

“Animal Tracks in the Margin”: Tracing the  
Absent Referent in Marian Engel’s *Bear*  
and J. M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*

Paul Barrett

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**Abstract:** This paper considers Carol Adams’ notion of the absent referent in Marian Engel’s *Bear* and J. M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*. I argue that both texts call for altered notions of reading and criticism that treat animals as presences but also contend with the difficulty of representing animals. Engel and Coetzee use different techniques to point to the impossibility of textual presence, in Adams’ sense, while also stressing the necessity of striving for a form of presence that represents animals beyond the logic of the absent referent.

**Keywords:** Coetzee, Engel, ecocriticism

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In *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990) Carol Adams argues that

animals have become absent referents, whose fate is transmuted into a metaphor for someone else’s existence or fate. Metaphorically, the absent referent can be anything whose original meaning is undercut as it is absorbed into a different hierarchy of meaning; in this case the original meaning of animals’ fates is absorbed into a human-centered hierarchy. . . . The absent referent is both there and not there. (53)

Against this system of representation in which animals function as absent referents she proposes a method of critical reading based on a “vegetarian’s privileging of the literal” (117). In this practice meat loses its fungibility as a signifier and is reconnected to the literal death of ani-

mals. Adams' call to return to the literal meaning of texts and representation is simultaneously compelling and puzzling. What, after all, is the "original meaning" of a subject both within and outside of discourse? How can critics claim to know the literal meaning of a sign? Does this claim to represent literal meaning occur from a place somehow beyond language and discourse? Is Adams guilty of what Michael Riffaterre calls the "referential fallacy" (231), wherein the critic claims to bypass textuality and interpretation and access the extra-discursive object itself? As critics, what hermeneutical approaches might we use that pay heed to Adams' privileging of the literal without abandoning the import of metaphor, metonymy, and the act of critical interpretation altogether?

Adams' theory of the absent referent, and the questions that dog her theory, inform my reading of Marian Engel's *Bear* (1976) and J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* (2001). Both texts are concerned, in their form and content, with representing animals beyond the logic of the absent referent but are also skeptical about any claim to literality. Despite both texts' struggle to represent animals, however, critical readings of the works reveal an unnerving consensus that interprets animals strictly as absent referents. Louis Tremaine, for instance, argues that "Coetzee's personal interest in and respect for the conscious lives of animals are quite genuine, but the insight these passages hold for a reader of Coetzee's novels bears more importantly on *human* experience, on the human condition of 'embodiedness'" (598; emphasis in original). Marjorie Garber suggests that a central question for readers is "[w]hat . . . the emphasis on animals tell us about *people*" (75; emphasis in original). She notes that "we thought John Coetzee was talking about animals. Could it be, however, that all along he was really asking, 'What is the value of literature?'" (84). Tremaine's and Garber's interpretations rely on the logic of the absent referent to argue that animals matter only insofar as they signify for humans. Michael Bell goes even further; he suggests the discussion of animal subjectivity in *The Lives of Animals* is "a Trojan horse designed to deconstruct the nature of conviction in relation to all fundamental life issues" (176). There is a virtual unanimity amongst critics that *The Lives of Animals* is not actually about animals but rather that the text's discussion of animals must be a metaphor for

something else. Laura Wright is perhaps the only critic willing to acknowledge that the text might truly be concerned with animals. She argues that “Coetzee’s text is on the one hand about our treatment of animals, both human and nonhuman, but it is also a rhetorical exercise of the sympathetic imagination and the role that imagining plays in breaking down binary distinctions” (212).

