Hunting Animals in JM Coetzee's *Dusklands* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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J.M. Coetzee's early novels Dusklands *(1974) and* Waiting for the Barbarians *(1980) outline the Western imperialist project to colonise and subjugate 'other' people, animals and the environment. The masculine colonising subject (in Cartesian terms, res inextensa) has separated itself from the world (res extensa) and seeks to conquer and subjugate in order to subsume it.* Dusklands *comprises two narratives: one, that of Jacobus Coetzee who hunts human and nonhuman animals and leaves a destructive trail behind him as he blazes a frontier in 1800s South Africa; and two, Eugene Dawn, an American mythographer, who advocates his 'Vietnam Project' to win the US war in Vietnam in the early 1970s by defoliating the environment and hunting the Vietcong 'like animals'. In* Waiting for the Barbarians, *Colonel Joll deals with the Barbarian 'threat' to his Empire by similarly destroying the environment, hunting barbarians, and torturing women and children. Each character is locked into a Cartesian 'self' consciousness that cannot interact with the 'other' (female, nonhuman animal, 'indigenous') except through violence and destruction. Hunting is a manifestation of this disease and the protagonists make no distinction between human, animal or vegetable in their path of destruction in the name of colonial expansion.*

> *We had a war once against the animals, which we called hunting, though in fact war and hunting are the same thing (Coetzee 2009: 59).*

Dusklands comprises two seemingly unconnected novellas, one the fictional diary of an early South African colonial hunter/explorer (named Coetzee), the other the rant of a mentally disintegrating 'mythographer' in the USA whose job it is to win the psychological war in Vietnam through propaganda.

The first novella, 'The Vietnam Project', presents Eugene Dawn mentally masturbating over photographs he has collected for his 'Vietnam Project' to win the war of hearts and minds of the Vietcong. The first is 'Father makes merry with children', a photo of a US marine copulating with a Vietcong child, and by the way he smiles at the camera, it is clear that he is showing off his 'trophy'; and if this is not enough to repulse the reader, Dawn's feeling of 'delicious shame' surely does: 'if the [photographs] arouse me like this I am a man and these images of phantoms a subject fit for men' (1974: 16). Another image presented is a photo of two US marines posing with their hunting trophies – the severed heads of Vietcong fighters. Again, Dawn's reaction is as repulsive as the image itself: 'a handcart bearing a coffin or even a man-size plastic bag may have its elemental dignity; but can one say the same of a mother with her son's head in a sack, carrying it like a small purchase from the supermarket? I giggle' (1974: 16). Another image is a still from a movie of a series of tiger cages containing the Vietcong prisoners of war, which makes Dawn 'shake with fresh excitement' (1974: 17).

The second part of *Dusklands*, 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee', is even more graphic, an inventory of cruelty, documented (and certainly voiced) in gleeful detail. For example, Jacobus Coetzee describes the punishment meted out for cattle raiding: 'There was no more cause for softness. A bullet is too good for a Bushman. They took one alive once after a herder had been killed and tied him over a fire and roasted him' (1974: 60); so too the apparent common practice of raping San women by colonisers:

> She has seen you kill the men who represent power to her, she has seen them shot down like dogs. You have become Power itself now and she nothing, a rag you wipe yourself on and throw away. She is completely disposable. She is something for nothing, free. She can kick and scream but she knows she is lost … She is the ultimate love you have borne your own desires alienated in a foreign body and pegged out waiting for your pleasure (1974: 61).
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> What is most disturbing is perhaps the detachment with which this violence is described: Someone in the village was screaming loudly enough for the screams, thin, boring, one after another, to reach us across half a mile. I tried to listen to them as one listens to the belling of frogs, as pure pattern;

> but the pattern here was without interest. I wished the screams would go away (1974: 110).

