

Dialogical Numbers: Counting Humanimal Pain in J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* Mike Piero

Abstract

This essay argues that J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* stages numerical sequences strategically, dialogically, and parodically in order to call attention to the ideological weight involved in counting. Focusing on how one counts – and accounts for – human and nonhuman animal pain, I contend that the repetition of numbers in the novel works to subvert the neoliberal faith put in numbers, quantification, and data. Without succumbing to some religious-mystical numerology, this reading attempts to expose the fiction involved in the act of counting and the need to pay more attention to numerical discourse in literary fiction. In tracking these numbers throughout the novel, I draw upon the polyphonic features of the text, particularly to understand the relation of law to justice as mediated by numbers. The number three that is repeated throughout the novel invokes religious, political, and ethical traditions that work to interrogate and disrupt ubiquitous dualistic conceptions of reality. Ultimately, the essay articulates the value of counting as it relates to humanimal pain, to writing the narratively unthinkable, and to the possibility of living a good life amidst unspeakable suffering.

‘Everything will be counted: not a word, not a movement
of the soul, not a half thought will be in vain.’
– Fyodor Dostoevsky, ‘At Tikhon’s’¹

Counting consciously or unconsciously engenders an ideological claim, and therein lies the difficulty of trying to track numbers contained within a novel, as one might track an animal's traces and movements. The very act of counting, fraught with politics so conveniently easy to overlook or ignore, can further contribute to numbers and data becoming fetishised objects. And still, *we count*, and some write about their counting. Yet narratology has been generally suspicious (and rightly so) of what for now we might call numerological approaches to narrative, especially literary narratives. Without contributing to the sea of scholarship that uses numbers as mere symbols, and without calling for a return to a religious-mystical numerological hermeneutic, this essay attempts to account for the dialogism proffered by numbers in J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*.² The marshalling of numbers in the novel parodies and subtly exposes ideologies wrapped up in the act of counting, particularly through hybrid constructions of discourse. Politico-ethical discourse in the novel is staged against this backdrop of tracking numbers in *Elizabeth Costello*, in the sense of tracing numbers, which themselves execute the

¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, ‘At Tikhon’s,’ *Demons*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Knopf, 1994) 712.

² J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Penguin, 2004). All subsequent references to, and citations of, the novel will appear in parentheses within the body of this article.

force of a route that can be tracked, as one might track a postal package. In particular, the reoccurrence of the numeral 3, and the attention it calls to the author's resistance to ideological pairing, is no small matter.³ Coetzee's self-reflexive parody of numerology and the fraught temptation of following fetishised numbers throughout chapters that are titled 'lessons', dialogical engagements more accurately conceived as 'arguings' than arguments,⁴ open up new avenues for what Elizabeth Costello calls 'the sympathetic imagination' (EC 80). Reoccurring numbers within the novel also register the humanity involved in counting, including what Elizabeth Costello might have called the potential for 'evil' in counting in ways similar to the dangers inherent to writing. Given the well-established and ever-growing cultural faith in and business-bureaucratic demand for numbers, measurement, data and quantification, the matter of counting – whether one counts animals, people, money, pain, et cetera – inevitably involves an 'accounting', a fiction spun under the guise of 'objectivity', once the privileged domain of an absolute Other, or God, if you will. Ultimately, this essay argues that more critical attention should be paid to numbers and counting in Coetzee's fiction, even looking back to the work before his recent *Jesus* novels.⁵ Coetzee's numbers become a way to track humanimal pain with an eye toward human and nonhuman animal justice.

Elizabeth Costello follows the titular Elizabeth Costello, an Australian author whose fiction is held in high esteem by an informed readership. The novel tracks Costello across various travels, speaking engagements, and meditations on living a writerly life. From the first pages of *Elizabeth Costello* – a novel divided into nine sections, eight of them titled 'lessons' followed by a postscript that presents itself as the ninth 'lesson' – the text impresses the reader with the numerical factor of three. Costello is 66 years old, author of nine novels, two books of poems, one book on bird life, and a number of uncounted news or magazine articles merely referred to as a 'body of journalism' (EC 1).⁶ Her most famous work – an early but critically acclaimed work that haunts her throughout the book – is her fourth novel, *The House on Eccles Street*, published in 1969. Her adult son, John Bernard, who assists his mother on the occasion of her visit with practical concerns of transportation and the occasional rescue from tedious questions by interviewers and literary groupies, admits to refusing to read her books until he had

³ The reader may note occasional deviations from standardised numerical formatting given the essay's preoccupation with numbers' dialogical relationship to words.

⁴ Derek Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004) 198.

⁵ For the most recent treatments of numerical and mathematical figures in *The Childhood of Jesus*, see *J.M. Coetzee's The Childhood of Jesus: The Ethics of Ideas & Things*, ed. Jennifer Rutherford and Anthony Uhlmann (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), particularly Baylee Brits's chapter, 'The Name of the Number: Transfinite Mathematics in *The Childhood of Jesus*' 129-148.

⁶ In the early drafts of 'What is Realism?' later to become the first chapter in *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee plays with dates and ages across eight dated and two undated drafts. While the dates of Costello's birth fluctuate, her age changes from 70 in the handwritten draft dated 28 June 1995 to 68 in a revision nearly six months later. The play with Costello's age as 68 continues in the seventh draft dated 12 March 1996, describing her as '68, going on 69'. Ultimately, Costello's age comes to be 66 going on 67. Playing with numbers is also found in Coetzee's manuscripts pertaining to how many novels Costello had written. Originally, Costello was the author of fourteen novels in the first draft, which would have been exactly double the number of novels Coetzee had published by the time of writing in 1995. In the second draft of *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee changes this to nine novels, effectively removing that doubling. Coetzee attends to numbers in this novel in a way not unlike Samuel Beckett tending the leaves of the tree in *Waiting for Godot* between Act I and II. J.M. Coetzee, 'What is Realism?' Containers 30 and 38.1. *The J.M. Coetzee Papers*. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX.

grown up, at the age of 33 (*EC* 5).⁷ In the first lesson on ‘Realism’, the narrator skips – ‘We skip’, a metanarrative move that occurs a total of seven times throughout the chapter, followed by three similar ‘gaps’ in the narrative, reminding readers of their complicity in the meaning-making act of reading.⁸ Admittedly, these numbers I have just counted mean nothing by themselves. One could attempt to tease out some structural unity of the numbers within the narrative, but such an activity would be futile, as Coetzee is nothing less than a master at anticipating and preemptively disrupting allegorical and symbolic formulae for interpreting his work (thus exposing the lack of imaginative thinking found in many methodologically sound ‘applications’ of various theories). Counting what appear to be benign numbers offers new opportunities for reading, imagination and sympathy though, as Brian Macaskill articulates:

Surely it is the case that we (humans) can agree on the rules of calculation without forgetting that the mechanisms and results of such calculation are not going to be value-free, that the values thus engendered will be related, and not exiguously so, to the moral domain we inhabit as humanimals; indeed, that counting – like some kinds of language, literature, philosophy, and music – might even open up ethical possibilities of empathetic cognition, possibilities that can be articulated in language of some sort, and that can so be shared and even acted upon.⁹

The weight of these innocent-seeming numbers in the first lesson can only become meaningful when put in dialogue with numbers that are repeated throughout the novel. Even more crucially in the heteroglossia present throughout, numbers reproduce and employ social and political agency as they assist people in negotiating meaning. Ultimately, Coetzee’s reproduction of a pseudo-numerology effects a parodic disavowal of numerology in its typical failure to self-reflexively account for its own ideological assumptions involved in the act of counting.