Criticism of *Bear* reflects a similar consensus that disavows the presence of animals. Stacey Alaimo describes *Bear* as a text that disrupts “Enlightenment dualisms that have been complicit in the domination of nature, women and racially marked others” (155), a fine reading of the novel but one which effaces Bear’s presence completely. Patricia Monk’s Jungian reading of *Bear* argues that in her relationship with Bear, the novel’s protagonist, Lou, “encounters a feminine divinity in theriomorphic form—the bear-goddess Artio” (35) and that “Lou’s bear is . . . specifically a mother-image” (37). Elspeth Cameron contends that Lou’s “relationship with the bear is emblematic of her tentative exploration of, gradual immersion in, and full acceptance of the primitive forces in the world and herself” (87). Coral Ann Howells stresses that the narrative is “about the relation between civilization and savage nature” (108) and explicitly marginalizes Bear, insisting that he is “the medium through which she [Lou] has been able to make her psychic journey through the wilderness” (116). Margery Fee’s argument that Lou uses Bear “as the kind of mirror that women have conventionally provided men: a surface onto which to project fantasy” (24) is certainly convincing but again analyzes Bear’s presence only in respect to his meaning for Lou. Whereas other critics see Bear strictly as a symbolic function of Lou’s challenge to patriarchy and assertion of her subjectivity, however, Fee is at least willing to acknowledge the process by which Bear is subsumed within Lou’s metaphorical schema.<sup>1</sup>

I work against this critical legacy and argue instead that both Coetzee and Engel insist that animals signify in ways not always intelligible to humans and thematize the problems of writing and reading animals. Coetzee and Engel represent animals beyond the logic of the absent referent yet they are skeptical about their capacity to represent animals literally. Instead, their texts employ a number of strategies for writing

animals in a manner that is neither humanist nor claims to speak on behalf of animal subjects. Their formal choices address Lawrence Buell's question of whether literary depictions of the environment and nature must necessarily "be taken as responding to nature, or as disguising a human interest. . . . The answer to such questions is always "both" (13). Buell describes this as the "dual accountability hypothesis" (102) wherein narrative offers an "ambidextrous response" (13) that

avoids opposite reductionisms: reductionism at the level of formal representation, such as to compel us to believe either that the text replicates the object-world or that it creates an entirely distinct linguistic world; and reductionism at the ideational level, such as to require us to believe that the environment ought to be considered either the major subject of concern or merely a mystification of some other interest. (13)

Adams' "privileging of the literal" engages in such a reduction and asserts that the "text replicates the object-world" and that its literal meaning can be unearthed by critics. I agree with Serpil Oppermann's position that this "polemic about realist versus textualist views, which only helps generate just another version of duality that the environmental philosophy successfully critiques, can be bypassed. In this respect the representations of nature in literature can neither be wholly dissociated from their referents in nature, nor from their complex conceptualizations in language" (120). In place of this privileging of the literal, which occurs at the expense of representational and critical practices, I argue, with Buell, Oppermann, and John Cooley, for an "ecological conception of textuality" (Cooley 252) that makes animals and the environment matter in representation rather than somehow beyond representation. Such a notion of textuality simultaneously attends to the gesture toward literal representation, the impossibility of that literality, and the structuring of that impossibility within narrative as a representation of the human struggle to understand and relate to animal subjects and the environment. *Bear* and *The Lives of Animals* offer different modes of ecological textuality as they engage Oppermann's question of "how the otherness of nature enters language as a non-speaking subject" (123)

while also writing animals as subjects unto themselves. Coetzee and Engel write animals into their texts in ways that render them present beyond a human structure of meaning while at the same time complicating notions of presence in writing.

In *The Lives of Animals*, Coetzee presents his Tanner Lectures for the University Centre for Human Values at Princeton University in the form of fiction. Rather than deliver a traditional lecture, Coetzee read a fictional narrative about Elizabeth Costello, a novelist who has been invited to lecture at prestigious Appleton College. Instead of speaking on her designated topic, fiction, Costello delivers two lectures, “The Philosophers and the Animals” and “The Poets and the Animals.” The first lecture critiques the function of reason in devaluing animal subjectivity and the second critiques representations of animals in poetry and fiction. Costello’s lecture within the narrative, which is within Coetzee’s own lecture, and their shared reticence in addressing eager academic audiences, tantalizingly suggests that Costello might “stand in” for Coetzee. Yet both the form of the narrative and the content of Costello’s lecture resist the interpretation of Costello as an absent referent for Coetzee. Indeed, from the outset of her lecture Costello is explicitly concerned with language and its capacity to represent others beyond the logic of the absent referent. She begins her talk by referring to a previous lecture on Kafka, “in particular to his story ‘Report to an Academy,’ about an educated ape, Red Peter, who stands before the members of a learned society telling the story of his life. . . . On that occasion I felt a little like Red Peter myself. . . . Today that feeling is even stronger” (Coetzee 18). Costello’s lecture begins in a manner similar to Red Peter’s both in terms of her address to an academic audience and their shared confession of the impossibility of delivering the kind of lecture the audience desires. She insists that “the remark that I feel like Red Peter . . . I did not intend it ironically. It means what it says. I say what I mean” (18). Her invocation of Red Peter’s story returns to the question of the absent referent and Costello denies the “orthodox” (56) interpretation of Red Peter as an absent referent for Kafka’s alienation. The shift from “it” to “I” is one of the text’s earliest moments of narrative ambiguity. It is unclear precisely to whom “it” refers: Red Peter, Kafka, Kafka’s story,

