “unknowable,” someone we see face to face and yet cannot “possess, grasp, [or] know” (1987, 75, 90). For Levinas, recognition of the other therefore *requires* distance, an understanding that the “other is in no way another myself” but rather “something that is absolutely other.” “I see the other,” Levinas

writes, “But I am not the other” (75, 74, 42). Levinas’s work reveals the danger inherent in a confrontation between self and other, raising the question of how two distinct beings can survive an encounter without some sort of annihilation. In Levinas’ thought, if I employ a sympathetic model of relating to the other, I risk merely converting the other into a duplicate of myself. And yet I also risk losing what defines myself as a distinct being. Levinas articulates this problem when he asks, “how, in the alterity of a you, can I remain I [?]” and “how can a being enter into relation with the other without allowing its very self to be crushed by the other?” (91, 77). Given the ethical pitfalls that emerge in an encounter with the other, we inevitably run into problems concerning language and representation. For Levinas, it is insufficient to regard an intersubjective encounter in terms of the model we might employ when relating to a foreign language: the “unknown is impossible to translate” (67). Yet given the inadequacy of this linguistic metaphor for approaching what is alien, how can we conceive of narrative techniques that seek to represent the other?

Perhaps the problem has less to do with language per se and more to do with the kind of erasure of difference and distance implied by the term translation. We might better begin to understand narrative as that which *preserves* something foreign in the other, and requires our own entry into foreign space. In terms that resonate with the work of Levinas, Gayatri Spivak suggests that fiction prompts us “to imagine the other who does not resemble the self” (2004, 23). Spivak helps us see how the use of narrative to create common spaces does not necessitate the discovery – or forced creation – of commonalities. In other words, various thinkers seem to convene on the insistence that shared space is in no way the equivalent of sameness. Shared space is a much more messy kind of encounter that does not guarantee the arithmetic duplication or enforced equality implied by a more colloquial sense of “common ground.” Spivak regards fiction as “an event – an indeterminate ‘sharing’ – between

writer and reader, where the effort of reading is to taste the impossible status of being figured as object in the web of the other” (ibid., 18). Spivak’s model asks us to imagine a *defamiliarizing* experience in which we ourselves become the objects embedded in a larger structure. We are involved, but we are also somehow fundamentally alienated: we must enter into a relation not only with the other but with the entire “web” of his being, a web in which we play no part other than object. This notion echoes the idea of inhabiting as a sort of *surrender to foreign places*; it is not sufficient to perceive what is alien from a safe point of removal. This surrender further informs the inadequacy of traditional perceptual models (organized around the “point of view” of a subjective “I”) when it comes to the ethics of otherness. Inhabiting has less to do with what we see or how we understand than it does with where we are, in what space we move. There is a fundamental willingness to be propelled outwards here. Thus while perception often aspires to a kind of subjective mastery, inhabiting just as often indicates a form of submission. The essential discovery here is that shared space might represent something quite different from common ground as it is conventionally understood. The sharing of space is a fundamentally alien and disorienting experience – perhaps we do not find ourselves “at home” but find ourselves willingly ejected from home.

In a somewhat similar vein, Butler imagines a sharing of space that is not violent or intrusive; the aim of activism for Butler is “to cross cultural barriers in a nonimperialist fashion” (2003, 203). The consequence of this non-imperialist crossing is “that we must do without a notion of common language.” Here, Butler shares the concerns of Levinas and Spivak that an “imperialist move ... claims to find itself in the other” (ibid., 206). The challenge, then, is to cease searching for ourselves in the other and instead attempt a different kind of movement toward rather than away from otherness. Thus we begin to see that the other is consistently figured

in negative terms: not me, unknowable, not the speaker of my language. The question remains: how can we represent this other in words? What role might narrative play in this seemingly “impossible” task – an encounter that does not collapse distinctions?

Bakhtin approaches these questions of alterity and foreign spaces through a social-linguistic paradigm. While Levinas focuses on the face-to-face encounter, Bakhtin describes those moments in which “several ‘languages’... have established contact and mutual recognition with each other.” For Bakhtin, an individual subject’s language “lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s” (1981, 295, 293). Interestingly, Nussbaum provides us with a model in which “*we cannot say whose image it is,*” and Bakhtin suggests that language is always “*half someone else’s,*” existing on the spatialized borderline between subject and other. While for Nussbaum point of view is perceptual, for Bakhtin it is fundamentally linguistic: alterity involves “the possibility of other linguistic points of view” (287). Here, language is the basis of social perception as a process that is shared yet nonetheless preserves distinctions. Bakhtin’s work thus puts pressure on a common presupposition concerning authorship: the notion that one can speak in one’s “own” words, or that words can belong exclusively to a given author. Bakhtin’s novelist is ethical not because he represents his own language but because he attempts to “speak in an alien language” or to represent “another’s speech in another’s language” (287, 324). Bakhtin’s notion of “hybrid construction” – an utterance combining two speech types or styles – allows multiple languages a shared space. The novel serves to “sharpen ... our perception of socio-linguistic differentiations” (287, 366). Thus via Bakhtin we again arrive at the paradox that shared space is a radical form of preserving – rather than abolishing – differences. Shared space is where differences meet and interact, not where they resolve.