The first ‘We skip’ – in addition to calling into question the problems of realism – also skips ahead to Costello’s arrival in Williamstown, Pennsylvania and her hotel, which she describes as ‘a surprisingly large building for a small city, a tall hexagon, all dark marble outside and crystal and mirrors inside’ (*EC* 2). Another invocation of three figures in its doubling, implied in the hexagonal space of the building: the presence of three works to disrupt the

⁷ See later comments in this essay on the politico-religious resonances of ‘33’ in the novel, a number itself doubled in Costello’s age, which received substantial revision throughout Coetzee’s drafts. The entire novel – as a metonym now for Coetzee’s oeuvre, his body of work – operates as a *hoc est enim corpus meum* that, for Jean-Luc Nancy, always expels that which we desire and is always sacrificed. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham UP, 2008) 5. Like another John – the ‘fictionalised’ John Coetzee of *Summertime* – Costello survives through and in her writing, the ‘limited immortality’ of all secret authors. J.M. Coetzee, *Summertime* (New York: Viking, 2009) 7.

⁸ See Derek Attridge’s epilogue ‘A Writer’s Life: Elizabeth Costello’ for more on the connection between these announced gaps as they relate to Coetzee’s testing of the tradition of realism and the resulting implications for the pursuit of ideas (Attridge 201). Additionally, the gaps work as a metanarrative gesture to the reader regarding the impossibility of representing fictional or historical worlds without gaps and omissions that effect a requisite incompleteness. See Lubomír Doležel, ‘Fictional and Historical Narrative: Meeting the Postmodernist Challenge,’ *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis* ed. David Herman (Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 1999) 258.

⁹ Brian Macaskill, ‘Fugal Musemathematics Track One, Point One: J.M. Coetzee, Ethics, and Joycean Counterpoint,’ *Word and Text: A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 4.1 (2014) 165.

constructed preoccupation with pairing in the novel, similar to the roles of doubling and the disruption of binary oppositions elsewhere in Coetzee's fiction (or in Samuel Beckett's work, Coetzee's literary forebear). Other fraught pairings include Coetzee/Costello, literature/philosophy, humans/animals, abattoirs/death camps, clean/unclean, good/evil, and so on. *Elizabeth Costello* contains within it a second book – *The Lives of Animals* (1999) – the published product of two Tanner Lectures (1997-98) given by J.M. Coetzee at Princeton University framed by a scholarly introduction and critical reflections. This latter book itself is composed of a pair of sections: 'The Philosophers and the Animals' and 'The Poets and the Animals', which constitute the third and fourth lessons of *Elizabeth Costello*, with a few changes.¹⁰ The presence, privilege, and repetition of threes (as well as sixes and nines that distil into threes) call critical attention to the artificiality of rigid, fraught pairings and their hierarchical power relations, already well-documented in the writings of Jacques Derrida and Claude Lévi-Strauss, among others. Through doublings and dichotomies, Coetzee guides the reader to count her way through Elizabeth Costello's lessons, as if her lessons are lessons on counting. This 3-6-9 repetition causes the careful reader to count as she reads about slaughtered animals, and humanity, and genocide, and evil. The very act of counting as presented to the reader repeatedly throughout the novel is wrapped up with the pain, difficulty, and absurdity of life known in and across moments in time, past and future always joined together in the fleeting present.¹¹ The argument here is not that we should count, or should count in a particular way, but that *Elizabeth Costello* calls attention to how we count unconsciously, unknowingly. The narrative reminds the reader of its own thirdness, its own alterity. The ways of counting presented in the novel – not necessarily Coetzee's ways of counting – are themselves mirrored by the numbers, like the number 69 as an inversely-aligned pair repeated throughout the novel. 'Reason' itself becomes a site of conflict for Costello in her scepticism of the anthropocentrism of human reason when put in opposition to animal rationality.

We count, as I wrote in the opening paragraph, and our counting with others also involves a politics of pronouns: whom exactly does the plural pronoun include? Whom does it exclude? Following Coetzee's 'we skip', Elizabeth Costello expresses concerns over the first

¹⁰ Nearly all of these 'lessons' were published independently before being joined together in the book *Elizabeth Costello*. For more on some of the orthographic changes in the text between *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), see Brian Macaskill, 'Fugal Musemathematics Track Two: Leopold Bloom's Fugal Fart and J.M. Coetzee's Contrapuntally Gendered Practice of Meegevoel,' *Word and Text: A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 5.1 (2015) 235. A list of editorial changes from *The Lives of Animals* to *Elizabeth Costello* dated 19 March 2003 is also available in *The J.M. Coetzee Papers*, which includes, incidentally, a change from parakeets in *Lives* to cockatoos in *Elizabeth Costello*. J.M. Coetzee, 'Elizabeth Costello,' March 2003, Container 38.7, *The J.M. Coetzee Papers* (Austin, TX: Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin).

