



METAFOR

Boğaziçi Üniversitesi
Batı Dilleri ve Edebiyatları Bölümü
&
Türk Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü
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The Department of Western Languages and Literatures and the Department of Turkish Language and Literature at Boğaziçi University are pleased to announce the launching of a new journal: *METAFOR: The Boğaziçi University Journal of Literary Studies*.

Our mission is to issue an academic periodical of the highest standards, one that provides a forum for innovative discussions in the field of literary studies and literary criticism. The journal accepts submissions of original essays, book reviews, interviews and short commentaries.

We especially welcome contributions that take an interdisciplinary and comparative approach. *METAFOR* will be a semi-annual journal, accepting submissions in Turkish and English. All submissions will be peer-reviewed by referees assigned by the editorial board.

*We thank Burak Şuşut and FİKA
for our cover design...*

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Eda Dedebaş Dünder, Boğaziçi University

**NARRATIVES OF RIGHTS AND THE TRAVEL OF STORIES IN J.M.
COETZEE'S *ELIZABETH COSTELLO***

Abstract

With its close reading and discussion of J.M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), this article undertakes the debate that is centered on doing good/humanitarian travel versus telling a story/writing about atrocities and argues that Coetzee's novel contributes a cutting-edge dimension to the discussion in that it foregrounds the interconnectedness of texts, humans, and other species. I argue that *Elizabeth Costello* adds a third dimension to the palimpsestic experience in the post-authoritarian text: that is, to enable interconnectivity among texts, humans, and other species, and thus enhance humanitarian effort through an intertextual travel among narratives. In its juxtaposition of travel and meta-fictional storytelling, the novel foregrounds writing and travel as possible modes of humanitarian action refuting a singled-out endeavor for rights abuses. It is thanks to Coetzee and Costello's self-conscious and self-effacing writing styles that storytelling immediately comes forth as an unsatisfying humanitarian effort. However, through inconsistencies of writing and the acknowledgement of stories as being unreliable sources, the act of writing itself turns out to be an empowering experience that denies a cathartic and an emphatic entanglement. Furthermore, combined with travel, writing and self-referentiality stand out as complementary aspects of the discussions of humanitarianism in the novel.

Keywords: J.M. Coetzee, human rights narratives, humanitarian travel, metafiction, *Elizabeth Costello*

**J.M. COETZEE’NİN *ELIZABETH COSTELLO* ADLI
ROMANINDA HAKLARIN ANLATILARI VE ÖYKÜLERİN
SEYAHATI**

Öz

Bu makale, Güney Afrikalı yazar J.M. Coetzee’nin 2003’te basılan *Elizabeth Costello* romanını detaylı incelerken, iyi bir şeyler yapmak/hikaye anlatmak ya da insan hakları için yapılan seyahatler/zulümlerin öykülerini yazmak arasında var olan tartışmayı ele almakta ve Coetzee’nin romanının metinler, insanlar ve öteki türler arasında bir bağlantı kurarak bu tartışmaya yeni bir boyut kazandırmakta olduğunu öne sürmektedir. Dahası, metinleri ve öteki türleri birbirine bağlı göstererek, bu roman metinlerarası bir seyahat kavramı üzerinden hümanitarizm sorunlarını çözmeye çalışmaktadır. Seyahat ve üstkurmacasal öykü anlatımını bir araya getiren bu roman, yazma ve seyahat etme eylemlerinin hümanitarizme beraberce katkıda bulunduğunun altını çizer ve hak ihlallerinin tek bir olguyla çözümlenemeyeceğini vurgular. Coetzee ve Costello’nun üstkurmacasal ve alçakgönüllü yazma biçimleri sayesinde hikaye anlatıcılığı hemen yetersiz bir çaba olarak ortaya çıkar. Fakat, yazma eyleminin tutarsızlıkları ve hikayelerin güvenilmez kaynaklar olduklarını kabullenmeden dolayı, yazma eylemi kathartik ve empatik ilişkileri reddeden güçlü bir olguya dönüşür. Buna ek olarak, seyahat etme kavramıyla bir araya gelen yazma ve özgöndergelilik kavramları romanda hümanitarizmin tamamlayıcı öğeleri olarak ortaya çıkarlar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: J.M. Coetzee, insan hakları anlatıları, hümanitarizm ve seyahat, üstkurmaca, *Elizabeth Costello*

