

Realistic fantasies: puzzles about what it is like to be Elizabeth Costello

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Abstract. In this paper, I present two puzzles arising from J.M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*, a fiction which is closely connected to analytic philosophy.

The main character of J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* is an Australian writer who became famous for a novel based on Molly Bloom. Molly Bloom originally appeared in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. We are told:

Eccles Street is a great novel; it will live, perhaps, as long as *Ulysses*; it will certainly be around long after its maker is in the grave. (2003: 11)

So what should we make of Coetzee's novel about a fictional novelist, who wrote a novel based on a character from an actual novel? I like it very much, but I am also puzzled by it. I wish to present two puzzles below.

1. A realist novel? Coetzee's novel is rich in intellectual discussions. There is a risk with such a novel that the characters are just mouthpieces for positions in a debate. The novelist, let us imagine, is interested in a debate about whether humans should be consuming so much meat. Mrs. A expresses arguments against which Mrs. D opposes; but these characters do not feel like real people; moreover, there is nothing much of interest about them apart from their views. I think Coetzee is trying to avoid that result. His novel appears to be written as part of a tradition which aims to achieve that realistic feel. If one does not look too carefully, he has done a good job. (i) These discussions could happen. (ii) There is nothing unlikely about them, or nothing

mysterious if they actually happened and were not recorded by a novelist – that may be more precise. (iii) We are also told believable things about the emotions of characters.

These points capture the impressions of some commentators¹ and I was not left with any feeling of disbelief upon my initial reading of it, in 2005. But on closer examination the novel's whole relationship to realism is puzzling and I am not convinced it is very realistic. Elizabeth Costello and a Nigerian writer are discussing "the African novel" to a couple from Manchester on a cruise ship. Costello has long known the Nigerian writer, whose name is Emmanuel Egudu. We are told:

If it were only a matter of Emmanuel and herself she would, at this point, walk out. She is tired of his jeering undertone, exasperated. But before strangers, before customers, they have a front to maintain, she and he both. (2003: 51)

It is easy enough to understand her emotions, and her situation is something which various readers will be able to relate to. It feels like a slice of life. Here is the next paragraph of the novel, which is where a puzzle for me lies:

‘The English novel,’ she says, ‘is written in the first place by English people for English people. That is what makes it the English novel. The Russian novel is written by Russians for Russians. But the African novel is not written by Africans for Africans. African novelists may write about Africa, about African experiences, but they seem to me to be glancing over their shoulder all the time

¹ M.V. Moses describes lessons 2 to 7 as providing scenes from Costello's life which form "a mainly coherent but somewhat sketchy whole" (2009: 28); and Y-P. Ong describes the ideas discussed as embedded within "a complex frame of events, situations, and interpersonal interactions" (2021:3). Also G. Cornwell takes the novel to be arguing for realism "that is in some way true to a lived sense of life" (2011: 358). By the way, for the people who think lectures should be obsolete because it is all online, this is another example where the online information is scattered. I have to search databases and go through complex documents, which a lecture might conveniently summarize: Coetzee and realism. See Edward 2022.

they write at the foreigners who will read them. Whether they like it or not, they have accepted the role of interpreter, interpreting Africa to their readers. Yet how can you explore a world in all its depths if at the same time you are having to explain it to outsiders? It is like a scientist trying to give full, creative attention to his investigations while at the same time explaining what he is doing to a class of ignorant students. It is too much for one person, it can't be done, not at the deepest level. That, it seems to me, is the root of your problem. Having to perform your Africanness at the same time as you write.' (2003: 51)

Now I find Coetzee's novel very easy to read and I think people who do not engage in a lot of novel reading would as well. *Here then is my first puzzle*: is Coetzee himself not like the scientist who cannot fully explore his subject matter – the interesting case of a “parasitic” novelist who is highly successful – because he is also trying to present her world to the ignorant? To what extent does Coetzee have thoughts of the form, “I think X would be an important part of the world of such a novelist but I cannot tell readers about X, because most of them are not going to understand X”?²

For example, the information we have about Elizabeth Costello's background involves famous figures from mainstream prestigious literature. She read Virginia Woolf, and D.H. Lawrence and T.S. Eliot were great influences (2003: 11, 126). Sometimes it seems as if her reading is entirely from a small and highly standardized bookshop in an English-speaking provincial city.³ (And even then it is quite restricted!) What about the less known world of Joyce

² You need to be clever to understand these old British textbooks, but I personally think we can't go back to that approach. Explanations have to be supplied for some people regarded as too thick, too rebellious, or too defensive.