¹¹ One can trace noteworthy numerical sequences repeated in *Elizabeth Costello* by counting lessons, years, humanimal victims of evil, sides of buildings, publications, Daniel Defoe's hats and shoes, religions of the Book, the floors of Costello's hotel, knitting needles, time, the people who order fish at the Appleton dinner, deaths, Aristotelian divisions (of gods, beasts, and men), the tears of old folks, currency, the ontology of frogs, and ultimately the judges to whom Costello must account for her beliefs. The above list documents Coetzee's depiction of counting as an everyday, humanimal act that is as ubiquitous as it is largely invisible and overlooked, which makes it a dangerous vehicle for ideology. The lessons in 'The Humanities in Africa' included eight lessons until draft 4b, which began a draft of the ninth section; similarly, the 'eight lessons' of the novel's subtitle – a subtitle omitted in some editions of the book – is supplemented with a postscript that could be considered the ninth lesson. J.M. Coetzee, 'The Humanities in Africa,' Draft 4b, 2000-2002, Container 29.5-10, *The J.M. Coetzee Papers* (Austin, TX: Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin).

person plural pronoun early in the novel. In the second lesson on ‘The Novel in Africa’, a talk delivered by her African ex-lover, Emmanuel Egudu, has turned his own writing into a career of entertainment, in her estimation, by exploiting ‘postcolonial’ performance to non-Africans of the African exotic. Considering Egudu’s discourse on the novel in Africa, Costello ruminates, ‘We, we, we, she thinks. *We Africans*. It is not *our* way. She has never liked *we* in its exclusive form’ (40-41). The use of *we* demands a generalisation that Costello refuses on the grounds of its presumption to speak for all Africans, or for all of Africa, but her objection lies more in the knowledge that Egudu knows this and still he insists on performing this exclusive (and exclusively binary) generalisation for his own profit: by ‘propping up the mystique of the African as the last repository of primal human energies’, he ‘has a stake in exoticizing himself’ (53). She knows this from reading his writing, from listening to his talks across a series of many years, and from ‘when she was young, or nearly young, when she spent *three* nights in a row with Emmanuel Egudu, also young then’ (58, emphasis added). This repetition of ‘we’ speaks polyphonically of the royal *we*, a patronising *we*, the dictatorial *we*, and even Coetzee’s own authorial *we*, the last of which speaks not only for the author but for the reader as well. The ‘we’ becomes a doubled, hybrid construction of a common utterance that signifies beyond polysemy, beyond postcolonial complexity, and beyond the novel itself. Combined with the numbers presented throughout the novel, the repetition of ‘we skip’ positions two epistemological ‘languages’ of meaning centripetally: numbers and words. *We count*. Who is this ‘we’? Perhaps I mean humans, and how humans count, to the exclusion of animals, to the exclusion of animal counting and grouping. Perhaps this ‘we’ means the author along with the reader, whose shared consciousness through the act of reading becomes the ‘just-between-us’, as Jean-Luc Nancy calls it, ‘of our manifestation, our becoming, our desire’, a ‘we’ who are exposed to the determinism all around us, exposed as neither subject nor object alone.¹² To be sure, this matter of counting – even the counting implied in pronouns – is tied to our nonhuman animal counterparts, whether they count by our system, by their own method, or not at all.¹³

The novel foregrounds and parodies numbers that are most usually associated with having religious significance: three as the number of a triune God; seven as the sum of three (God) and four (human and the other three creaturely orders); the hotel room on the unlucky thirteenth floor; and 33 as the putative age when Jesus was crucified. In the latter instance, John Bernard, as previously mentioned, began reading his mother’s novels at the age of 33. In ‘The Lives of Animals: The Philosophers and the Animals’, Costello points out that the Indian

¹² Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative* trans. Jason Smith and Steven Miller (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002) 78.

¹³ Recent studies claim to have discovered the ability of some animals to count, something more than mere repetition or response to intense conditioning. Elizabeth Brannon of Duke University has observed that rhesus monkeys possess the capacity to match the number of sounds to the number of shapes they see. She has also found that the monkeys can effectively do subtraction well beyond the rate of mere chance. According to an article by Michael Tennesen, Brannon believes that animals ‘do not have a linguistic sense of numbers – they aren’t counting “one, two three” in their heads ... [but] she believes that ability [of summing sets of numbers] is innate’. Is the ability to distinguish between groups of numbers, sets of large and small, counting? Is there such a thing as counting outside of a logico-mathematical *system* of numbers? Perhaps it requires another word. The question of whether or not nonhuman animals can count, therefore, is not so simple. Counting, for the purposes of this essay, constitutes a human system that only (most) humans can enter into fully, that is, with all of its ideological weight and value. Michael Tennesen, ‘More Animals Seem to Have Ability to Count,’ *Scientific American* (September 2009) 15 April 2016.

mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan, who, in Costello's words, was 'captured' and brought to Cambridge, died at the age of 33 (*EC* 68). Replete with biblically-inflected numbers, *Elizabeth Costello* resists and refuses any attempt to draw out a symbolic meaning from these numbers, and yet includes them: two instances of major life events (Bernard's and Ramanujan's) – a matter of degree of course – that invoke a third man, Jesus, who was also allegedly captured (and crucified) at 33. The colonial 'capturing' (Ramanujan) and the literary capturing (John Bernard) are tied together with the politico-religious capture of Jesus; therefore, a priori, the colonial project is tied not only to the ideological power of narrative as a means of indoctrination, resistance, and everything in between, but also to counting, numbers, and measurement as similar modes of inventing history.¹⁴ And the narrative continually points the reader to the possible intersection of the human and the divine: Bernard, after a night of coital pleasure with one of his mother's fan-interviewers (in room 1307 of the hotel), speculates that her interest in him is due to bafflement 'by the mystery of the divine in the human. You know there is something special about my mother – that is what draws you to her – yet when you meet her she turns out to be just an ordinary old woman' (*EC* 28).

The room number is not insignificant: in his handwritten revisions dated 11 December 1995, Coetzee replaces 'They make love' with a description of the space of the activity, all mediated by relations of room numbers – his room, her room, and his mother's room.¹⁵ The numbers become the site of contact, and a narrative mechanism that parallels the 'we skip' that features in the novel (and elsewhere, in various forms, in Coetzee's fiction). In another moment, Costello, when pressed by academics at the dinner following her lecture at Appleton, suggests that her vegetarianism 'comes out of a desire to save my soul' (*EC* 89). A third example of this imbricated discourse on the 'coming together' of divine and human (into a third category) appears in the debate between Costello and her sister – given two names, Blanche, and her new name, Sister Bridget – on the depiction of Christ and the crucifix in Africa. The implications that such an image might connote give hope and a sense of community in suffering as Bridget sees it, whereas Costello imagines a different model of *caritas* after some reflection, emerging not out of agony but instead out of a hospitality of beauty, what she considers to be a more genuine act of humanity (150). Even the copulation between gods and humans comes into play in Lesson 7 on 'Eros' when Costello speculates about the fantasies of the gods who imagine and at times indulge in sex with mortals, persons who 'live the more urgently, feel [the more] intensely', to the point that the gods

¹⁴ To suggest the interpenetration of narrative and history is not to equate the two simplistically. Given the imbrication of narrative and history as discourse – thinking of Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, Fredric Jameson, and Hayden White (White 146-47) – I would recommend Doležel's lucid engagement with the problem of discourse analysis and 'the Holocaust Test.' Possible worlds theory offers a way out of the potential snare of the 'postmodernist' emphasis on the freeplay of language and the impossibility of linguistic access to the Real; however, to be sure, one must be careful not to conflate contingency with mere relativism, nor confuse the weight of testimony, memorial, and the witness with an arhetorical pursuit of objectivity, which too often serves as a self-legitimising goal. The difficulty of representing the unrepresentable in the work of writing is a thread that runs not only through Costello's 'lessons' but throughout Coetzee's oeuvre as well. Doležel 251-253.