The question of representation – whom to represent and how to represent the distant other – has been one of the prominent questions of human rights narratives. Moreover, the discrepancy between doing good versus telling a story; humanitarian travel versus writing about atrocities, consolidates the dominant discussions of contemporary human rights narratives. The main distinction oscillates between whether a humanitarian traveler or a writer who focuses on relaying atrocities, provides more benefit to establish a human rights regime in international territories. For instance, in “‘The Spectacle of Our Suffering’: Staging the International Human Rights Imaginary in Tony Kushner’s *Homebody/Kabul*,” Elizabeth Anker introduces the term “humanitarian crusaders” for Western humanitarian travelers and their newly emerging interest in depictions of suffering from underdeveloped parts of the world and argues that “the humanitarian sentiment that inspires Milton and Priscilla [the two protagonists of Tony Kushner’s *Homebody/Kabul*] is tainted by multiple kinds of self-interest. ... [and] egoistic longings for atonement also consolidate humanitarianism as an ideology.”¹ The metaphorical mantling of the imperialist perspective of the Crusades in contemporary humanitarian aid campaigns implemented by Western NGOs solidifies the short-sighted view of savior Westerners and establishes a binary that differentiates between white saviors and their non-white victims.² In this mutual interdependency, both the savior and the victim thrive through the existence of one another and the real motives of the Western humanitarian crusader – to quote from Anker – are challenged in contemporary human rights narratives.

Similarly, J. M. Coetzee’s 2003 novel *Elizabeth Costello* deals with likeminded questions and the overlapping boundary between humanitarian travel and writing and narrates the story of an aging fictional writer, Elizabeth Costello, who abandons writing in order to travel around the world and delivers lectures on human rights and planetarity. As a vegetarian, traveler, lecturer, self-contradictory writer, public intellectual, mother, sister, and an animal rights absolutist, Costello bears inconsistencies in her lectures and her life in general. Made up of five lectures in eight lessons, all of which were composed by Coetzee between 1998 and 1999,³ the novel tackles these disparate lectures that are connected through Costello’s voyages around the world. Ranging from realism to the relationship between poetry and ecological writing, Costello’s lectures offer the reader a meta-fictional and an inter-textual

1 Elizabeth Anker, “‘The Spectacle of Our Suffering’: Staging the International Human Rights Imaginary in Tony Kushner’s *Homebody/Kabul*,” in *Imagining Human Rights in Twenty-First Century Theater: Global Perspectives*, ed. Florian Becker et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 215-217.

2 For a detailed analysis of the triangle of savage, victim, and savior, see Mutua, Makau. In “Savages, Victims, and Saviors: The Metaphor of Human Rights,” Mutua argues that contemporary human rights debates and aid campaigns are established on a triangle of a non-white local savage, a non-white non-Western victim, and a white, Christian, Western savior. The elements of this schematic triangle are interdependent on one another.

3 For a complete list of the lectures, see Attwell, David.

reading in which divergent ideas come together in various ways.⁴ The novel has been interpreted as a narrative presenting ecocritical perspectives by critics such as David Attwell, Sam Durrant, and Dominic Head.⁵ In addition, to date, it has been read as a postmodern text foregrounding intertextual references by Thorsten Carstensen, Louise Bethlehem, Michael Moses, and Reingard Nethersole.⁶

Moving beyond the existing criticisms on the novel, I argue that *Elizabeth Costello* adds a third dimension to the palimpsestic experience in the post-authoritarian text: that is, to enable interconnectivity among texts, humans, and other species, and thus enhance humanitarian effort through an inter-textual travel among narratives. In its juxtaposition of travel and meta-fictional storytelling, the novel foregrounds writing and travel as possible modes of humanitarian action refuting a singled-out proposition for rights abuses. It is thanks to Coetzee and Costello's self-conscious and self-effacing writing styles that storytelling immediately comes forth as an unsatisfying humanitarian effort. However, through inconsistencies of writing and the acknowledgement of stories as being unreliable sources, the act of writing itself turns out to be an empowering experience that denies a cathartic and an emphatic entanglement. Furthermore, combined with travel, writing and self-referentiality and their self-sustaining aspects are revealed throughout the novel. In line with the argument proposed above, the first part analyzes the dubious role of writing in activism and narratives of rights and dwells upon the boundary between "telling a story" versus "travelling for a humanitarian purpose." As a writer who now chooses to travel instead of writing fiction, Costello stands out as a disputed figure, and is the emblem of this controversy between travelling and writing. As a female traveler and the public face of J.M. Coetzee, Costello elucidates how the concept of voyage is linked to intertextuality and takes her readers to a journey through her lectures and literary allusions. The second section discusses the concept of self-referentiality and the duplicated embedded reader and writer roles in the novel. In this last section, I highlight the representation of a writer-protagonist and her performativity along with the actualization of a readerly duty that arises through the form of writing proposed in *Elizabeth Costello*.