These graphic descriptions of violence are not limited to humans. Jacobus Coetzee, at one juncture of his narrative, dismembers a beetle for no other apparent reason than to watch it suffer: ‘You may pull his legs off one by one and he will not wince. It is only when you pull the head off the body that a tiny insect shudder runs through him' (1974: 96).

Dusklands confirms Elizabeth Costello’s thesis that fronts this paper, namely that ‘war and hunting are the same thing’, that there is no distinction between human and nonhuman when it comes to a colonial exploitation of land, people and animals. Coetzee implies in *Dusklands* that animal rights are contiguous with human rights, not by elevating nonhuman animals to that status of subjects (‘self’), but by reducing the status of enemy combatants and indigenous people to that of ‘wild animals’, ‘beasts’; in short, objects (‘other’): ‘The Bushman’, Jacobus Coetzee philosophises, ‘is a different creature, a wild animal with an animal’s soul … They are like dogs … heartless as baboons they are, and the only way to treat them is like beasts’ (1974: 58).

Treating people like beasts is, in Kantian terms, immoral. By all means treat nonhuman animals as ‘means’, Kant maintains, as long as it does not deaden the compassion you feel for other humans: ‘[As] far as animals are concerned, we have no direct duties. Animals are not self-conscious and are there merely as the means to an end. That end is man’(1963: 240). Coetzee, echoing his character Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals,* would beg to differ:

> What a terrible crime, to treat human beings like cattle (Nazi concentration camps)! If we had only known beforehand! But our cry should more accurately have been: What a terrible crime, to treat human beings like units in an industrial process! And that cry should have had a postscript: What a terrible crime, come to think of it, to treat any living being like a unit in an industrial process! (2007: n.p.)

The images in *Dusklands* evoke disgust because they treat humans as trophies, or spoils of hunting, but by implication, the ‘terrible crime’ is extended to include the treatment of nonhuman animals as trophies and spoils of hunting.

The war against animals and those we consider animals exposes what an early critic of *Dusklands* calls the ‘metaphysics of violence’ (Knox-Shaw 1982: 26). And this ‘psychopathology of Western life’ (Knox-Shaw 1982: 3) is systemically explored using the metaphor of sexual penetration.[1] Hunting in *Dusklands* is a violent sexual act against others; in other words, rape. ‘We brought with us weapons, the gun and its metaphors, the only copulas we knew of between ourselves and our objects’ (1974: 18), Dawn asserts.

The orgy of killing administered by Jacobus Coetzee takes on sexual overtones: the rape of a Griqua child is another example of the Imperial father ‘making merry’ with its children. Jacobus Coetzee’s servant’s death is similarly described in sexual overtones, and the gun becomes orally phallic: ‘I pushed the muzzle against his lips. “Take it”, I said … His lips seeped blood, his jaw relaxed. I pushed the muzzle in till he began to gag … ’ (1974: 111). Dawn’s masturbatory pleasure in the imagery he collects reveals the pornographic nature of these narratives.[2]

Cartesian Dualism

If hunting is the impulse to possess, destroy and display what has been conquered in a way that resembles sexual conquest and rape, it is not union. Both Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee find that the ‘other’ is impenetrable. For Dawn, the image of the Vietcong prisoner in the tiger cage is all surface,’yielding no passage into the interior of this obscure but indubitable man’ (1974: 17). Dawn tries to reach the ‘other’ as a means of re-connecting to himself: ‘In euphoric gestures of liberation I stretch out my right hand. My fingers, expressive, full of meaning ... close on [the prisoner's] shoulders, but close empty… in the empty dreamspace of one’s head ... it is never dawn’[3] (1974: 36). For Jacobus Coetzee too, the other is unreachable, and the world of the Hottentot equally as ‘impenetrable’:

> I am an explorer. My essence is to open what is closed, to bring to light what is dark. If the Hottentots comprise an immense world of delight, it is an impenetrable world, impenetrable to men like me who must either skirt it, which is to evade our mission, or clear it out of the way (1974: 113).[4]

Such impenetrability is explained in reference to the seventeenth-century philosopher Rene Descartes, and the disease that both Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee are infected with is Cartesian Dualism, a severing and isolation of consciousness leading to a hyper self-consciousness that cannot connect to its surroundings: ‘It is the voice of the doubting self', laments Eugene Dawn, ‘the voice of Rene Descartes driving the wedge between the self in the world and the self that contemplates that self’ (1974: 21).