Bakhtin specifically characterizes linguistic encounters in terms of space and territory. Language invoking ownership and property alerts us to the potentially imperialist or invasive nature of using someone else's words:

not all words for just anyone submit equally easily to this appropriation, to this seizure and transformation into private property: many words stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them ... Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's intentions (294).

Here we can really begin to anticipate some problems for the novelist who must venture into alien linguistic worlds and also potentially claim, appropriate, or seize the language of another. Words are not just objects to be used but spaces that function like other territories. Is it possible for language to remain in a borderland characterized by constant flux and sharing, or does an author inevitably seize language, despite its resistance, and make it his own? Is it possible for different authors to share worlds, to draw on each other's languages, to rewrite each other's texts? And additionally, how can a novelist represent a subject who inhabits a radically alien world? In creating a character, does an author find a way to speak for or with the other? One overarching problem seems to be that while we have a distinctly spatialized language for imperialist invasion of the other's territory, we have a less developed vocabulary for an *alternative* kind of shared space. It is to this problem that I turn in my discussion of *Elizabeth Costello*.



In what follows I make the case that an author's relationship to her character provides an ideal test case for the more abstract-sounding "encounter with the other" so pervasive in twentieth century ethical theory. In *Elizabeth Costello*, authors regard



inhabiting as both a formal and ethical demand. Characters are not just portraits of subjects but entire *worlds to be inhabited*. While the bulk of my argument rests upon the specific instance of character as other, it is worth first noting that Coetzee's text reveals additional forms of authorial encounters with the other. For example, it is not just the character who presents as an other, but also *other authors* whose works materialize as habitable spaces. Literary tradition itself is consistently spatialized: the canon must make space, reserve space, refuse space – and allow for authorial sharing of space. In a radio interview, Costello's remarks concerning *The House on Eccles Street* illustrate the ethical treachery involved in rewriting another author's work:

[Interviewer]: Critics have focused on the way you have claimed or reclaimed Molly from Joyce, made her your own ... challenging Joyce, one of the father-figures of modern literature, on his own territory.

[Costello] No, I don't see myself as challenging Joyce. But certain books are so prodigally inventive that there is plenty of material left over at the end...

[Interviewer] But ... you have taken Molly out of the house – if I can continue with your metaphor ... where her husband and her lover and in a certain sense her author have confined her (Coetzee 2003, 12-13).

The image of Costello on Joyce's "own territory" is particularly significant here. While Costello denies that the encounter is confrontational in the way that Moebius suggests – not a "challenge" – she does not dispute the idea of *territory*, the notion that in creating a fictional world for his characters Joyce has also carved out a world for himself as author. Thus in order to write *The House*, Costello must in some sense travel to foreign territory; she must inhabit an alien world and write from there. In so doing she risks losing a degree of authority. But is this territory really the possession of Joyce – can a single author truly be said to own exclusive deeds to his literary space? Indeed can an author *be* literary space? After all, we often speak of authors as

places: “In Joyce,” “navigating Joyce,” “getting lost in Joyce,” and so forth. In pointing to the “prodigally inventive” nature of Joyce’s work, Costello seems to suggest that the former author has left room – space – for continued creative intervention. The novel’s constant dramatization of intertextuality plays on this idea that authorship involves not only locating one’s own place in the literary canon but also a willingness for radical *dislocation*. We tend to think of authors as transporting their readers to another world, but authors themselves are continuously transported to territories and spaces carved out by other authors. This means that part of the work of authorship is first finding room in the crowded space of literary tradition, moving to that foreign place, and then continuing to create from within a new habitation.

As we have begun to see, Molly is not the only one who inhabits a certain ‘house of fiction’; the author herself is engaged in the task of taking up residence in various fictional worlds. Given the ethical risks involved in entering the fictional habitations created by other authors, it might seem preferable for an author simply to retreat behind sturdy fictional walls of her own construction. Indeed, there is tension throughout the novel between Costello’s assertion that “[w]e can’t go on parasitizing the classics forever” (14) and the simultaneous need to communicate with other authors and texts, to enter into a literary tradition no matter how crowded the shared “house” or “picture.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, we come to see that there is no such thing as complete

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<sup>2</sup> And even if originality were possible, it is not at all clear that it represents an ethical good to strive for. Costello’s son John articulates the idea that,

at a certain level we speak, and therefore write, like everyone else. Otherwise we would all be speaking and writing private languages. It is not absurd – is it? – to concern oneself with what people have in common rather than with what sets them apart.

John’s sense of private versus shared languages here echoes Bakhtin’s notion of perpetually colliding languages. In both cases, language is social and thus to share language is not to foreclose creativity or appropriate the words of another but instead to find common ground, indeed to *choose* common ground over “what sets them apart.” The very notion of a “private language” troubles the

insulation from other worlds and other words. John, for example, reflects that “[a]s he thinks these words, other words echo at the back of his mind: the words of one of William Faulkner’s characters” (31). This notion of *other words* opens up the potential of *words-as-others*.