¹⁵ J.M. Coetzee, 'What is Realism?' draft one, revision one. 1995. Containers 30 and 38.1. *The J.M. Coetzee Papers*. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX.

wish they had that inimitable little quiver [of *la petite mort*] in their own erotic repertoire, to spice up their couplings with each other. But the price is one they are not prepared to pay. Death, annihilation: what if there is no resurrection, they wonder misgivingly? (189)

Perhaps the gods mirror back to humans an erotic urge to transgress the boundary that separates two things, or two beings in this case.

Such speculation about the thoughts of the gods is the necessary counterpart to Costello's reflection on *caritas*. If Adorno is correct in describing 'the life of philosophy [as] reflection and speculation', then our present era and the privilege it affords to the ostensible 'objectivity' of data leads to an 'administrative structure of analysis, [by which thought] forgets to be thought'.¹⁶ This way of slower thinking and reading recalls Heidegger's lectures on thinking as being underway, self-legitimising, and a way of life.¹⁷ Nietzsche's remarks on slow reading as a life-affirming activity come to mind as well.¹⁸ Costello's speculative-reflective engagement enables her sympathetic imagination, which at bottom is the work of the writer, or, perhaps more accurately, the ontological becoming of the author who writes the work of art, who labours, in Costello's own words, as a 'secretary of the invisible, one of many secretaries over the ages' (*EC* 199). Such writing involves the writer, whose moment of writing becomes an ontological instant of *being-with*, a personally impersonal activity.¹⁹ By the time she crafts this statement, Costello describes her so-called secretarial work of speaking as a mouthpiece for others as an effort in thinking herself into the life of another animal.²⁰ The most polemical pairing of the novel is that between slaughtered animals and slaughtered Jews. Beginning with a brief historical discussion (always too brief) of Treblinka and the heinous atrocities of the Third Reich, Costello moves the discussion to animals by way of the language used to describe the denunciation of the camps; phrases like "'They went like sheep to the slaughter.'" "'They died like animals.'" [and] "'The Nazi butchers killed them'" (*EC* 64). This fragile comparison is taken to the extreme quickly by her insistence on a failure in the moral imagination of those who wilfully ignore the widespread suffering of animals in production facilities; wielded for her own purposes, her statements could be seen as at least indecent, if not obscene:

¹⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005) 68-69.

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004).

¹⁸ See Brian Macaskill, 'Translating and Transforming J.M. Coetzee's *Slow Man* from Novel to Opera: An Ambling, Doubling, and Tripling Pursuit of the Opera's Cinematographic Beginning,' *Mise-en-scène: The Journal of Film & Visual Narration* 1.2 (2017) 3.

¹⁹ I have written elsewhere about the imbrication of Coetzee's impersonal aesthetic and personal autobiography as it relates to the work of writing, isolation and personality, all involving an 'isolation' that should be thought of as occurring in an *instant* of being more so than a *state* of being. See Mike Piero, 'Coetzee, Blanchot, and the Work of Writing: The Impersonality of Childhood,' *MediaTropes*, Special Issue, J.M. Coetzee: Contrapuntal Mediations, ed. Brian Macaskill 4.2 (2014) 79-97. I borrow 'being-with' from Jean-Luc Nancy, who writes about the singular plural origin of being as taking place in an instant, an ontological theory that undergirds this present essay. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2000).

²⁰ As a challenge to rigid methodologies and the primacy of the Western analytical philosophical tradition – that is, the foundation of 'human reason' itself – Wittgenstein offers this charming statement: 'It's only by thinking even more crazily than philosophers do that you can solve their problems.' Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) 75.

Let me say it openly: we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them. (65)

Immediately following this paragraph, Costello solidifies her position by addressing possible objections, eventually calling for people to be ‘philosophical rather than polemical’ (66), a paradigm that the reader is left to explore regarding Costello’s own rhetorical allegiances. The passage above, incidentally, echoes a similar moment in *Age of Iron* when Mrs. Curren – Elizabeth Costello’s fictional predecessor – articulates her experience killing animals with the following: ‘A universe of labor, a universe of counting: like sitting in front of a clock all day, killing the seconds as they emerged, counting one’s life away.’²¹ While numbers have become a more recent interest in scholarship on Coetzee’s fiction – with a few earlier notable exceptions – the allusive genealogy between colonialism, numbers and narrative can be seen throughout his literary corpus.²²

Some members of the audience, however, choose to engage Costello in moral objection to the polemics of her ‘philosophical’ argument; after all, she is not a philosopher, but someone who admittedly has ‘written stories about made-up people’ (*EC* 66), namely, Abraham Stern, whose first name of course alludes to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic forefather. Here, again, we have a three – the three religions of the Book. This third voice, third opinion, disrupts her pair of lectures. Stern, in his letter to Costello explaining his absence from her dinner as a refusal (there are twelve seats, one of which remains empty), identifies the apparent logical fallacy in her argument: ‘The Jews died like cattle, therefore cattle die like Jews, you say. That is a trick with words which I will not accept. ... The inversion insults the memory of the dead’ (94). For this reason, he refuses to break bread with Costello at the dinner following her lecture. Incidentally, the reader only knows the contents of the letter because John reads the letter in its entirety; Costello reads it first, but ‘she reads it quickly, then with a sigh passes it over to him’ (*EC* 93).

This is not to insist that certain comparisons should not ever be made, for even a comparison between the victims of the Shoah – too many to count, for how can one count, and register, and mourn for millions? – and slaughterhouse animals can be responsibly handled. It takes both a careful hand and a willingness to look past a discourse of law to the possibility of humanimal justice. Jacques Derrida adroitly navigates these difficult waters in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, writing that ‘one should neither abuse the figure of genocide [in discourse on

²¹ J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (New York: Penguin, 1990) 44.