Descartes, in his *Meditationes de prima philosophia, in qua Dei existentia et animæ immortalitas demonstratur* (1641), discovers that by denying everything around him, he can prove his own existence. What he cannot doubt

is his consciousness, what he calls his mind, or self. All else – the body, the material universe – is separate from the subject that contemplates it. Descartes thus divides 'man' into two different entities, mind and body:

> Although I certainly do possess a body with which I am very closely conjoined; nevertheless, because, on the one hand, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in as far as I am only a thinking and unextended thing, and as, on the other hand, I possess a distinct idea of body, in as far as it is only an extended and unthinking thing, it is certain that I (that is, my mind, by which I am what I am) is entirely and truly distinct from my body, and may exist without it (1949: 132).

The Cartesian split between mind and body or self and other is what has traditionally separated humans from nonhumans, how mind has distinguished itself from body, and why consciousness (*res inextensa*) has been viewed as a superior 'substance' to the material world (*res extensa*). The material world becomes an object for scientific investigation, exploitation and domination by the thinking self; 'man' (particularly the masculine subject) becomes the centre of his environment. The effect of this split provides the West with a framework by which to control, manipulate and measure its world, and in particular, its nonhuman environment.

Such an attempt to separate mind from body, to divorce our human 'soul' from its animal nature seems fallacious and futile, yet this has been a central concern of both Western and Eastern cultures for centuries. And Coetzee demonstrates that the Dualist condition is at the centre of imperialism and colonialism. Yet this condition is (no surprises here) an alienating one. The self is master, Coetzee maintains, but he is alone in his consciousness. The world is outside, different, impenetrable, and the mind, locked in itself, needs to, but is unable to, unite with this world in order to become whole. The world outside of the coloniser's consciousness is a heart of darkness – impenetrable, incomprehensible, other.

Pain is Truth

Waiting for the Barbarians is Coetzee's further investigation of colonisation as Cartesian Dualism, hunting as sexual conquest, and alienation of the colonising self. In this follow-up novel, the colonising self crosses the line, and experiences what it is like to be the 'other', the enemy, the nonhuman animal, the body. If *Dusklands* is the experimental laboratory where Coetzee outlines his metaphysics of violence in Cartesian terms, *Waiting for the Barbarians* is the space where he elaborates on his second Cartesian resolve: pain is truth. And this focus on sentience in this novel cuts through the (false) distinction between human and nonhuman: in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the main protagonist discovers that what we have in common (as imperialist, terrorist, animal) is the body. And not an abstract '*res extensa'*, a body separated by consciousness, but a body that is the site of engagement, a body which is the 'self'; and it is this body that we have in common with other animals: 'How do you know when you have the truth?' the Magistrate asks Colonel Joll when the notion of torture is raised. 'Pain is truth,' the torturer tells him, echoing the Cartesian dictum, and 'all else is subject to doubt' (1980: 5). In this ironic reversal of Descartes' privileging of the mind over the body, here it is the body that reveals the truth of our humanity:

> But my torturers were not interested in degrees of pain. They were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well, which very soon forgets them when its head is gripped and a pipe is pushed down its gullet and pints of salt water are poured into it ... They came to my cell to show me the meaning of humanity, and in the space of an hour they showed me a great deal (1980: 115).

Pain is the leveller, the 'truth' that humans are animals, and that human and nonhuman interests operate at this basic level, the right not to suffer as a body.[5] Coetzee has argued elsewhere that the standard of equality is the body, and this dissolves the false distinction of 'self' and 'other', of human versus animal:

> If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not', and the proof that it *is* is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes the counter to the endless trials of doubt … (Jolly 1992: 248).