The notion that reading words is itself a kind of encounter with otherness takes on an additional dimension when we take fictional characters into account. At the risk of stating the obvious, characters are made out of words. After all, a character is in essence the particular arrangement of words in a text. Characters are also “others” in the broader sense that they represent alien subjectivities. They may be fictional, but that only makes them all the more clearly *not us*. Thus the relationship between an author and imagined character is a particularly productive site for exploring alterity. The fundamental task of a novelist is, in terms reminiscent of Levinas, *to imagine an other that is not me*. “It is the otherness that is the challenge,” Costello says, “Making up someone other than yourself. Making up a world for him to move in” (12). Note the implication here: imagining the other is contingent upon a willingness to imagine an *other world*. To simply deposit an imagined other in one’s own familiar world is not to succeed in imagining alterity at all because the other is inherently one who does not inhabit that world. I read Costello’s two sentences here as part of the same statement: “making up someone” and “making up a world” are not two discrete tasks but part of a single process. Thus while an elementary approach to literature separates the novelist’s formal work into distinct categories such as “character” and “setting,” here it becomes apparent that these are inseparable tasks.

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fundamentally communicative and representative functions of language. In John’s formulation there is something “absurd” about the very idea of linguistic privacy, something outrageous in the thought that language can ever be a private place or property.

The stasis implied by a conventional term like ‘setting’ belies the sort of *activity* always inherent in an experience of inhabiting space. What is more, Costello must create not just a static place to deposit a character but a space “for him to move in.” In other words, the creation of a character requires the carving out of multidimensional space and not just the painting of an appropriate background. It is, moreover, only by first putting a *distance* between herself and characters that Costello is poised to move into their fictional worlds. Representing otherness is then, at least initially, a *denial* of common ground, a resistance to sameness. Thus in pointing to the otherness of both character and world, Costello echoes Levinas: “I see the other. But I am not the other” (Levinas 1987, 42).

If we imagine a scenario in which author and character inhabit the same world, we could think of them as sharing space but not sharing being. However, in this realm, Costello exceeds Levinas in her conception of what is possible. Authorship provides the model for a creative rather than destructive encounter with the other. Costello claims very specifically – and repeatedly – that she inhabits her characters. She believes that it is conceivable “to share at times the being of another” (Coetzee 2003, 23, 79). Yet how could we possibly share *being*? Is it not “otherness” as opposed to “sameness” that Costello privileges?<sup>3</sup> In “The Philosophers and the Animals,” Costello suggests that

[t]here is no limit to the extent to which *we can think ourselves into the being* of another. There are no bounds to sympathetic imagination. If you want proof, consider the following. Some years ago I wrote a book called *The House on Eccles Street*. To write that book I had to *think my way into the existence* of Marion Bloom ... the point is, *Marion Bloom never existed*. Marion Bloom was a figment of James Joyce’s imagination. If I *can think my way into the existence* of

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<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere in the novel, Costello certainly articulates the fundamental breach between subjectivities: “[t]he utter, *illimitable difference between what is in her heart and what Nurse Naidoo would see*” (ibid., 154).

a being who has never existed, then I *can think my way into the existence* of a bat (80; added emphases).

Here, imagination is far from a static mental process accomplished at a distance from its object. Instead, the act of imagining is necessarily active: “think my way into” suggests a painstaking effort at movement, a sort of digging deeper or pushing closer. Thus Costello sets out to travel to foreign territory, and it is precisely that imaginative moving out of self, towards another, that inaugurates the being of the other. That her novel is titled *The House...* is no coincidence; her task is to inhabit the entire structure of a character’s world. This process then relies on both distance and intimacy: Costello does not draw the other into the folds of her own existence but instead travels to the site of another being. This capacity to meet the other on his own territory provides additional evidence for the appeal of inhabiting as an ethical model. The author does not play host to character; to the contrary, it is the author who finds herself in a foreign environment. Here, a significance for narrative in particular begins to come into view: this is a process that requires sequential movement in which the author creates a character as a sort of world and then moves into that world as new habitat. New worlds are carved out not only in space but in time as well – sequentially, bit by bit, chapter by chapter. Costello’s discussion also makes a strong case for the use of fiction as a framework for ethical encounters. The fictional character is a prime model for otherness because it represents a radical acknowledgment of one that is different – so different it does not even exist. By comparison, a bat seems even closer to the human reader. An encounter with a fictional character thus relies on the “submission to the impossible” advocated by several of the ethical theorists we began by consulting.

Inhabiting also captures something corporeal and affective: “the way that people live in their bodies” (44). It is this proprioceptive mode of inhabiting that

provides the basis for animal-as-other throughout Coetzee's text. Indeed, critics including Don Randall have suggested that "Coetzee's animals [are] the principle figures of the other – the other whose full recognition is the source and foundation of ethical awareness" (2007, 213). When we are confined only to *thinking* our way into the other, animals remain off-limits. When tethered to a conventionally cognitive model, imagination leaves us confined by the limits of what can be thought. Yet inhabiting captures a more radical and insistently physical mode of moving away from self; it requires *felt* presence in space. Costello suggests that in the poem "The Jaguar," Ted Hughes is

feeling his way towards a different kind of being-in-the-world ... we know the jaguar not from the way he seems but from the way he moves ... The poem asks us to imagine our way into that way of moving, to *inhabit that body ... not of inhabiting another mind but of inhabiting another body* (Coetzee 2003, 96; added emphasis).