4 In regards to the disparity of her lectures, Reingard Nethersole states: "All the 'lessons' remain inconclusive because they offer neither an escape from ambivalence nor resolution of 'double meanings', although the first 'lesson' of Elizabeth Costello adheres, at least, to a minimal narrative contract between a reader and a collection of hybrid metafictional texts. [...] [T]he compositional structure of the stories/lessons prevents any suture that would put to rest simultaneous conflicting feelings or close the gap between dichotomies set up by multivalent views espoused, voices aired and contrasting positions taken. Moreover, the 'lessons' neither synthesise opposing views nor do they bridge incompatible sides" (2).

5 See Attwell, Durrant, and Head.

6 See Carstensen, Bethlehem, Moses and Nethersole.

I. Traveling in the World of Writing and Humanitarian Activism

Extensive criticism on the romanticized and voyeuristic experience of the traveler in a non-Western setting and the perpetuation of superior attitudes portrayed in fiction and travel writing have been frequently discussed by scholars.⁷ In *Tourists with Typewriters*, Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan argue that “travel writing frequently provides an alibi for the perpetuation or re-installment of ethnocentrically superior attitudes to ‘other’ cultures, peoples, and places”.⁸ Likewise, in the twenty-first century, this colonial phenomenon has molded into a different form that emphasizes humanitarian aid and travel. Moreover, it is these superior attitudes that Holland and Huggan underscore that mark why humanitarian travel and travel writing are worth critiquing. Despite the fact that Elizabeth Costello denies travelling for the sole purpose of engaging in humanitarian action, the novel repudiates writing as a form of activism and foregrounds an old-fashioned writer’s travels. However, the fact that Costello travels to the Western world so as to instruct Westerners on the atrocities around the world, *Elizabeth Costello* resists settling into hierarchical binaries in which a Western traveler explores sites of dark tourism where she can perpetuate superior attitudes to other cultures.⁹ Therefore, the novel and its traveling protagonist defy hierarchical and mutually exclusive categories.

The close affinity between expedition and storytelling has also been analyzed by scholars. In *Travelers, Immigrants, Inmates*, Frances Bartkowski defines journey as “a strong motif in all storytelling, [...] already a rewriting of the journey into culture.”¹⁰ The concepts of voyage and intertextuality are intrinsically linked to one another. In the distance travelled, there is no longer a discovery for the traveler since the new destination has already been visited by many others. It enables the traveler to look back at home from a new perspective, the new experience she/he gains through his expedition. Alternatively, rewriting in literary texts functions in an analogous way to the idea of voyage. Akin to the concept of travel, intertextuality not only displays a new - usually a critical - view of the source text but also enables us to look at the source-text with different eyes. Julia Sanders defines adaptation as both an innovative and conservative genre since it also locates itself within the canon. Disregarding the question of fidelity between the source-text and the adaptation, she labels

⁷ See Blunt and Mills.

⁸ Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 7.

⁹ For a wider discussion on dark tourism, see Willis.

¹⁰ Frances Bartkowski, *Travelers, Immigrants, Inmates* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xix.

adaptation as “the expansion of the canon.”¹¹ Likewise, the female wanderer, Costello in this case, stands in this liminal position in which she imitates the previous models and exemplifies a unique figure at the same time. She not only travels to different lands so as to voice her opinions and to repudiate the influence of literature, but also legitimizes literary actions as modes of activism by alluding to several literary texts. Through this engagement, she juxtaposes travel and writing as leading techniques to call attention to human rights violations and ecological decay. It is through the schema of this palimpsestic experience that she builds up this interdependency among humans, texts, and other species.

A parallel idea of liminality in adaptation and intertextuality can also be observed in Costello’s role as a traveler. In *The Invisible Flâneuse*, Janet Wolff draws attention to the invisibility of women travelers of the nineteenth century. Labeling modernity and the experience of the modern as masculine, she states that a *flâneuse* cannot exist within male institutions.¹² In response to Wolff’s article, Elizabeth Wilson argues that as the *flâneur* leaves home for travel, he loses his masculinity, his ties with the home.¹³ Being emasculated, the *flâneur* becomes a defeated hero who no longer has strict gender boundaries.¹⁴ Analogously, in Coetzee’s novel, Elizabeth Costello takes the position of a female traveler, who no longer has strict gender codes. As the emasculated face of J.M. Coetzee, she has a presence that is both original with no clear-cut gender boundaries and imitative due to her adaptation of a male traveler/writer figure. It is this act of voyage that transforms Costello into a gender-free and almost identity-free role. Due to the symbiotic relationship between Coetzee and Costello, both writers replace one another and their roles are displayed as being interchangeable. Having delivered the five lectures in the novel before its publication, Coetzee uses Costello as his pseudo-public intellectual, who travels to give lectures and does not believe in the power of fiction any more.