or even Coetzee. Costello's "literal cast of mind" leads her to offer a possible history of Red Peter's capture, transfer to Europe, and gradual humanization, all based on her belief that "[w]hen Kafka writes about an ape, I take him to be talking in the first place about an ape" (32). Furthermore, her identification of Kafka as Red Peter's "amanuensis" (26) suggests that Coetzee may occupy the same position in relation to Costello, thus further disrupting the logic of the absent referent.

Costello's invocation of Red Peter's lecture introduces the main theme of her Appleton College lectures: the impossibility of representing animal expression and subjectivity in literature. Indeed, throughout her first talk, she struggles to communicate what she means when she says "I feel like Red Peter." Thus, when she appeals to her audience, explaining that she "want[s] to find a way of speaking to fellow human beings that will be cool rather than heated, philosophical rather than polemical, that will bring enlightenment rather than seeking to divide us" (22), she bespeaks the struggle for voice that animates her character both within and outside her lecture. Costello's struggle to speak asserts her own presence in the narrative and thematizes the struggle for a language that disrupts the absent referent. The language that she seeks is not a philosophical language that can distinguish "between mortal and immortal souls, or between rights and duties" (22) but rather an imaginative language that can communicate what it means to "feel like Red Peter." Her alternative history of Red Peter does not necessarily insist that Red Peter actually existed as a talking ape but suggests that it is through narrative, story, and the powers of imagination that one can feel what it is like to be another body. She does not posit this history to challenge the historical record but rather to add to the narration of animal life in a manner that renders Red Peter present beyond the logic of the absent referent. It is thus through her interpretation of fiction and poetry that Costello is able to critique Thomas Nagel's argument that a human can never know what it is to feel like a bat. She argues that "[t]o be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being. Bat-being in the first case, human-being in the second, maybe; but those are secondary considerations. To be full of being is to live as a body-soul" (33).

Costello maintains that imagination can represent and understand this “[f]ullness of being” (33) in ways that philosophy and reason cannot. Fullness of being challenges the logic of the absent referent as it suggests a model of subjectivity and representation in which subjects are present in their own right and can never be wholly effaced as part of some other subject’s meaning. Furthermore, Coetzee’s overarching narrative aligns with Costello’s lecture as it challenges dominant forms of reason, expands notions of subjectivity, and practices a model of literary representation in which subjects are made present through an embodied “[f]ullness of being.”

Costello differentiates her conception of fullness of being from reason-based arguments for humanist thought and silencing animal subjects. As part of her critique of Descartes, Kant, Nagel, and others she argues that “reason may not be the being of the universe but on the contrary merely the being of the human brain” (23). She extends her argument by critiquing rationalist truisms that “the being of God is reason. . . . The universe is built upon reason. God is a God of reason . . . man is godlike, animals thinglike” (23). Costello suggests that dominant forms of reasoning are a decidedly human means of understanding the world and are merely the measures by which human subjects situate themselves in a central position in the human narrative of the universe. Her chain of equivalencies mocks the systems of logic and reason that transmute man into God and animal into thing. Costello critiques the “vast tautology” (25) between humanity and rationality: human beings are human because they possess reason and reason is the system of knowing particular to human experience. Her critique is made even more forcefully when she asks, “Might it not be that the phenomenon we are examining here is, rather than the flowering of a faculty that allows access to the secrets of the universe, the specialism of a rather narrow self-regenerating intellectual tradition whose forte is reasoning, in the same way that the forte of chess-players is playing chess”? (25). Foregrounding the implicit naturalism in the language of “flowering,” Costello suggests that humans locate reason “at the center of the universe” not because it *is* the discourse of the universe, or the natural positive quality of a “dominant species,” but because in placing reason as

central to any formation of the subject, humans provide themselves with an exclusive claim to full subjectivity.