The precise language of inhabiting again revolves around movement; we must 'think our way into that way of moving.' "Feeling his way" again suggests a narrative trajectory and yet one centered on an embodied and affective register. It is important to note, however, that Costello does not claim that this process of inhabiting allows for *communication* with the animal. It allows specifically for a less conventional form of "knowing." Thus when Costello's debate opponent argues that "[d]iscussion is possible only when there is common ground" (112), he misses the fact that it is not discussion or communication that Costello defends as possible: "When we divert the current of feeling that flows between ourself and the animal into words, we abstract it for ever from the animal ... It falls within an entirely human economy in which the animal *has no share*" (96; added emphasis). Costello suggests, then, that while we might need linguistic common ground to communicate socially, we need something

quite different when it comes to the mode of contact necessary for literary representation: a shared “sensation of being” (78), a kind of baseline sentience shared by all living creatures.<sup>4</sup> We thus have a gesture here towards literature’s non-representational possibilities – its capacity to bypass realistic content in favor of a desired effect.

That a “*current*” exists between the two beings helps reinforce the idea of a kind of atmosphere or radiating aura we have seen throughout – a being’s existence overflows its physical borders and therein lie important possibilities for a nonimperialistic sharing of impersonal, affect-infused space. This current of feeling between the two is not reducible or locatable to either subject. It fundamentally exists in the space between; it is spatialized but not localized. This evocation of flowing currents reminds us that the “world” that is the other need not be placid; its atmosphere might in fact be quite volatile. We enter into that turbulence of the other-as-world; we allow our feelings to move us. This capacity to *be moved* – so essential to affect as well as empathy – again reveals a different understanding of a term like ‘setting.’ Indeed the critical turn towards affect in recent years repeatedly builds from this precise recognition that the colloquialism of “being moved” extends beyond mere sentimentality to a specifically corporeal and spatial understanding of motion.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Randall (2007, 210) suggests that *Elizabeth Costello* prompts us to “expand the sphere of our community beyond the bounds of the human.”

<sup>5</sup> Brian Massumi has played a key role in reenergizing the work of Spinoza as well as Deleuze and Guattari. In “Notes on the Translation” to Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, Massumi (1987, xvi) translates “Affect/Affection: Neither word denotes a personal feeling (*sentiment in* Deleuze and Guattari). *L’affect* (Spinoza’s *affectus*) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act. *L’affection* (Spinoza’s *affectio*) is each state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body (with body taken in its broadest sense to include ‘mental’ or ideal bodies).” Eric Shouse’s “Feeling, Emotion, Affect” (2005) similarly emphasizes the centrality of movement: “the pleasure that individuals derive from music has less to do with the communication of meaning, and far more to do with the way that a particular piece of music moves’ them.”

Thus, Costello claims, “we are for a brief while the jaguar ... he takes over our body, he is us” (98). Inhabiting in this way extends certain restrictive boundaries imposed by a standard understanding of imagination; it is not just something we picture mentally or entertain hypothetically but something we do bodily. Interestingly, though, it is the jaguar who assumes the active role here: ‘he takes over our body’ rather than the other way around. Inhabiting, it seems, can be passive: we can *be inhabited* just as we actively inhabit others. In both cases, though, movement is a necessary component of the process. It is not just the perception – not just the acknowledgment or the Levinasian recognition – but the movement to a new space.

Here the concept of inhabiting also opens onto a richer understanding of Coetzee’s metafictional devices and their implications for the role of the critic. *Elizabeth Costello* is structured around a series of fictional and nonfictional frames with several chapters taken from public lectures Coetzee had previously delivered. I see this deliberate crossing of generic lines as a careful construction – another of Coetzee’s habitable structures – that does more than serve as a convenient mode of packaging the author’s own beliefs and theorizations. Coetzee’s several layers of mediation themselves create spaces for the reader/critic to inhabit. When we encounter a pronouncement on good and evil or one of Costello’s own critical readings, we explore these issues as embedded in a larger fictional world rather than stand alone moral prescriptions awaiting our approval or condemnation. Such intricate metatextuality further creates the sense of distance and constant deferral that requires us to explore ethical matters as a series of spaces rather than rooted positions. We inhabit the worlds and worldviews of various characters, but we also inhabit an entire discursive space created in the process, one that is irreducible to any one character or author – fictional or imagined. Therefore, if we simply read Costello as a mouthpiece for Coetzee, we are essentially tearing down the fictional scaffolding



that is an integral part of the ethical project as a whole. Critic Derik Attridge similarly stresses that for Coetzee ethics needs fiction; he cites the many instances in which Coetzee delivered public lectures in the form of fictional narratives. On these occasions, intellectual audiences expected a direct articulation of Coetzee's ideas but were met instead with ideas mediated through the fictional persona of Costello. Attridge writes:

[W]e have no grounds for taking this [Costello's view] as Coetzee's position ... what he has done is to imaginatively represent what it might be like to feel this way (or, rather, to come to feel this way at the end of a long career as a novelist) ... what we encounter are not these characters' beliefs, but their believings; we undergo their speeches and arguments as events, and we share, momentarily, the process of articulating feelings and ideas (2004 11).