²² Perhaps the earliest critical attention paid to numbers comes by way of Brian Macaskill who writes in his influential essay, ‘Charting J.M. Coetzee’s Middle Voice’, of the importance of numerical sequencing in Coetzee’s second novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, a book divided into 266 numbered sections. This technique describes how Coetzee ‘foregrounds the discontinuity of Magda’s being’. He connects Coetzee’s practice of writing in the linguistic ‘middle voice’ to the metonymy of the novel’s numbered sections:

Thus “lost in the being of [her] being” (35), Magda seeks a median place from which to articulate herself, and the numbered entries in which she seeks to record this articulation come in turn to constitute Coetzee’s act of “doing-writing” in the middle voice: a means, no less, of enumerating (for Coetzee) equally complex negotiations facing the writer in that time and place of contemporary South Africa.

Brian Macaskill, ‘Charting J.M. Coetzee’s Middle Voice,’ *Contemporary Literature* 35.3 (1994) 458-59, 465.

abattoirs] nor too quickly consider it explained away.’²³ The rest of Derrida’s paragraph, too long to reproduce in its entirety here, examines this comparison, including by means of a startling hypothetical situation: ‘(let’s say Nazi) doctors and geneticists had decided to organize the overproduction and overgeneration of Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals by means of artificial insemination’ in order to produce a steady supply of people

destined in always increasing numbers for that same hell, that of the imposition of genetic experimentation, or extermination by gas or by fire. In the same abattoirs. I don’t wish to abuse the ease with which one can overload with pathos the self-evidences I am drawing attention to here ... Instead of thrusting these images in your faces or awakening them in your memory, something that would be both too easy and endless, let me simply say a word about this “pathos.”²⁴

Derrida goes on to question the role of such sympathy and pity, which he then relates to how Jeremy Bentham changed our ontological relation to the animal Other.²⁵ The following passage, as another hybrid construction of dialogical utterances, shows how Elizabeth Costello’s questions take on the ‘scent’ of Jacques Derrida in particular, and some of the more informed post-structuralist discourse in general:

* * *

Costello
‘The question to ask should not be:
Do we have something in common –
reason, self-consciousness, a soul –
with other animals?’ (EC 79)

Derrida
‘The question is not to know whether the
animal can think, reason, or speak, etc.,
something we still pretend to be asking
ourselves.’²⁶

* * *

The better question, which Costello, as though paraphrasing Derrida, reiterates throughout her lectures, would be: ‘Can they suffer?’ As Derrida suggests, ‘being able to suffer is no longer a power; it is a possibility without power, a possibility of the impossible.’²⁷ The possibility of the

²³ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (New York: Fordham UP, 2008) 26.

²⁴ Derrida, *Animal* 26.

²⁵ Taking to task the majority of Western philosophy and theory, ‘from Aristotle to Descartes, from Descartes, especially, to Heidegger, Levinas, and Lacan’, Derrida positions human relation to ‘the animal’ Other in terms of Bentham’s critical question: “‘Can they suffer?’” asks Bentham, simply yet so profoundly.’ By locating the question outside of a comparison of humanimal to nonhuman animal ‘reason’, Derrida locates a possibility of animal *justice* rooted in compassion through the undeniability of suffering. This justice diverges from a discourse of ‘animal rights’ owed to the animal that comes to resemble ‘the human’ on the grounds of a shared human rationality, or of ‘rights’ that require the violence inherent in law to enforce. Derrida, *Animal* 27.

²⁶ Derrida, *Animal* 27.

²⁷ Derrida, *Animal* 28. This hybrid construction of discourse that calls back to Derrida is repeated most recently in Coetzee’s *The Schooldays of Jesus* in a conversation between David and Simón on animal suffering. Simón – who is often wrong, incidentally, though well-meaning and full of love for the boy – argues that ‘Animals don’t feel

impossible is the impossible possibility that people can herd other people onto trains to be gassed, burned to ash, annihilated – all inadequate words given the atrocities that leave no ‘true witness’, only survivors who bear the burden of a vocation to ‘bear witness to a missing testimony’ of those exterminated, in Giorgio Agamben’s words.²⁸ It is the impossible possibility of dropping an atomic bomb upon not one but two cities to burn, deform, and incinerate life there, the effects of which persist to this day. It is the impossible possibility of an earthquake and subsequent tsunami wreaking unimaginable devastation in the very same country – to humanimals, nonhuman animals, flora, economies, and more – brought about by a nuclear power plant that should already have been decommissioned. For Jean-Luc Nancy, speaking about the catastrophe of Fukushima, ‘challenges the capacities of calculation whereas, at the same time, what we plan or project remains within the order of calculation, even if it is out of our reach’.²⁹ A networked technological connectedness makes large numbers – previously unthinkable – possible, and along with them, catastrophes more far-reaching and devastating.³⁰

The lives of nonhuman animals – and the far-reaching catastrophe of their treatment under the jurisdiction of industrial factory farming, its related industries of production, and all those complicit in the resulting consumption (myself included) – are tied to how *we count* in ways that *Elizabeth Costello* ever so subtly calls the reader’s attention to by nudging them to count along as they read the unthinkable. In Coetzee’s fiction, humans have been positioned as those who count. In the three religions of the Book, man counted for God as seen most acutely in the ‘Book of Numbers’, since God ‘created all things by number, weight, and measure’.³¹ This quantification and the keeping of numbers secured God’s power as both the keeper of numbers and the creator of the categories of measurement, which today is always negotiated as a social technology of control.³² I. Bernard Cohen points out in *The Triumph of Numbers* that 70,000 people were killed for King David’s counting mistake in the census.³³ Cohen and Porter independently recall that the latter half of the eighteenth century saw a forceful and largely secular interest in census data issuing from the realisation that the newly ‘liberated’ nation-states were dealing no longer just with people but with populations. Science and technology – the

anything when they are slaughtered. They don’t have feelings in the way that we do.’ J.M. Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus* (London: Harvill Secker, 2016) 76.

With Señor Arroyo corroborating the justification of the enterprise of abattoirs on the familiar grounds of animals lacking human reason, David – as so often he, David, also does in *Childhood* – asks the more important question: ‘But does it hurt?’ J.M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* (London: Harvill Secker, 2013) 76.

²⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002) 34.

²⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophes* trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham UP, 2015) 27.

³⁰ Nancy, *After Fukushima* 28.

³¹ Solomon 11:20.

³² Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995) 77.

Additionally, Jean-Luc Nancy addresses *Hoc est enim corpus meum* by linking it to ‘our *Om mani padme* [sic] ..., our *Allah ill’allah*, our *Schema* [Shema] *Israel*’ to illustrate the primacy of *this* body, this thing of the unknowable Other presented so one can touch and know. This connection of the Christian ‘This is my body’ to its Islamic and Jewish counterparts – among similar cultural assurances, such as in Buddhism – is crucial to recognise, however, for the purposes of the present analysis, my interest lies primarily in the Christian instances of God as keeper of numbers. Nancy, *Corpus* 3.