Costello's critique of reason echoes the position of a number of eco-feminist philosophers and critics, perhaps most closely that of Val Plumwood in *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (2002). Plumwood argues that "[t]he ecological crisis we face . . . [is] a crisis of the culture of reason or of what the dominant global culture has made of reason" (5). For Plumwood, Josephine Donovan, and others, many notions of animal rights fail to address the tautological relation between reason and the human subject such that animal rights theorists remain mired in an anthropocentric perspective. Donovan critiques the "subject-object mode inherent in the scientific epistemology and the rationalist distancing practiced by the male animal rights theorists" (372). Plumwood offers a more nuanced critique of "[n]eo-Cartesian animal defence theory" and submits that it is merely "an exercise in boundary extension which otherwise retains the basic conceptual framework of Cartesian-rationalist monological relationships in which a rational-conscious mind confronts a mindless and morally meaningless universe" (143). She suggests that reason itself must be recovered from a humanist rationalism that constructs the environment and animals strictly as passive objects. This mode of rationalism "elevates to extreme supremacy a particular narrow form of reason and correspondingly devalues the contrasted and reduced sphere of nature and embodiment" (4). It enables the absent referent by transforming animal subjects into objects that are easily stripped of their own meaning and located within a human-centric structure of meaning. Plumwood thus argues for new models of reasoning that are not anthropocentric but rather treat animals as subjects in their own right. Both Costello and Plumwood insist that "we need to seek out higher order forms of reason that can reflect critically on these failures and develop new forms" (Plumwood 18).

In order to identify the failures of reason to account for all subjects, Costello draws a comparison between the mass slaughter of animals for food and the Holocaust. She argues that "[t]he particular horror of the camps . . . is that the killers refused to think themselves into the place of their victims. . . . In other words, they closed their hearts. The heart is



the seat of a faculty, *sympathy*, that allows us to share at times the being of another. Sympathy has everything to do with the subject and little to do with the object” (34–35; emphasis in original). Sympathy, according to Costello, is a form of knowledge and experience better suited to understanding other subjects than is reason. Not only does Costello’s reference to the Holocaust allude to the monstrous way in which rationality can violently convert subjects into objects, but her comparison of the slaughter of animals to the slaughter of Jews brings the problem of the absent referent to the forefront of her discussion of language, subjectivity, and reason. If one accepts that the Holocaust is that which defies comparison, an event that signifies such massive suffering that it simply cannot be abstracted in metaphor, Costello’s attempt to use it as a metaphorical referent for another subject’s pain inverts the typical arrangement of the absent referent. Garber rightly suggests that Costello’s reference to the Holocaust asks that readers consider “the function of analogy in the posing of some of the most urgent ethical and political questions” (81). In this case the suffering of humans is made absent in order to illustrate the suffering of animals, an inversion that makes explicit the violence enacted by the absent referent.

In the text, Abraham Stern, a poet, protests Costello’s use of the Holocaust as a component of analogy and refuses to attend her second lecture. He explains:

You took over for your own purposes the familiar comparison between the murdered Jews of Europe and slaughtered cattle. The Jews died like cattle, therefore cattle die like Jews, you say. That is a trick with words which I will not accept. You misunderstand the nature of likeness. . . . Man is made in the likeness of God but God does not have the likeness of man. If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. (Coetzee 49–50)