That the language of inhabiting reverberates so strongly in Attridge's scholarly prose is a testament to Coetzee's work of dissolving generic boundaries and bringing all of us, critics included, into the folds of a shared world. Coetzee wants us to encounter the novel's intellectual content not as abstract theorizations but as *ideas that populate a fictional world*. This sort of encounter with ideas in their own habitats – the fictional worlds in which they thrive and capture a given character's worldview – produces a distinct effect on the reader/critic. Instead of merely being exposed to or lectured on a given perspective, we are asked to temporarily inhabit that way of thinking. The critic's obligation to “think” thus takes on a phenomenological component, turning the ethical mandate to sit with an idea into an obligation *to live in it* as a world.

The imperatives to “think one's way into” and “feel one's way into” thus begin to merge – much like the effort to inhabit the jaguar. We are accustomed to accepting that fiction moves us, but here it becomes possible to grasp how the critic is not just a thinking but also a feeling creature. By “feeling” I mean something quite

distinct from emotional sentimentalism – not an instinctual release of feeling but the difficult and painstaking work of feeling one’s way into an other world. The intriguing thing here is that the significance of feeling persists even in the context of a drastic move away from a sympathy-based model of ethics. In this regard, Coetzee’s notion of ethical inhabiting participates in contemporary efforts to rethink the role of the critic in affective terms. For example, in precisely the kind of spatialized and active language we have been tracking, Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg describe affect theory in terms of a critical commitment to “[m]ore than discourse. We want [scholarship] to touch, to move, to mobilize readers ... to show what affect can *do*” (Seigworth and Gregg 2010 24). I would suggest that affect theory’s focus on a work’s nonsignifying elements – such as rhythm, texture, tone, or mood – puts the critic into a visceral/sensual mode analogous to that of the author feeling her way into the jaguar. Seigworth and Gregg suggest that such affective investments make shared space possible:

Whatever the futures of affect theory might portend, it always and already calls for a critical practice – what Lefebvre called a ‘theory of moments’ – that must seem to imaginatively/generatively nudge these moments along ... in the clumsiness of bodily adjustments and in worldly accommodations barely underway. That is, these affective moments – at once all-powerful and powerless – do not arise in order to be deciphered or decoded or delineated but, rather, must be nurtured ... into loved practices of the everyday as perpetually finer-grained *postures for collective inhabitation*” (ibid., 21).

This willingness to undergo bodily strain and ‘clumsy’ maneuvering contrasts with a more conventional understanding of what both ethics and criticism are all about: firmly taking a position. This precise sort of clumsiness reflects the effort to accommodate one’s body to new worlds and spaces just emerging. The implied awkwardness speaks to the bodily effort to inhabit a new space, no matter how foreign or poor the fit may seem.

For Costello, a failure or refusal to think one's way into the being of another amounts to an ethical transgression with extreme repercussions. She suggests that the "[t]he horror [of the Holocaust] is that the killers refused to think themselves into the place of their victims, as did everyone else. They said, 'It is *they* in those cattle cars rattling past'...They did not say, 'It is I who am in that cattle car'" (Coetzee 2003, 79). Here, Costello draws on the same language of 'thinking one's way into' that she employs to describe the construction of a fictional character. In both cases, it is not sufficient to observe or imagine from a safe distance. The truly ethical encounter requires a form of inhabiting: moving one's self into the cattle car rather than watching it go past. Mere observation preserves the safety and immunity of distance and therefore will not suffice. Thinking here is not purely cognitive but is instead physically active – we do not *think of* but rather *think our way into*. Thinking becomes a way of moving, allowing us to transport ourselves into the cattle car. Therefore it is only from the effort required to position one's self *inside* that cattle car that we can make the statement: "It is I." The mere fact of the utterance also seems important. This is perhaps a speech act in which to say "It is I" in some sense affirms it. It is not only the content of the utterance that matters but also the highly *spatialized structure* from which it is uttered within the cattle car. To say anything from outside those walls – no matter how sympathetic in content – would be to miss the fundamental necessity of inhabiting the space of the other's experience.

Here again we see that we simply cannot separate the inhabiting of the other subject from the inhabiting of an other space. Others do not exist independently of their worlds. Thus to access an other requires acclimating to another atmosphere. This model distinguishes itself from a telepathic channeling of interiors (such as the brain) and instead involves a surprisingly exterior mode of feeling the other's surrounding world.

Costello's insistence on movement into the cattle car resonates powerfully with the finding of scholarly work conducted elsewhere which found that

the experience so often cited by visitors to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum as the most powerful is that of standing inside the railway car which had actually been used in the transports to the camps (Hirsch and Suleiman 2003, 80).