³ An exception is that she has read the award-winning fictional Nigerian novelist, who seems very fictional as a novelist, despite how many novelists that country produces. (Egudu strikes me as like a member of a kind of security

specialists? *Ulysses* is a very difficult novel and is it not likely that she had some contact with this world, rather than successfully extracting a Joycean character and building a novel around them all by herself?⁴ The only piece of background information the novel gives that helps explain how she achieved this success is that she grew up amongst Irish Catholics in Melbourne (2003: 1), but that alone hardly helps. A literary plant like Costello growing entirely out of famous mainstream literary soil is possible, I suppose, but I suspect it is very unlikely. Perhaps Coetzee thought, “I can put her relations with her son, other novelists, her sister, and even episodes from her sexual life into this novel, despite my being of another sex; but relations to Joyceans? NO!”

Even if Costello somehow produced her famous work independently, years have passed and she is no recluse. She would have become much more acquainted with this Joycean world by now. Amongst other things,⁵ she would know of people who, observing her success, have tried to do something like what she did, with another character from Joyce, and also people who dress just like her and imitate her bodily dispositions, including probably some scholars of the Irish master. Coetzee tells us of people writing theses on Costello’s work, but I think it is the imitators she notices who are likely to be a larger presence in her consciousness, irritating her and diluting the striking brand identity that she has in the novel. I imagine Costello often moves in a world of people who, from her point of view, seem to exist to annoy her! (Plausibly they regard her as having got rather far with little talent or a threat to people they care about: “That place should be taken by our person.”)

system. By the way, Coetzee’s novelists are almost humourless. Don’t literary people often have nervous highly sophisticated senses of humour? “Show me what an oral poet can do” 2003: 58!)

⁴ There are a lot of other characters which I would find easier to extract and I suspect I am not unusual in this respect.

⁵ People who speak in Joycean dialects, walking talking Joyce encyclopaedias, etc.

2. We in Australia. Let us move on to the second puzzle. Elizabeth Costello explains how Australia once faced and then solved the problem African novelists are apparently facing:

‘...we in Australia have been through similar trials and have come out the other end. We finally got out of the habit of writing for strangers when a proper Australian readership grew to maturity, something that happened in the 1960s. A readership, not a writership – that already existed. We got out of the habit of writing for strangers when our market, the Australian market, decided that it could afford to support a home-grown literature.’ (2003: 51-52)

Elsewhere Elizabeth Costello shows awareness of objections and how to navigate them at least, if not convincingly reply – ‘I know that Nagel is only using bats and Martians as aids... like most writers, I have a literal cast of mind, so I would like to stop with the bat.’⁶ *That brings me to my second puzzle*: what should we make of her “Australiacentric” account of how Australian literature developed, given that she is famous for a novel about Molly Bloom, a character from Irish literature? I don’t mean that it is Australiacentric in that it is biased by being from the point of view of an Australian, rather that it charts a development towards being for Australians. You write a whole novel with Molly Bloom as the main character, your fourth novel: would you not anticipate some interest abroad and wonder, for example, what the Irish would think of this and also what Joyce scholars abroad would think? Can you screen off those non-Australian points of view so easily? When explaining the development of Australian literature, Costello seems to be going through a well-worked routine. Would she not just get another routine rather than invite

⁶ 2003: 76. Returning to the previous section, another kind of annoying person she is likely to encounter is someone who registers such delicately-placed manoeuvres – “Like most writers, I have a literal cast of mind”! – and ignores them, for example by asking, “Are you not taking Nagel too literally?” after the lecture. How is our George Best going to evade these bullish tackles?

questions about this, or at least add “I’m the exception of course”? I can see this inconsistency being used in a bizarre comedy, or else as a test – “If you notice this, then I should not be talking to you” – but both of these options are very unlike Costello.

“Parasitic” authors are a long-term part of our literary culture. Most of them do not become famous – I suspect it would be much easier to discover the name of a famous Joyce scholar than the best writer of Joycean poetry today, though he or she may be more skilled. I would like to read a realistic novel about the shadowy world of a parasitic author. On closer inspection I think this is not it. The satisfactions Coetzee’s novel gives are probably similar to the satisfactions from fictions which feature simple archetypes; it is just slightly more realistic.

References

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