Stern identifies the inherent misrepresentation in Costello’s “trick with words.” Yet perhaps Costello’s point is not to compare the treatment of cattle to the Nazis’ treatment of Jews but rather to highlight the innate misrepresentation in any use of the absent referent. Donna Haraway

makes a similar point to Stern's; she makes the case that Costello, "[a]rmed with a fierce commitment to sovereign reason . . . flinches at none of the discourse's universal claims, and she embraces all its power to name extreme atrocity. She practices the enlightenment method of comparative history in order to fix the awful equality of slaughter. Meat eating is like the Holocaust; meat eating is the Holocaust" (83). Haraway misses Costello's sustained critique of "sovereign reason" and does not consider the possibility that Costello raises this "awful equality" in order to highlight the violence inherent in such comparisons. Specifically, Costello seems especially interested in showing how this "familiar comparison" (a phrase that plays on the shared etymological origins of family and familiar) sustains a hierarchy that privileges humans at the expense of animals.

In place of the rationalism of the absent referent, Costello argues that subjects can "think themselves into the place of" some other subject through the power of the sympathetic imagination (Coetzee 34). She explains that "[t]here are no bounds to the sympathetic 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" (35). According to Costello, humans can enter into animal experience and understand the "fullness of being" of animal subjects through the sympathetic imagination. Thus the narrative attention to "familiar comparison" gives way to an effort to think oneself into the place of an other.

Costello explicates her conception of the sympathetic imagination in her second lecture, "The Poets and the Animals," particularly in her discussion of Rilke's "The Panther" and Ted Hughes' "The Jaguar." She begins with a critique of the "kind of poetry" in which "animals stand in for human qualities: the lion for courage, the owl for wisdom, and so forth" (Coetzee 50) and argues that "in Rilke's poem the panther is there as a stand-in for something else. He dissolves into a dance of energy around a center" (50). In both her discussion of the Holocaust and her reading of Rilke, Costello is concerned with "slaughtered" victims and "dissolve[d]" animals. Death pervades her discussion of the absent referent and she longs to find a method of representation that combats

this erasure. She locates an example of such a method in Hughes and states that he “is writing against Rilke” (50). Specifically, he is “feeling his way toward a different kind of being-in-the-world. . . . [W]e know the jaguar not from the way he seems but from the way he moves. The body is as the body moves. . . . The poems ask us to imagine our way into that way of moving, to inhabit that body. . . . With Hughes it is a matter—I emphasize—not of inhabiting another mind but of inhabiting another body” (51). Hughes describes his encounter with the jaguar as “[b]y the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear” and imagines the jaguar’s “stride is the wildernesses of freedom” (Hughes 12). Hughes’ impression of the jaguar is a mode of “poetry that does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead the record of an engagement with him” (Coetzee 51). His “bodying forth the jaguar” enables the reader to “embody animals—by a process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense. . . . He shows us how to bring the living body into being within ourselves” (53). This is in line with Marc Bekoff’s argument that “deep ethology” requires that one “become coyote . . . become penguin . . . try to step into animals’ sensory and locomotor worlds to discover what it might be like to be a given individual, how they sense their surroundings, and how they behave and move about” (11). Costello suggests that poetry can employ the sympathetic imagination to represent that “primal . . . empathic connection” (Bekoff xxii) and depict embodied subjects in a manner that “mingles breath and sense.”

Coetzee reflects this call in *The Lives of Animals* by interspersing Costello’s lectures with scenes of interpersonal relationships and by representing the body in moments of sympathy and suffering. These interruptions bring Costello’s living body into being within the text while also enabling readers to think their way into her place. It is in this context that the narrative situates Costello’s concern with reason and animal suffering within the turbulent familial relationship between Costello, her son John, and his wife Norma. Framing Costello’s lectures within these interpersonal relationships enables Coetzee to subtly demonstrate the fissures in human-centric rationalism as well as provide a voice that critiques her arguments. Indeed, the tension between the allegedly reasoned