Why is standing in the railway car so powerful in both cases? I suspect it has much to do not only with authenticity and materiality but also the surrender of one's self to a foreign structure. Other spaces are not just backgrounds for other subjects but constitutive of their experiences – something the concentration camps make brutally clear.

Yet in "The Problem of Evil," the ethical virtue of inhabiting another world gets flipped on its head. The process of penetrating into a distant, profoundly alien space loses its ethical value and becomes instead the ultimate ethical *transgression*. In a lecture that seems to squarely contradict the ethical virtue of inhabiting we have just looked at, Costello suggests that

Certain things are not good to read or to write. To put it another way: I take seriously the claim that the artist risks a great deal by venturing into forbidden places ... because I take seriously the forbiddenness of forbidden places. The cellar in which the July 1944 plotters were hanged is one such forbidden place (Coetzee 2003, 173).

Costello's subject is *The Very Rich Hours of Count Von Stauffenberg*, a (real 1980) novel by (real) author Paul West, about the thwarted 1944 attempt to assassinate Hitler. Interestingly, Costello's ethical critique of West draws on language that we have seen elsewhere in this discussion. In this way it seems as if unethical and ethical authorship themselves convene on common ground. This shared language centers on a highly spatialized conception of entering or penetrating distant spaces. Costello

specifically condemns an act of movement – “venturing.” This language of transgressive motion recurs throughout the lecture in various forms such as “wander[ing],” “invad[ing],” and “enter[ing]” (161, 174) to name a few. The notion here is that certain spaces are “forbidden,” essentially *off limits* – a claim that at first glance seems to radically contradict the idea espoused in “Philosophers” that “there is no limit” to thinking our way into another being. Yet this is not exactly a contradiction. Costello does not deny her earlier suggestion that inhabiting is limitless but actually reaffirms it. West’s ethical transgression is not a failure of imaginative inhabiting; if anything it represents the height of (dangerous) imaginative power, a point where ethical potential tips over into unethical reality. Costello suggests that West has failed to limit himself, to impose restraints on a limitless imagination. Yet how is this form of trespassing so different from inhabiting the body of another or entering into the “territory” belonging to James Joyce? How can the author who insists on the possibility of inhabiting the bat and tiger also so forcefully defend the idea of “forbidden places”? Could it surprisingly be the case that Coetzee associates ethics with authorship in order to advocate the *limiting* of imagination, rather than its unobstructed freedom?

I think it is far more likely that Coetzee wants to avoid this precise process of transforming inhabiting into merely another name for familiar ethical or literary values. The novel resists any temptation to map inhabiting onto a moral code or set of prescriptions – one way or the other.<sup>6</sup> What it does instead is make inhabiting an issue that is at stake in ethical encounters of all kinds. In other words, inhabiting cannot be reduced to a simple rule or single valence.

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<sup>6</sup> See David Atwell (2006, 25), who asserts that “Coetzee resists fiction’s being made to deliver usable ethical content.” Thorsten Carstensen (2007, 91, 81) similarly suggests that the novel “[c]elebrates ... eternal dissensus” and refuses to “provide narrative closure.”

Of course, we are still left wondering if some forms of inhabiting are more ethical than others. In her assessment of West, Costello notes several peculiarities about the particular mode of inhabiting. One issue concerns death as a supremely personal event. Costello spatializes time itself when she suggests that “[t]heir last hours belong to them alone, they are not ours to enter and possess” and “[d]eath is a private matter; the artist should not invade the deaths of others” (Coetzee 2003, 174). The last bit of time belonging to these individuals is configured as a distinctly personal space: to enter it is inevitably to possess it, in some way to take over the rights of ownership. These are private moments – private property – that “do not belong in the light of day” (159) and should not be shared – and here note how “shared” is now taking on the secondary sense of being *represented*. When we expose ourselves to that which is foreign, we also expose a bit of foreignness itself – some part is exposed to the light of day.

Costello’s concern is not only with the violence inflicted upon represented individuals but also with the effect on the author himself. Once again this problem is figured in spatial terms. “Can anyone,” Costello asks, “wander as deep as Paul West does in the Nazi forest of horrors and emerge unscathed? Have we considered that the explorer enticed into that forest may come out no better and stronger for the experience but worse?” (161). Some pages later she states: “I do not think one can come away unscathed, as a writer, from conjuring up such scenes” (172). In another strikingly inverse reflection of “Philosophers,” the problem becomes not a matter of inhabiting but of *being inhabited*: “Through Hitler’s hangman a devil entered Paul West” (167). By invading the space of others, West has himself been invaded. Here, the bidirectional possibilities of inhabiting constitute a major peril. The reader, too, is complicit in this crime of trespassing: “violence was done to her but she conspired in the violation” (181). Thus the problem with shared space persists but common ground

becomes a dangerous reality rather than an idealized aspiration. While “Philosophers” highlights the problem of authors getting *into* a foreign space, “Evil” considers the opposite problem: how can an author “come away” from a foreign world? Is inhabiting a reversible process? Just how nomadic is the ethical author or reader? Here, the previously discussed bodily commitment to moving outside one’s self reemerges in sinister terms and with little hope of return. The sense that one can be lost or trapped inside an evil world further reinforces this idea of both fiction and ethics as spaces.