Our sentience – and our link to the sentience of others – also dissolves the false dichotomy of human and animal, 'for it is the body to which violence is visited upon, the body which we share with other animals' (Coetzee 1999: 74).

Coetzee's early novels have as their main protagonists hunters of animals, and these animals may be human animals: Jacobus Coetzee, for example, advises:

> it is only when you hunt them [Bushmen] as jackals that you can really clear a stretch of country; [T] hey are like dogs, they can run all day without tiring, and when they migrate, they carry nothing with them; heartless as baboons they are, and the only way to treat them is like beasts; the only way of taming a Bushman is to catch him when he is

> young (1974: 62-64).

Similarly, both the protagonist and antagonist of *Waiting for the Barbarians* are hunters of both human and nonhuman animals. It is their common love of hunting that drives the conversation at the first meeting of Colonel Joll and the Magistrate: '[W]e talk about hunting. He tells me about the last great drive he rode in, when thousands of deer, pigs, bears were slain, so many that a mountain of carcasses had to be left to rot' (1980: 2).The outpost which the Magistrate administers is a hunting culture, and this practice is taken for granted. It is at first limited to nonhuman animals and in the following passage, he coolly observes (as coolly, it seems, as Jacobus Coetzee's observation of animal suffering) a returning hunting expedition: 'By mid-morning they are back with huge catches: birds with their necks twisted, slung from poles . . . by their feet, or crammed alive into wooded cages, screaming with outrage' (1980: 62).

Whereas Joll and Jacobus Coetzee are 'true' hunters, the Magistrate begins to doubt his role, and suffers a crisis of conscience and identity. On a hunting trip after he has witnessed Joll's torture methods, he finds he has lost his hunting impulse to shoot, kill, and acquire trophies:

> With the buck before me suspended in immobility, there seems to be time for all things, time even to turn my gaze inward and see what it is that has robbed the hunt of its savour: the sense that this has become no longer a morning's hunting but an occasion on which either the proud ram bleeds to death on the ice or the old hunter misses his aim (1980: 42).

It is a significant turning point, for it is here that the Magistrate turns away from his complicity with Empire and its predatory relationship to the world, and begins to feel empathy towards the hunted 'other'. After Joll leaves, the Magistrate attempts to repair the damage done by the visiting representatives of Empire, primarily by taking a Barbarian 'girl' who has been tortured and left behind, into his quarters to rehabilitate. She is described as an animal: 'People will say I keep two wild animals in my room, a fox and a girl,' he jokes with her (1980: 34), and it is not difficult to draw parallels between the Bushman woman (sic) Jacobus Coetzee keeps 'pegged out' waiting for his pleasure (1974: 61), and this 'girl' (sic) around whom the Magistrate 'prowls' (1980:27).

Similar to the photographs that Eugene Dawn tries to connect with, she is impenetrable. The girl is a symbol he attempts to decipher, and he tries in vain to recapture a vision of her wholeness, before she was tortured, as 'a child … in a universe somewhere far away'. But he cannot recover the ideal image of the 'other', 'strain as [he] will' (1980: 33). In Eugene Dawn's description of the US's attempted penetration of Vietnam, the 'other' withers before the Master figure: 'our nightmare was that since whatever we reached for slipped like smoke through our fingers … whatever we embraced wilted … like everything else they [the Vietnamese] withered before us' (1974: 18). By contrast, it is now the Magistrate, the Imperial figure who 'withers: his hunting impulse to penetrate, possess, destroy has died, and he cannot penetrate her, for in the middle of the act, the erotic impulse, if that is what it has been, withers' (1980: 37).

The Magistrate is a hunter who cannot hunt, a sexual predator who cannot penetrate, a servant of Empire who no longer believes in its thrust beyond the frontier of 'self', or its othering of barbarians and fisher folk and the natural environment:

> With this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry. Is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was? For the first time I feel a dry pity for them: how natural a mistake to believe that you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other (1980: 43).