debate of the lecture and the emotional undercurrents of Costello, John, and Norma's relationships demonstrates how reason cannot be separated from emotion and desire. When Costello first enters Norma and John's house, for instance, the narrator describes how "[h]ostilities are renewed almost at once" (Coetzee 16). Norma worries that Costello is trying to "undermine [her] behind [her] back" (68) and suggests that Costello's vegetarianism, arguments against reason, and speaking engagement at the university where John teaches are all "nothing but a power-game" (68). Throughout the lecture Norma signals, via snorts and "a sigh of exasperation" (32), that she finds the topic ridiculous. Norma's presence in the text at once predicts, and perhaps disarms, anticipated criticism of Coetzee's lecture-text. Her insistence that "[t]here is no position outside reason where you can stand and lecture about reason" (48) attempts to critique Costello yet actually confirms her thesis that rationalism is a "vast tautology." Furthermore, Norma's relationships with John and Costello demonstrate that her insistence on strict reason remains embodied and inextricable from emotions. For example, Norma insists to John that Costello's views on "animal consciousness, and ethical relations with animals are jejune and sentimental" (17). In his insightful analysis of this passage, Robert McKay notes that jejune connotes "'without food' and hence 'not intellectually nourishing'" and Norma's use of the word links the discourse of reason with the consumption of subjects (11). The narrative juxtaposes Norma's claim to universal reason and normalcy against Elizabeth's attempts to develop and express a language of sympathy and inter-subjectivity in order to demonstrate "how difficult it can be for morally serious people to sympathize with, or even understand, each other's perspectives" (Gutmann 7).

Norma's criticisms are disarmed by Coetzee's hybrid fictive mode, particularly as the text's intertwining of reasoned debate with emotion and sympathy deconstructs what Lori Gruen identifies as an "unnecessary dichotomy between reason and emotion" (79). Norma refuses to recognize an intellectual position outside of reason and her staunch rationalism supports John's observation that he does not "think she is in a position to sympathize" (Coetzee 68). Cathryn Bailey anticipates Norma's argument and Coetzee's project more generally, arguing that

“[t]o continue to treat emotion and reason as elements that can and should be distinguished in the process of moral philosophy ignores the fact that reason and emotion are intertwined in ways that are not always obvious” (13). Norma and Elizabeth’s relationship demonstrates that reason is always an embodied discourse; it is always a manifestation of an embodied subject at a specific moment within a particular context. In demonstrating the extent to which Norma’s conflict with Elizabeth is founded on emotion and a lack of sympathy but manifests itself in a debate about the merits and limits of reason itself, the narrative demonstrates how reason is always embodied, always contextual, and never wholly isolated from emotion.

The narrative also critiques rationalism and echoes Costello’s call for sympathy between subjects in its attention to her body. The first description of Costello is given from John’s perspective. He notices that “her hair . . . is now entirely white; her shoulders stoop; her flesh has grown flabby” (Coetzee 15) and thinks of her as “this fleshy, white haired lady” (16). This representation of Costello as distinctly embodied—and particularly vulnerable in her embodiment—evokes her argument that against “thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being—not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the sensation – a heavily affective sensation – of being a body with limbs that have extension in space” (33). Representing the embodied subject displaces discourses of subjectivity and reason from the abstract-universal and instead locates them within a particular, lived, embodied experience. Thus, at the end of the narrative, John responds to Elizabeth’s “tearful face” by taking “his mother in his arms. He inhales the smell of cold cream, of old flesh. ‘There, there,’ he whispers in her ear. ‘There, there. It will soon be over’” (69). Costello weeps for the animal suffering that she cannot ignore, the seeming indifference of those around her to the suffering, and the impossibility of any meaningful course of action to prevent it. John’s final words, the final words of the text, are inflected by his awareness of “the smell of cold cream” and “old flesh” to indicate how his comfort is shadowed by his indifference to Costello’s vulnerability and death. There is a trace of hollowness in John’s final words and thus

while he appears to sympathize he also appears to pander to Elizabeth in a manner that suggests his inability to feel himself into Elizabeth's place. John's denial of his own body, his presence as a "dance of energy around a center" (50),<sup>2</sup> limits his capacity to sympathize and understand Costello as an embodied subject. However, Costello's embodied presence within the text invites readers to employ their own imaginations and feel their way into Elizabeth's position in ways that John's hollow words cannot.