Compare the striking similarities in the language Costello uses to describe the ultimate ethical action and unethical action in “Philosophers” and “Evil” respectively:

[Philosophers]: I urge you to walk, flank to flank, beside the beast that is prodded down the chute to his execution (111).

[Evil]: word by word, step by step, heartbeat by heartbeat, I accompany him into the darkness (174).

In both cases, Costello describes a process of shared movement, a motion in which the steps of the subject and other fall into indistinguishable unison. This is a matter of feeling every aspect of experience down to its very proprioceptive rhythm. The crucial difference, of course, is that in the former case we walk with the victim of execution while in the latter we walk with the author who speaks for the executioner. Taken together the two passages do not provide a coherent moral prescription, but they do reinforce the sense that moving into foreign spaces is fundamentally at stake in ethics as well as in narrative. Ethical action hinges not only on where one *stands* but how and where one *moves*.

Yet given the perplexing discrepancies throughout the novel – most visible, I think, in “Philosophers” and “Evil” – readers continue to wonder where Costello (and

Coetzee – who overlaps with but is not the same as his fictional author) “really” stands on these ethical issues.<sup>7</sup> We have seen that movement plays a central role in ethical problems, but the novel does not wholly abolish the notion of some ethical stance, a position, or viewpoint. Thus in the face of such glaring contradictions, we find ourselves struggling to determine where Elizabeth Costello and J.M. Coetzee stand. If the author is able to move in and out of not only fictional worlds but spheres of ethical values as well, are we left with no choice but to decide that Costello has no discernible position at all? Should we assign her what the character Norma refers to as “the kind of easy, shallow relativism that impresses freshmen” (91)? When we put the somewhat conflicting narratives of “Philosophers” and “Evil” side by side, we lose the ability to locate Costello in the sphere of a particular set of ethical values. It seems possible then that the capacity to inhabit foreign worlds and minds is fundamentally a refusal to commit, a refusal to stake out and claim certain ground as one’s own. The ethical risk, then, is that we lose the commitments that come with the act of unambiguously stating where one stands – note how the matter of ethical “positions” is a spatialized model of ethics too, but one that relies on rootedness rather than motion. If the work of the author is to continuously displace herself, that is, propel herself into an other world, does the author become emblematic of that individual who escapes commitment and by extension ethical responsibility? Or is there something ethical about this precise process of displacement?

The novel’s final full chapter dramatizes these questions and contradictions. By this point, we have seen Costello inhabit the worlds of other authors, other characters, and multiple contradictory ethical viewpoints. All of these others reemerge in some sense in the text’s concluding section. While West’s work evokes

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<sup>7</sup> Perhaps this indeterminacy is the point. Carstensen (2007, 82) suggests that the novel records a “multiplicity of reality.”



the feeling that “*no one has been here before*” (174), the prevailing sentiment in “At the Gate” is that *everyone* has been here before. Costello finds herself in a world that is “too literary” (225), a space that intensifies the Bakhtinian notion that “our speech is filled to overflowing with other people’s words” (Bakhtin 1981, 337).<sup>8</sup> The final chapter is a struggle to locate Costello in this world of literary canonicity and in relation to her own contradictory beliefs and ethical viewpoints.

In the closing chapter, Costello finds herself in a purgatory suspended between worlds: this life and the next, fiction and reality, her own language and that of others. She locates herself spatially and architecturally in a Kafkaesque world: “[t]he wall, the gate, the sentry...” (Coetzee 2003, 209) that is also more generally a familiar literary space. She notes the presence of the “square to give its verisimilitude, the reality effect” (212).<sup>9</sup> Thus by the novel’s final chapter Costello finds herself in *a world written by other authors*. “Is this someone’s idea of what hell would look like for a writer,” Costello asks, “or at least purgatory: a purgatory of clichés?” (206). Costello’s irritation echoes the struggle of authorship throughout the novel: “[h]ave they not the wit to come up with something new?” (204). But the question is also whether, in a world such as this, Costello herself has something new to say. When she defines herself as a “secretary of the invisible,” for example, she quickly adds “not my own phrase” (199). Can an author venture into other literary worlds and retain her own voice, something of herself? This question echoes a related

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<sup>8</sup> Carstensen (2007, 91) compares this multiplicity to what “Bakhtin calls ‘discursive polyphony,’ [but] *Elizabeth Costello* will never reach this state of utter certainty. As there exists no dominant voice of an omniscient author reconciling adversarial opinions into a universal synthesis, Coetzee’s novel is open to an infinite number of disparate readings and celebrates its own provisional nature.”

<sup>9</sup> A clear echo of the novel’s first lines: “There is first of all the problem of the opening,” the novel begins, and goes on to call our attention to the rules and conventions of genre, “[t]he blue costume, the greasy hair, are details, signs of a moderate realism. Supply the particulars, allow the significations to emerge of themselves” (1, 4). Of course this outright attention to the work’s constructed fictionality in some way undermines the very project of realism – in a sense destroys the verisimilitude it creates.

problem introduced through Paul West: can an author who has ventured *into* a world ever hope to venture *out*?