Severing ties with Empire means that he is treated as 'other' himself, as enemy, as animal, as wild beast, as Barbarian. He is tortured, dressed in women's clothing or left to roam the courtyard naked, and thrown scraps, like an animal. He describes himself as a 'beast' (1980: 125), 'a dog', and he is made to do tricks for the amusement of the soldiers (1980: 116):

> I, the old clown who lost his last vestige of authority the day he spent hanging from a tree in a woman's underclothes shouting for help, the filthy creature who for a week licked his food off the flagstones like a dog . . . I live like a starved beast at the back door, kept alive perhaps only as evidence of the animal that skulks within every barbarian-lover (1980: 136).

He is shown what it is like to be a body, to feel pain, and to understand viscerally what it means to be an animal. If pain is truth, then the Magistrate has become enlightened: 'We are the great miracle of creation!' he says. 'We crush insects beneath our feet, miracles of creation too, beetles, worms, cockroaches, ants, in their various ways' (1980: 107). Any sentient being, in other words, if it is capable of feeling pain, demands our empathy and deserves its dignity.[6]

The Novel as Problem

If Coetzee's novels pose problems and offer solutions [7], and if *Dusklands* sets up the solution to the self-enclosed, isolated consciousness, then it is *Waiting for the Barbarians* which provides a sense of the way out of this philosophical impasse. Coetzee's third novel takes its title from the nineteenth century Greek poet C.P. Cavafy's poem, 'Waiting for the Barbarians' and it is this poem which provides the clue to what may be the 'solution' to male colonial self-consciousness:

> Because it is night and the barbarians have not come
> And some men have arrived from the frontiers
> And they say that barbarians don't exist any longer.
> And what will become of us without barbarians?
> They were a kind of solution (1966: 11-12).

If 'the barbarians are some kind of solution', then Coetzee's narrative project not only explores Cartesian consciousness and the inability of the 'self' to reach the 'other', but ways in which this chasm between human and nonhuman, between 'us and them' can be breached. And if pain is truth, then empathising with another being's suffering is a way to break this impasse; as Josephine Donovan argues, the suffering body is an 'epistemological touchstone' (2004: 3), a point of authenticity that is immune in a sense to scepticism, to doubt. It is not consciousness that is 'real' and all else subject to doubt, but 'the body with its pain [that] becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt. Not grace, then, but at least the body' (Coetzee in Attwell, 1992: 248).

Susan Onega in 'Trauma, Shame and Ethical Responsibility for the Death of the Other' (2011) speaks of the trajectory in Coetzee's novel of taking moral responsibility for 'other people's pain'. But if the very act of narration (interrogation of the truth) is an act of violence against the 'other', then how can healing occur? 'It has not escaped me,' says the Magistrate, 'that an interrogator can wear two masks, speak with two voices, one harsh, one seductive (7) … the distance between myself and her torturers, I realise, is negligible' (27).

Techne

> When the earth conspires incestuously with her sons, should our recourse not be to the goddess of techne who springs from our brains? (Coetzee 1974: 23).

Whereas consciousness in the early hunter-protagonists is seen as '*techne*', a self-to-self relation, cut off from its surroundings of the 'other' and delivers a hunting narrative that destroys, obliterates, silences the other narrative in the hands of Coetzee's later characters (the hunted) becomes an empathetic connection to the other. If the Magistrate is unable to articulate his empathy through his self-enclosed monologue, but can by the power of imagination, through dreams, visualise a 'whole' barbarian 'girl', then Coetzee is suggesting that it is through art and narrative in particular that the issues can be resolved.