In line with Sanders’ definition of an adaptation, Bortolotti and Hutcheon offer a third position in which a literary adaptation is analogous to a biological adaptation and represents “a repetition with a change.”¹⁵ They endorse the absence of authenticity and celebrate the numerous adaptations that are separate from the source but bring a change, an expansion to the canon. They state: “[T]he success of the replicator (narrator) is measured by its survival in

11 Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 7.

12 Janet Wolff, “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity,” in *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, (London: Routledge, 1989), 141.

13 Elizabeth Wilson, “The Invisible Flâneur,” *New Left Review*, 191 (1992): 110.

14 Ibid., 108.

15 Gary Bortolotti and Linda Hutcheon, “On the Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Fidelity Discourse and ‘Success’—Biologically,” *New Literary History*, 38 (2007): 447.

its other versions and copies, by its persistence, abundance and diversity. The success of the vehicle is measured by its capacity to propagate the replicator that rides inside it.”¹⁶ Correspondingly, in the novel, as Elizabeth Costello travels and makes allusions to previous texts, Coetzee’s place in the canon is further strengthened. The more she travels through stories and recounts them to her like-minded readers, the more sustained her position in the canon becomes. It is this self-contradictory undertaking that locates *Elizabeth Costello* as a controversial and inaccessible text.

II. Self-Conscious Writing and the Role of the Writer-Protagonist in *Elizabeth Costello*

In contemporary human rights narratives, the act of storytelling stands out as a significant entity as it is usually being set as a complementary form of relaying atrocities and abuses to the rest of the world and a tool to help for healing. In his discussion of the affinity between literature and human rights, James Dawes is critical of storytelling since he believes that choosing one witness or a speaker erases many: “No trial, and no novel, can tell everyone’s story, but the act of selecting a single representative [...] is always an erasure of many.”¹⁷ Repudiating the idea of a single representative and the singularity of the rights, Dawes calls for a multiplicity and heterogeneity of activism and advocating for human rights. In conjunction with Dawes’s argument, it is argued that writing could not be regarded as the sole action against rights abuses, and correspondingly, Coetzee’s writer/protagonist Elizabeth Costello juggles with her dual roles: she is a writer who travels around the world and gives lectures.

Making a clear-cut distinction between “doing good” and “telling a story,” Costello stands out as a self-contradictory writer. On the one hand, she is the famous author of a bestseller, *The House on Eccles Street*, a novel that rewrites Joyce’s *Ulysses* from Molly Bloom’s perspective. She believes in the potential of literature in “reclaiming women’s lives.”¹⁸ On the other hand, she is an activist writer who no longer believes in literature:

She is not sure, as she listens to her own voice, whether she believes any longer in what she is saying. Ideas like these must have had some grip on her when years ago

¹⁶ Ibid., 452.

¹⁷ James Dawes, *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 198-9.

¹⁸ J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 14.

she wrote them down, but after so many repetitions they have taken on a worn, unconvincing air. On the other hand, she no longer believes very strongly in belief.¹⁹

It is thanks to this controversy that she voices throughout the novel and that leaves literature's role in rights debates in limbo. As a writer who gives lectures on the amity between rights and literature, Costello openly disregards writing as a form of engagement with the debates on planetarity.

In addition to Costello's and Coetzee's disillusion with fiction, the novel displays a variety of metanarrative techniques. First, it uses intertextual references in the lectures by making allusions to Homer's *The Odyssey*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *A Modest Proposal*, *Robinson Crusoe* and various poems by Ted Hughes. Instead of paying tribute to a single text and securing a position in the canon (just as Elizabeth Costello does with her best-seller), Coetzee's novel adds a recalcitrant dimension to this palimpsestic experience, celebrates interdependency among texts, humans, and other species, and challenges the legacy and authority of a single text.