If that is the major problem for authorship in “At the Gate,” the related ethical crisis revolves around the imperative to unequivocally state one’s beliefs. The final chapter explicitly raises the question, what is Costello’s position? Is there any one place that she stands? How can we understand the oscillating movements we have traced throughout? We can think of this problem as particularly urgent after inhabiting has emerged as both ethically productive and problematic. In Costello’s testimony, we encounter only additional inconsistencies:

I am open to all voices, not just the murdered and violated ... If it is their murderers and violators who choose to summon me instead, to use me and speak through me, I will not close my ears to them, I will not judge them (204).

This is of course a striking revision of Costello’s previous statements. In “Evil,” for example, Costello specifically takes issue with the fact that West “gives the butcher a voice” (168). In so doing, she articulates the kind of perpetual shifting we have seen throughout the novel: “*I maintain beliefs only provisionally: fixed beliefs would only stand in my way. I change beliefs as I change my habitation or my clothes*” (195). The use of “habitation” here highlights one aspect of inhabiting that I have thus far only alluded to: its potential impermanence. Inhabiting, in many cases, signals only the temporary taking up of residence. There is something pragmatically sparse about habitations. Perhaps it is the narrative progression between different habitations that holds ethical promise.

In “At the Gate,” entire belief systems become habitable structures rather than abstract principles. Costello moves from one habitat to the next. Yet she resists claiming ownership of these beliefs. When prompted by the judges, it seems that Costello could easily claim any belief as her own, that is; she could construct a

fiction. Instead our protagonist commences a painstakingly difficult writing process. In fact, it is in this chapter that we get one of our only glimpses of Costello actively writing. More specifically, it is here that we see her *revising*. In this moment, both the ethical and authorial meanings of the term “revision” begin to merge. Revision is not a reckless unchecked freedom – it is more like the freedom to change habitations. Costello suggests that her drafts are “revised to the limit of my powers,” but interestingly, the judge – from whom we expect an insistence on finality – suggests that “there is always one more revision to do” (199). Thus in the final chapter we cannot say which revision is the “true” statement any more than we can determine which viewpoint is truly Costello’s or Coetzee’s.<sup>10</sup> This sense of limitlessness echoes Costello’s earlier suggestion that inhabiting is sympathetic imagination with ‘no limit.’ In this sense inhabiting and revising seem to share a similar resistance to closure that unites the ethical and literary. Costello’s statement following one of these revisions informs our understanding of this indeterminacy: “My answer is, both are true. Both. And neither. I am an other. Pardon me for resorting to words that are not my own, but I cannot improve upon them” (221). Costello seems to exist in some sort of borderland here. I think we can make some sense of the way this statement manages conflicting impulses if we think back to the section “Philosophers.” There, Costello suggests that inhabiting is in some way to temporarily achieve the impossible, to sustain contradictions. In that lecture, she insists that it is in fact possible to imagine death: “For an instant, before my whole structure of knowledge collapses in panic, *I am alive inside that contradiction*, dead and alive at the same time” (77; added emphasis). Thus, while in many respects, *Elizabeth Costello* affirms the Levinasian belief that “I am not the other,” there are fleeting moments in which

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<sup>10</sup> Carstensen (2007, 91) suggests that “[a]s someone who ‘no longer believes in belief,’ Elizabeth embodies the postmodern condition.”

the subject does become the other and shares in the being of another. There is a brief moment in which *I am an other*. It is possible to speak (and to write) not only across distances but *from* a distance. The very idea of living ‘inside’ a contradiction again evokes the spatialized, architectural language I have been tracing throughout. Ultimately contradiction *itself* becomes a habitable structure. And if contradiction is a structure to be inhabited, we can begin to think of the entire text – with its glaring contradictions – as one such structure. The fact that inhabiting emerges as supremely ethical yet also unethical in the novel further consolidates this idea that inhabiting allows us to take up residence *within a contradiction*. To hold two radically different viewpoints is in a sense to surrender one’s self to an entirely different world, structured by different organizing principles and physical laws. The only conceivable structure of a contradiction is a fictional world. Houses of fiction provide architectural support for contradictions.

*Elizabeth Costello* thus gives voice to the pervasive and troubling suspicion that there is something impossible about both ethics and narrative. Coetzee’s novel takes seriously the assertion that we cannot represent or share the being of an other - and yet – we “live the impossible” (Coetzee 2003, 77). This language of impossibility resonates across diverse works of ethical and literary theory. For Spivak, fiction allows us to “taste the impossible status of being figured as object in the web of the other” (2004, 18). For Harpham, we can find “some identity, however minimal, with the unimaginable other” (1999, 5). For Levinas, the other is “an unknown that is impossible to translate” (1987, 69). And for Butler, some parts of the other “cannot be fully known” (2003, 208). The process of inhabiting temporarily turns contradiction into a space to be inhabited rather than an obstacle to be surmounted. If ethics is about living the impossible, fiction seems a pretty good place to start.

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