³³ I. Bernard Cohen, *The Triumph of Numbers: How Counting Shaped Modern Life* (New York: Norton, 2005) 30.

former being characterised by ‘explosions’ in breakthrough discoveries, the latter by gradual development and advancement³⁴ – act as the primary agents in this move toward reclaiming measurement, numbers, and data from God. Reterritorialising counting and data as human activity, the emphasis on empirical, measurable data rises to methodological fame under the guise that quantification will eliminate ‘subjective’ contaminants and produce a universal, utopian knowledge. David Attwell confirms that Coetzee’s early interest in his doctoral work at The University of Texas at Austin in stylostistics, given his interests in Beckett and mathematics, quickly dissipated, and ‘by the time he wrote *Dusklands*, the positivism of stylostistics had even come to seem related to the mythology of the technocrats who ran the military-industrial complex’.³⁵ This obsession with quantification must be recognised as ‘simultaneously a means of planning and of prediction’ sustained not by its objective observations, methods, and collection of data – for these methods themselves have been exposed to be constructed, gendered and manipulated – but rather by the subjective creativity of this quantitative technology: ‘the creative power of statistics’.³⁶ People themselves are made governable by the *loss* of information that quantification engenders since to measure and collect data requires the elimination of any element that cannot itself be measured.³⁷ What is lost, in other words, is the third space of *play* – the give, the movement, the ambiguity – between 0 and 1, with which measurement, algorithmic logic, and artificial neural networks have such trouble. The social stratification of numerical discourse has increased ever since, made possible on an even larger scale as ‘we’ become more technologically (and, therefore, economically) connected. For Nancy, Fukushima is exemplary of how communication becomes contaminated:

An earthquake and the tsunami it caused become a technological catastrophe, which itself becomes a social, economic, political, and finally philosophical earthquake ... There are no more natural catastrophes: There is only a civilizational catastrophe that expands every time.³⁸

Technology has become ‘not an assembly of functioning means [but] the mode of our existence’.³⁹ In this position, which makes us neither subject nor object, we struggle to live and make decisions outside the omnipresent deterministic forces that generally govern our daily lives as singularly plural beings. Perhaps we resemble our nonhumanimal counterparts more than we often like to think.

In the eighth lesson titled ‘At the Gate’, the sequence of number-lessons comes to fruition when Costello finds herself a petitioner in a Kafkaesque purgatory wherein a statement of belief is required of her before she can proceed through the gate. In the course of making three revised statements of belief – which the other petitioners refer to as confessions (*EC* 212) – Costello negotiates her application by producing a statement in which she confesses to having only provisional beliefs, followed by a revised statement in which she claims to be a secretary of the invisible before a committee of nine judges. Finally, her third amended statement speaks to a

³⁴ Juri M. Lotman, *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture* (Tallinn: TLU P, 2013) 88.

³⁵ David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face-to-Face with Time* (New York: Viking, 2015) 37.

³⁶ Porter 37, 43, 76.

³⁷ Porter 45, 29.

³⁸ Nancy, *After Fukushima* 34.

³⁹ Nancy, *After Fukushima* 36.

belief in frogs, particularly the tens of thousands of frogs that would emerge after the ‘torrential rains that swelled the rivers with the carcasses of drowned animals’ had eased along the Dulgannon River in Victoria to rejoice in the mud (216): ‘I believe in those little frogs ... They exist whether or not I tell you about them, whether or not I believe in them ... it is because of their indifference to me that I believe in them’ (217). Polyphonically resonant with the legal discourse of the courtroom through a hybrid construction of its heteroglossia, the narrative clearly states that Costello has issued two statements, which she proffered in person before the committees.⁴⁰ This accounting of statements, however, does not count the first written statement she provided, which was later revised. The uncertainty engendered by the difference between internal narrative accounting and how the external reader might otherwise count calls further attention to the difficulties inherent in the act of counting. To what degree can one distinguish the second statement, which is clearly a revision, from the first? To what degree does it matter, given that the voices of the law – both the judges and the gatekeeper – claim it to be two statements, not three? As in Kafka’s ‘Before the Law’, – which has received thorough critical attention already as it concerns *Elizabeth Costello* – ‘even before moral conscience as such, [the law] forces an answer, it calls for responsibility and guarding’.⁴¹ I count three statements.

Like nonfictional authors, Costello thinks (and even sometimes counts) herself into the position of an other: ‘*I am an other*’, Costello testifies, after sympathetically imagining herself into the lives of the little frogs (*EC* 221). Measuring leads to a distancing from nature, and measurement by numbering not only operates as a social technology of control over humanimals – their thoughts, bodies, (non)identities and agency, insofar as these elements of cognition can be distinguished – but also over nonhuman animals to which humans have historically been placed in opposition.⁴² In the early years of biological standardisation within the pharmaceutical industry, a ‘cat-unit’ was used as the unit of measurement that would test ‘each harvest of leaves by determining the minimal fatal dose per kilogram of cat’, along with many other kinds of animal-units. In an effort to measure the effects of chemicals with a high natural variability, researchers conceived of ‘the animal’ as standard itself: all cats are the same; all will react in the same fashion.⁴³ The research eventually bore out that variability among ‘the same animal’ was too great for such standardisation to work, even when ‘scientists worked to defeat the variability of nature by breeding well-standardized laboratory animals’.⁴⁴

The frog unit, in particular, highlighted the problems of this reductive thinking about the animal other that reduced plurality to singularity under the banner of scientific measurement:

Already the ‘frog unit’ had fallen into disrepute because frogs tolerated the drug differently in summer and winter, and because they were often killed by its effect on their nerves rather than their heart. By 1931 there were more than seven hundred papers on the quantitative testing of digitalis, involving a variety of animals.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel,’ *The Dialogical Imagination* ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 304.

⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, ‘Before the Law,’ *Acts of Literature* ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992) 206.

⁴² Porter 23.

⁴³ Porter 30.

⁴⁴ Porter 30-31.

⁴⁵ Porter 30.

Costello's belief in frogs is a belief in individuality, wherein the 'force of I', of which Adorno writes, addresses 'the strength of the individual not to entrust himself to what blindly sweeps down upon him, likewise not to blindly make himself resemble it'. And, on the other hand, the realisation that '[w]ithin this individual it [the force of 'I'] represents reality, the 'not-I', just as well as it represents the individual himself.'⁴⁶ Preserving the force of I without erasing the singular plural origin of being is crucial to the disruption of totalitarianism. Whether by the industrial pharma-measurements of cat-units, by an immaterial economy built on 'measuring' individuals out of the equation, or even by means of the totalising character of Fredric Jameson's imagined 'ultimate concrete collective life of an achieved Utopian or classless society', the narrative force of I depends on a given moment of negation.⁴⁷ Likewise, the preservation of life lived in-between-us as singularly plural beings occurs in a world driven by statistical logic in which 'everybody must behave (as if spontaneously) in accordance with his previously determined and indexed level, and choose the category of mass product turned out for his type,' according to Adorno and Horkheimer.⁴⁸ Even as individuals increasingly take on the role of producers of mass media and other informational capital engendered by the internal collapse of concepts like work and play into themselves, Adorno's warnings of widespread deterministic forces that seek to control behaviour is crucial to any social justice project.