In addition to stressing Costello's vulnerability and providing an instance of the sympathetic imagination, the narrative's attention to Costello's embodiedness also questions the extent to which Costello is an absent referent for Coetzee. The overlap between Costello and Coetzee is very difficult to determine as the narrative's multiple layers of focalization and hybrid form (as both lecture and fiction, oral and written) make the spaces between subjects as well as the borders between the inside and outside of the narrative virtually impossible to determine. Perhaps the first level of focalization occurs with Coetzee reading the narrative to his audience during the lecture. Within that narrative is a narrative voice that is distinct from any of the characters. From there the narrative is focalized on John who observes his mother as she lectures.<sup>3</sup> McKay argues that the problem of authorial intent is further problematized not only by the hybrid narrative form, but also because "the author is *physically there*" to deliver the narrative (14; emphasis in original). With Coetzee speaking as an embodied, physical presence, the distinction between him and Costello becomes unclear and the reader or listener is never sure where Costello's and Coetzee's respective lectures intersect. Yet Costello's embodiedness and the sympathy that she evokes cuts through these layers of focalization, rendering her a subject who "mingles breath and sense" and is present in her own right.

Costello's embodiedness within the narrative also demonstrates the manner in which such a presence resists a clear exchange of subjects via the absent referent. Coetzee cannot simply map his own authorial presence onto Costello as her embodied being resists being subsumed into the logic of the absent referent. Instead, her embodied subjectiv-

ity expresses an existence independent of the author despite Coetzee’s physical presence when delivering the lecture. The single passage in which Norma’s body is described occurs in this context: “In a show of affection that must cost her a great deal, Norma holds her arms out wide and says, ‘Elizabeth!’” (Coetzee 15). This sole moment of Norma’s embodiment, in which she holds her arms open to embrace an other, is also an instance of affection “that must cost her a great deal.” In this moment of physical presence Norma moves outside the sphere of reason and enters into a model of embodied, sympathetic intersubjectivity. The language of cost connotes the exchange at the heart of this sympathetic act as well as Norma’s displacement from an economy of cleanly exchangeable signs that comes with her act of physical embrace. That Norma has a PhD in Philosophy of Mind further indicates the price of Norma’s embodiment, particularly as she abandons the self as the privileged, rational subject confronting a mindless world of objects. Indeed, it is in this sense of the cost of the body as it disrupts the economy of signs that the Dean of Appleton College describes vegetarianism as a “very odd transaction” (44).

This economy is critical to the logic of the absent referent. When subjects are imagined strictly as “ghostly reasoning machine[s]” (33) bereft of physicality, they are easily abstracted in order to fit the structure of the absent referent. Plumwood argues that this system of purely symbolic exchange results in “distorted forms of human rationality whose simple, abstract rules of equivalence and replaceability do not fit the real, infinitely complex world of flesh and blood, root and web on which they are so ruthlessly imposed” (14). Bodily presence disrupts a rationalist economy of signs and makes this clean exchange impossible. Cary Wolfe contends that “the full transcendence of the ‘human’ requires the sacrifice of the ‘animal’ and the animalistic, which in turn makes possible a symbolic economy in which we can engage in a ‘non-criminal putting to death’” (39). Wolfe’s argument, while beyond the scope of this essay, suggests that the representation of the body within symbolic systems problematizes the economy of signs and the transcendence of the human subject as the body renders the subject vulnerable, particular, and present and non-equivalent with other subjects. The narrative atten-

tion paid to Costello's body is thus a crucial component of Coetzee's environmental cultural project, particularly as it disrupts the structure of the absent referent, refuses the "sacrificing of the animal," and renders subjects present within the text. In bringing the body into being within his text, Coetzee mixes the physical, emotional, and reasoning components of subjectivity which, in combination with his ambiguous focalization, undermines the economy of signs in which the absent referent functions.