Secondly, the last chapter "At the Gate" is written akin to Kafka's *Before the Law*. In this dream-like lesson/chapter, no lecture exists but Costello arrives at a gulag-like camp where she is asked to make a statement about what she believes. As the writer of many novels and speeches, she finds it hard to write a statement. Finally, she defines herself as such: "*I am a writer, a trader in fictions. [...] I maintain beliefs only provisionally: fixed beliefs would stand in my way. I change my beliefs as I change my habitation or my clothes according to my needs.*"²⁰ In this hazy scene, she acknowledges the efficacy of literature and writing as a profession and thus lays out another contention in relation to the role of writing and literature.

Throughout the novel, substantial references to literature and the impact of storytelling in creating an equal world and feeling compassion for the distant other abound. Labeling herself as the "secretary of the invisible," Elizabeth Costello defends her position as embracing all beings: "I am open to all voices, not just the voices of 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."²¹ She underlines her position as a writer who advocates planetarity and sets up links among texts and beings.

¹⁹ Ibid., 39.

²⁰ Ibid., 195.

²¹ Ibid., 204.

The call for writing is further emphasized with Elizabeth Chandos's letter in the epilogue. Elizabeth Chandos, the fictional wife of a fictional character Lord Chandos, replies back to Francis Bacon.²² In the letter, she asks Bacon to convince her husband to return to writing:

All is allegory, says my Philip. Each creature is key to all other creatures. A dog sitting in a patch of sun licking itself, says he, is at one moment a dog and at the next a vessel of revelation. [...] But how I ask you can I live with rats and dogs and beetles crawling through me day and night [...] Save me, dear Sir, save my husband! Write! Tell him the time is not yet come, the time of the giants, the time of the angels. Tell him we are still in the time of the fleas. Words no longer reach him, they shiver and shatter, [...] But fleas he will understand, the fleas and the beetles still creep past his shield, and the rats.²³

The novel's epilogue with a letter written to a historical character as a response to a fictional letter further bolsters Coetzee's protean fiction that defies the authoritarian text.²⁴ According to Chandos/Costello/Coetzee, writing is a tool to pave the way for sympathetic imagination among human beings, fictional characters, and other species. This intertextual travel among other texts makes human beings eligible to comprehend one another. Intertextuality, thus, bridges the gaps in writing and establishes connections among beings from various backgrounds. It is through writing and literature that human beings are able to have empathy for other species.

In the cruise boat in Chapter 2, Costello becomes aware of the gap between herself and the King penguins. However, later in the novel, she proposes writing as a means to bridge this gap. She says: "In any event, the point is, Marion [Molly] Bloom never existed. Marion [Molly] Bloom was a figment of James Joyce's imagination. If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life."²⁵ If there is sympathetic imagination between fictional characters and the reader or the characters and the writer herself, then there is the possibility of establishing a likewise bond between ourselves

22 The Chandos letter was written by Hugo von Hoffmanthal in 1902. It is considered to be one of the foundational texts of modernism. It is a fictional piece written by a fictional writer, Lord Chandos, to Francis Bacon. There is a play with time and textuality in the letter. In this fictional letter, Lord Chandos complains about the fact that he cannot write due to the raptures in language.

23 J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 229-230.

24 Michael Valdez Moses, "'King of Amphibians': Elizabeth Costello and Coetzee's Metaphoric Fictions," *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir Literatuurwetenskap*, 25 nr: 4 (2009): 29.

25 J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 80.

and other species. Building on Costello's belief in sympathetic imagination, Heather Walton argues that Coetzee claims to share a related bond with Costello. In relation to Coetzee's writing from the perspective of a woman, Walton writes:

Literature does truth differently and it cannot manifest its revelations without fault. ... Yes, when a man writes as a woman, he employs imagination rather than experience and they are not the same. Yes, authors achieve their ends by borrowing, impersonating, mirroring and metamorphosis. But it is substitution, miscegenation and artful deceptions that constitute every literary text. This is what literature is.²⁶

It is this intertextual and deceptive nature of writing that Coetzee and Costello utilize and thus make an argument based on the fact that if literature is made to build sympathetic imagination, then human beings are analogously dependent on other species and can establish hearty bonds among species.

Despite Chandos's plea for writing and Coetzee's stress on the power of fiction, Michael Deckard draws attention to the ironic nature of Costello as a writer and the discrepancy between her frailty as an intellectual and her strong and radical arguments in the lectures.²⁷ The novel problematizes Elizabeth Costello as a failed intellectual and activist. As a vegetarian who does not allow any meat to be served at any dinner she attends, as an animal rights advocate who uses a leather bag, Costello stands out as an inconsistent activist. As she becomes radical in her beliefs, she turns into an animal rights absolutist, who takes her arguments to an extreme position and makes an analogy between the cattle slaughtered in the slaughterhouses and the Holocaust.