Belief in plurality is central to the discourse on animals, but also to the potential of a world in which justice becomes (more) possible for all living beings based on a model of justice governed by a rule of divergence, not convergence. Jean-François Lyotard writes in *Just Gaming* that justice today is a matter of plurality, including a plurality of language games, in which 'every one of us belongs to several minorities, and what is very important, none of them prevails'.⁴⁹ And even then, Lyotard adds the caveat that 'one should be on one's guard, I think, against the totalitarian character of an idea of justice, even a pluralistic one'.⁵⁰ Yet simply to describe difference is never enough, since the law of genre is wrapped up in such difference insofar as we are speaking of the difference of belonging. To clarify, with regard to difference, I refer to 'a taking part without being part of, without having membership in a set'.⁵¹ This participation without belonging is precisely Costello's problem at the gate: she participates in many minorities; she participates in beliefs without colonising them as her own, without belonging to any of them; and her statements speak to being's origin as always already being singular plural.⁵² 'One' is never as simple as one, never *solely* individual. For the law, a 'justice' that cannot be measured is unacceptable and impermissible. Much like the problems of testing pharmaceuticals on animals for measurement, a 'justice' that cannot be standardised is irreconcilable with the structures of sovereign state power as they currently exist, and, more crucially, are also irreconcilable to the ever-expanding technological networks that mediate

⁴⁶ Theodor Adorno, 'Gloss on Personality,' *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia UP, 1998) 165.

⁴⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 291.

⁴⁸ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,' *Dialectic of Enlightenment* trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 2002) 123.

⁴⁹ Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming* trans. Wlad Godzich (Minnesota: U of Minnesota P, 1985) 95.

⁵⁰ Lyotard and Thébaud 96.

⁵¹ Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre,' *Acts of Literature* ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992) 227.

⁵² Nancy, *Being* 30.

social existence. In the end, as Giorgio Agamben proclaims, ‘Law is solely directed toward judgment, independent of truth and justice.’⁵³ For Lyotard, any idea of justice based on fixed criteria cannot be counted as justice. Justice is always a matter of dialectical engagement and never *epistémè*, since ‘dialectics allows the judge to judge case by case’, and thus account for the complexity and nuances of each situation.⁵⁴ Justice as enforced by law is impossible given the inherent violence necessary in initially establishing the law and the maintenance-violence involved in the enforcing of such law; indeed, each court case is assigned its own number, blind by law and tracked, regardless of suffering, regardless of the impossibility of justice emerging.

For Derrida, ‘Deconstruction is justice.’⁵⁵ Enforced law is always socially and politically constructed by powers of legitimation, and justice is undeconstructable. Deconstruction itself (not as a ‘method’, incidentally) ‘takes place in the interval that separates the indeconstructability of justice from the deconstructability of *droit* (authority, legitimacy and so on)’.⁵⁶ Writing of Blanchot’s *The Madness of the Day*, Derrida writes, ‘The narrative ‘I’ frightens the Law.’⁵⁷ Costello’s ‘I’ also frightens the law, the committee, and the gatekeepers insofar as her answers at the gate ‘deconstruct’ the law. Her responses also perform the plurality inherent to the number one, the thirdness (and fourth-ness, and so on) that always accompanies and disrupts the binary coupledness signalled by the numeral two. Though the novel calls attention to Costello’s suffering and the seeming indifference of her judges, the suffering at the gate by demand of law showcases the threat to power that Costello’s numerical-narrative statements engender.

Costello’s encounters at the gate draw close attention to the force of law, especially of law housed within bureaucracy, in which the gatekeeper also is the keeper of records (*EC* 223). With the fall of God as the keeper of numbers, one can see why Dostoevsky – whose work Coetzee frequently engages throughout his oeuvre – would write in *The Brothers Karamazov* that if God is dead, then everything is permitted; and yet, for Lacan its reversal rings true: ‘for we analysts know full well that if God doesn’t exist, then nothing at all is permitted any longer’.⁵⁸ The moral accounting involved in our being-with becomes an offshoot of the loss of the self’s subjecthood. Adorno contends – along with many others – that the very self has been rendered non-existent in the face of unprecedented levels of domination and mediated existence.

⁵³ Agamben 18.

⁵⁴ Lyotard and Thébaud 27.

⁵⁵ Jacques Derrida, ‘Force of Law: The “Mystical Foundation of Authority,”’ *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992) 15.

⁵⁶ Derrida, ‘Force’ 15.

⁵⁷ Derrida, ‘Before’ 206.

⁵⁸ Slavoj Žižek, following Lacan, reveals how the atheist revelry in claiming that ‘God is dead’ under the guise of a tolerant, hedonistic pursuit of pleasure itself reinscribes the prohibitions of God unconsciously: ‘what is repressed are not illicit desires or pleasures, but prohibitions themselves’. Costello shows little sign of such repression, despite her sacrilegious disregard for belief: she appears not only as a figure of postmodern existential thought or even as a figure of *différance*, but more crucially, she is positioned as a confessor who confesses that which is not ostensibly permitted. And while she might bear some of the marks that Žižek might associate with the ‘modern atheist’ – such as her vegetarianism – she accounts for herself on her own terms, as a matter of obligation and not as a matter of catharsis. Considering Costello’s discussion with her sister about the form and meaning of the crucifix as it was being ‘shared’ (sold) in Africa, and the openness that Žižek describes as living in the aftermath of the Event (of Christ’s death on the cross, an empty Master-Signifier [39]), Costello’s confession could be read as that very openness ‘of drawing out the consequences – of what? Precisely of the new space opened up by the event’. Slavoj Žižek and Boris Gunjević, *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* (New York: Seven Stories P, 2012) 28, 40.