'The Lives of Animals' which is not only an argument for empathy, or a narrative articulated in the flawed and weak voice of Elizabeth Costello, but is also an argument for fiction as an alternative discourse to rational logic, a 'solution' to the problem of Cartesian self-enclosed discourse. And it is this narrative that mirrors the author's concern that narrative (fiction) is an effective tool to bridge the Cartesian divide between 'self' and 'other':

> Costello's plea for imaginative intervention is an argument for the effectiveness of fictional discourse to make another kind of critical analysis … Pathos, sympathy and living into the consciousness of Elizabeth Costello enables us to understand her argument more fully, which is to live imaginatively into the lives of other animals. The argument made by Costello and her author then is for a fictional, imaginative approach to the world. How better to argue for the understanding of nonhuman animals' feelings, pain and interests than narrating the intimacy of a few days of a tired old human animal herself? (Williams 2013: 3).

The disgust which the images presented in *Dusklands* of suffering, tortured human and nonhuman animals deliberately arouse in the reader are mirrored in Costello's narrative. She expresses disgust at the hunting impulse which has turned both Jewish people into Nazi lampshades, and cattle into meat for human consumption. Her narrative strategy is to cause revulsion in her audience's attempt to expose the vain attempt to separate 'selves' from 'other' and to see hunting as normal. The initial visceral reaction of disgust the reader feels when reading *Dusklands* at how animals (both human and nonhuman) are hunted demonstrates the effectiveness of narrative itself to elicit sympathy and create empathy. Whereas the two first-person narratives presented in *Dusklands* are the manifestation of a masculine infliction of *techne* (self-conscious monologue), and the first- person narrative in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is the Magistrate's unsuccessful attempt to disentangle himself from his Imperial consciousness, Coetzee's later novels, particularly *Elizabeth Costello and The Lives of Animals*, employ narrative itself as a strategy to extend people's sympathetic imagination into the realities of 'other' animal lives.

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End Notes

1. Eugene Dawn insists on 'the gun as copula', and observes that it is a particularly 'Western' disease ('for penetration you need blue eyes' (1974: 103).
2. Rosemary Jolly's 'The Gun as Copula: Colonization, Rape, and the Question of Pornographic Violence in J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands*' analyses how Coetzee's novel avoids the fantasising activity of pornographically yoking sex and violence which 'seduces both author and reader'.
3. Besides the ironic pun on his name, the 'dream-space' through which Dawn tries to reach the 'other' is elaborated on in J.M. Coetzee's third novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in which the protagonist, the Magistrate, attempts liberation from his divided self in a sequence of dreams.
4. Ironically the 'immense world of delight' referred to here is William Blake's Romantic notion of Nature's inaccessibility to 'Man': 'How do you know but every bird that cuts the airy way, is an immense world of delight, closed by your senses five?' (1984:87) and thus makes the connection of the Hottentot to the animal/other.
5. If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering – in so far as rough comparisons can be made – of any other being (Singer, 1989: 148-162).
6. Hamilton's "The Meaning of Suffering" (2005) analyses the relationship between the body and the 'event' of pain that circulates upon it, that insists on its corporeality.
7. *Disgrace* sets up the 'problem of sex' and characters in the novel attempt to 'solve' this problem. *Disgrace* offers a continuation of this re-education of the colonising subject, of the hunter who becomes the hunted. Like the Magistrate, David Lurie is the hunter/ predator of dark skinned young women. His student Melanie's 'capture'/ rape is described in terms of the hunt: 'As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close in on its neck' (1999: 25). But like the Magistrate, Lurie experiences a quick reversal of fortunes, and becomes the hunted animal himself, the 'other' that does not belong in the modern world: 'they [the press] circle around him like hunters who have cornered a strange beast and do not know how to finish it off' (1999: 55-56). And like the Magistrate too, Lurie learns lessons about what is means to be a dog, to die like a dog, and to watch his daughter attacked like an animal. Once awakened to the reality of suffering bodies, he has an epiphany in which he realises the importance of animal suffering and of human communion with this pain in a community of suffering beings.

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