The reader's skepticism on Costello's inconsistency can be observed in Norma, her daughter-in-law, who criticizes Costello for being too sentimental and naïve by refuting her biased perspective on vegetarianism. As a professor of philosophy, Norma disapproves Costello's speech "The Philosophers and The Animals." In her complaint of Elizabeth Costello, Norma talks to her husband John:

It's naïve, John. It's the kind of easy, shallow relativism that impresses freshmen. Respect for everyone's world view, the cow's world view, the squirrel's world view,

26 Heather Walton, "Staging John Coetzee/Elizabeth Costello," *Literature & Theology: An International Journal of Religion, Theory, and Culture*, 22 no: 3 (2008): 286.

27 Michael Funk Deckard, "Irony and Belief in Elizabeth Costello," in *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature*, ed. Anton Leist and Peter Singer (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010), 339.

and so forth. In the end, it leads to total intellectual paralysis. You spend so much time respecting that you haven't time left to think.²⁸

By assuming the position of a reader and voicing her views openly, Norma discloses Costello's ambiguous stance in this novel. It is through Norma's reflection of the reader's point of view that *Elizabeth Costello* showcases its metafictional features and reveals the disputed role of writing.

Moreover, in Chapter 6, in her Amsterdam lecture called "The Banality of Evil," Elizabeth Costello critiques Paul West's novel *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*, which depicts the memories of a hangman, who tortured the would-be assassins of Hitler in 1944.²⁹ She is critical of the realistic representation of the memoir. As a writer who clearly values "doing good" over "telling a story," she perplexes the reader with her ideas on West's novel. As an activist who has turned to activism due to the mesmerizing aspect of fiction; "the secretary of the invisible," i.e. Elizabeth Costello, is now critical of a novel for being too realistic. According to Thorsten Carstensen, her disillusionment and inconsistency is compatible with the deconstruction of Grand Narratives in the novel. He writes: "While Elizabeth continuously deconstructs her own ideas, the novel displays an analogous lack of coherence and discomfort with universal statements. [...] Acting within different fields of discourse, Elizabeth experiences the loss of an all-embracing, ultimate truth. Forever gone is the unifying metanarrative, which would offer the necessary criteria for judging and (de-) legitimizing individual claims."³⁰ Costello's inconsistencies as a writer and an intellectual challenge the idea of authoritarian text and writer. Finally, her re-union with her son and daughter-in-law Norma ends with an ironic, skeptical and perhaps a rhetorical question raised by her son as they are departing. To highlight his mother's inconsistent and irrational behaviors, John asks: "Do you really believe, Mother, that poetry classes are going to close down the slaughterhouses?"³¹

III. Conclusion

In the novel, Elizabeth Costello devalues writing as a failed attempt for humanitarianism, for bridging the gap between previous writings, for creating a sympathetic imagination between ourselves and other species. Instead, she emphasizes traveling and

28 J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 91-2.

29 Ibid., 88.

30 Thorsten Carstensen, "Shattering the Word-Mirror in Elizabeth Costello: J.M. Coetzee's Deconstructive Experiment," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 42 (2007): 81.

31 J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 103.

“doing good.” However, the novel ends with Elizabeth Chandos’s appeal for writing despite all the limitations: “Yet he writes to you, as I write to you, who are known above all men to select your words and set them in place and build your judgments as a mason builds a wall with bricks. Drowning, we write out of our separate fates. Save us.”³² On the surface level, Elizabeth Costello emphasizes the futility of writing as a form of humanitarian effort and valorizes her travels and lectures as enabling modes of activism. However, deep down, as an inconsistent figure, she refutes what she advocates. By presenting Costello as a controversial figure, Coetzee opens up new venues for fiction to emerge. By challenging the authority of canonical texts with the use of intertextual references and including a writer-protagonist who is not successful in her travels and lectures, Coetzee foregrounds fiction as a means to channel thoughts and to pave the way for a more sustainable form of activism. Moreover, in his use of a metaphor of a travel – a metaphorical and symbolic voyage among texts – Coetzee underscores the travel of stories that foreground writing and literature. All in all, *Elizabeth Costello* emerges as a novel that successfully assembles travel and literature as potential patterns to human rights narratives and their advocacy.

³² Ibid., 230.

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