What we are permitted to do has been inextricably linked to some dubious notion of compulsory, hedonistic happiness that is conflated with freedom; on the contrary, writes Adorno,

It is part of the mechanism of domination to forbid recognition of the suffering it produces, and there is a straight line of development between the gospel of happiness and the construction of camps of extermination so far off in Poland that each of our own countrymen can convince himself that he cannot hear the screams of pain.⁵⁹

For Adorno, humans have become absolute social objects – an interpellation with which ‘psychology has collaborated’, even going as far to say that ‘psychology provided society with weapons for ensuring that this was and is the case’.⁶⁰ Costello’s statement of belief in frogs, whether the little frogs believe in her or not, illustrates the reflexivity of belief itself; as Žižek writes, ‘it is never the case of simply believing – one has to believe in belief itself’.⁶¹ And such a belief, which she tries to refuse, also refuses the illusion of her own self, her own supposed position as an independent subject. The moral accounting one tries to effect in daily living – a necessary series of acts, it seems to me – does not free one from the wider accounting imposed by others from the outside, whoever or whatever those interloping forces might be.

Objectified life is seen most clearly in Costello’s confessional act, a speech act that recalls Stavrogin’s confessional encounter with Father Tikhon in Dostoevsky’s ‘At Tikhon’s’ from *The Possessed* (or *Demons*), which involves the superego’s thirst for enjoyment, in this case ‘the grip of desire for martyrdom and self-sacrifice’,⁶² the masochistic and cathartic pleasure of shame, humiliation, and ridicule.⁶³ As a psychoanalyst might do, Tikhon identifies the repressed desires lurking under the guise of confession and self-forgiveness; he also assures Stavrogin of God’s accounting: ‘Everything will be counted: not a word, not a movement of the soul, not a half thought will be in vain.’⁶⁴ This is quite a different accounting than in *Elizabeth Costello*, to be sure, but while ‘At the Gate’ resembles and engages Kafka most immediately, there are hints of Dostoevsky here as well: in a world in which God is said to be dead, there is still a longing, in many moments, for there to be *some* kind of accounting or reckoning of one’s – or perhaps, more accurately, others’ – actions, especially in a world in which data, measurement and statistics like ‘to boast’ that ‘their science [has] averaged away everything contingent, accidental, inexplicable, or personal, and left only large-scale regularities’.⁶⁵ For Coetzee’s Señor C from *Diary of a Bad Year*, in a ‘strong opinion’ on probability, ‘Probabilistic propositions constitute a little world unto themselves’, a world that has little to no bearing on individuals.⁶⁶ And still, the desire for an individual accounting of our actions lingers, consciously or unconsciously. Stavrogin and Costello, as disparate as they may be, share this common trait. They both aspire to be extra-ordinary in their confessions, and both receive responses that indicate their ordinary character. For Costello, the answer given in the final line of

⁵⁹ Adorno, *Minima* 63.

⁶⁰ Adorno, *Minima* 63.

⁶¹ Žižek and Gunjević 189.

⁶² Dostoevsky 712.

⁶³ Dostoevsky 692.

⁶⁴ Dostoevsky 712.

⁶⁵ Porter 86.

⁶⁶ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (New York: Penguin, 2008) 101.

the chapter-lesson, when she asks the gatekeeper whether he sees many people in her situation, is silencing: “All the time,” he says. “We see people like you all the time” (*EC* 225). The tone of this ending is that of an existential fading, reminiscent of Adorno, once again, who writes that ‘anything that is not reified, cannot be counted and measured, ceases to exist.’⁶⁷

In *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy*, Coetzee writes in conversation with psychotherapist Arabella Kurtz about belief in a cosmic accounting of justice,

As you see, the question of the secret, remembered or forgotten, continues to gnaw at me. I would like to believe that the universe is just, that there is some or other eye that sees all, that transgressions of the Law do not ultimately go unpunished. But a voice keeps asking: Is that really so? Is everyday life not bursting with examples of people who have forgotten what it is not convenient for them to remember, and prosper nonetheless?⁶⁸

Such an accounting – accounting for one’s past-in-present actions and beliefs – is fundamentally a matter of narrative, of translation, even through the dialogical interplay of alphabetic and numeric figures. Without creating a ‘moral double entry notebook’,⁶⁹ or succumbing to the largely neoliberal force of quantitative reasoning and living, a reading that takes into account the dialogic stylisation of numbers becomes one of the ways to account for – and, therefore, to remember – humanimal pain. Like Costello, authors – including Coetzee – suffer as they think themselves into the painful lives of others. To write the impossible possibility of unthinkable suffering exacts a cost and imposes a burden. The suffering occasioned by the work of writing and summoned by a sympathetic imagination leads to an understanding that ‘we cannot do anything at all about the appalling ways human beings treat other human beings or animals without rethinking and renewing our norms, presuppositions, platitudes, and morals with regard to life and what is living’.⁷⁰ *We count*, and such dialogical counting is always an act of accounting, always constituent with our narrative lives. As Wittgenstein reminds us, counting is tied to ‘a way of living’.⁷¹ Even (and especially) Coetzee’s Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg* registers the pain of losing a son, Pavel, in this way: ‘On the cold fingers folded to his chest he counts the days again. Ten. This is what it feels like after ten days.’⁷² We count many things in life, though we count and mourn only one humanimal death at a time. Beyond that singular counting of death, the dialogical numbers with which we live bear witness to the

⁶⁷ Adorno, *Minima* 47.

⁶⁸ J.M. Coetzee and Arabella Kurtz, *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* (London: Harvill Secker, 2015) 34.

⁶⁹ In B.S. Johnson’s novel, *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry*, Malry’s double entry notebook effects a workaround to the question of a cosmic accounting that bothers Coetzee. Johnson and Coetzee both share a similar indebtedness to literary modernism in general, and to Beckett in particular. Christie’s mother says, in her last words to her son, ‘We fondly believe that there is going to be a reckoning, a day upon which all injustices are evened out ... But we are wrong: learn, then, that there is not going to be any day of reckoning, except possibly by accident ... But we shall all die untidily, when we did not properly expect it, in a mess, most things unresolved, unreckoned, reflecting that it is all chaos.’ B.S. Johnson, *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry* (New York: New Directions Books, 1973) 30.

⁷⁰ Kalpana Rahita Seshadri, *HumAnimal: Race, Law, Language* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2012) 11.

⁷¹ See Macaskill, ‘Fugal Musemathematics Track One’ 165.

⁷² J.M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg* (New York: Viking, 1994) 17.

narratively unthinkable. They, too, remind us that counting plays a crucial part in the stories and experiences we labour to remember, to keep alive, even as *we skip* around along the way.⁷³

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⁷³ I am enormously grateful to Brian Macaskill for his generous feedback on drafts of this essay in addition to years of life-affirming discussions about J.M. Coetzee's writings. Special thanks go to the staff at the Harry Ransom Center at The University of Texas at Austin for their helpfulness and hospitality.

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