Engel's *Bear* engages in a number of the textual practices that Costello calls for in her lectures and that Coetzee practices throughout *The Lives of Animals*. *Bear* is a less philosophical and experimental novel but it is equally attuned to the challenges of writing animals within narrative and offers different formal methods for attending to both the desire for literal representation and the final impossibility of literality. *Bear* addresses what Barbara Smuts identifies as a "striking gap" in Coetzee's text, namely the "the lack of reference to real-life relations with animals" (108),<sup>4</sup> yet does so in a manner that keeps the difficulty of representing animals in fiction at the forefront of that representation. Smuts agrees with Costello's call for embodied sympathy but "would phrase her point slightly differently, so that it has less to do with the poetic imagination and more to do with real-life encounters with other animals" (120). In *Bear*, Costello's arguments concerning the continuity between reason and emotion, the value of the sympathetic imagination, and the role of the body in disrupting the absent referent are thematized in a relationship between a woman and a bear. The novel begins as Lou, an academic working at an "Historical Institute" (Engel 11), moves to northern Ontario to collect and research the historical papers of the deceased Colonel Cary. Lou begins her project by attempting to assemble Cary's historical details by ordering, filing, and interpreting his papers and notes. Her efforts to render history present eventually give way to her increasing interest in the bear that resides on Cary's estate. Over the course of the summer Lou develops an emotional, spiritual, and sexual relationship with the bear. As the novel proceeds, she is progressively distracted from her textual-historical project and more focused on the bear and his presence in her life.



The structure of the absent referent is present from the very beginning of the text where Lou is described as spending her winters living “like a mole” that “would not be forced to admit it had been intended for an antelope” (11, 12). Animals are present throughout *Bear* and are routinely constructed as absent referents that operate as metaphors for Lou’s experience. “So this was her kingdom,” she thinks when she arrives on the island; “the idea of a bear struck her as joyfully Elizabethan and exotic” (29). She enters “the forest solemnly, as if she were trespassing in a foreign church” (47). The absent referent pervades the first half of the text as Lou ascribes meaning to both the environment and Bear according to what each signifies for her. The absent referent is also present in the text’s continual references to colonial literature; for example, Lou imagines herself as “Cary advancing boldly on the new world, *Arala* under one arm, *Oroonoko* and the handbooks of capability brown under the other” (52). In these passages, and in her confession that “[e]veryone wants to be Robinson Crusoe” (42), Lou affirms that “this was her kingdom” and that the bear and the environment matter only insofar as they fit her schema of representation.

Bear comes to stand in for an alternative to the violence of misogyny and patriarchy that Lou experienced in the city as well as an escape from her personal insecurities and anxieties. She constructs Bear as a mythic, transformative, and magical creature that provides her with a sense of meaning and hope and alleviates her “crises of faith” and uncertainty about “why she did what she did for a living. And who she was” (84). Upon arriving on the island, Lou describes “an odd sense of being reborn” (19), and in one particularly telling passage, after she and Bear have begun their sexual relationship, Lou pleads with him to “take me to the bottom of the ocean with you, bear, swim with me, bear put your arms around me, enclose me, swing, down, down, down with me. Bear make me comfortable in the world at last. Give me your skin. . . . What I want is for you to continue to be something to me. No more. Bear” (112–13). Her stream-of-consciousness appeal signifies the dissolution of her past self, yet Bear remains an object upon which she projects her desires. Lou repeatedly demands that Bear make her “comfortable in the world at last” and that he “continue to be something to” her.

Upon meeting Bear Lou is confronted with the incongruity between her idea of Bear and the actual Bear on the island. The narrator explains that “it had seemed a wonderfully strange idea at first, but it appeared there really was a bear” (31). After her first encounter with Bear, she realizes that “[e]veryone has once in his life to decide whether he is a Platonist or not. . . . I am a woman sitting on a stoop eating. . . . This is a bear. Not a toy bear, not a Pooh bear, not an airlines Koala bear. A real bear” (34). Lou’s shift in perception disrupts the absent referent, as Bear is an embodied subject within the text. Bear’s physical presence at this early stage in the novel unsettles the rationalism that privileges forms and abstractions over embodied, particular subjects. Yet Lou still attempts, throughout the text, to map various meanings and identities onto Bear. She imagines him as “a middle-aged woman” (36), “a lump” (34), and “a cross between a king and a woodchuck” (55). She describes how Bear “stood there staring at [her] like a fur coat” (47) and how he sits “in the water like a large-hipped woman” (69). She watches him sitting in her bedroom, “solid as a sofa, domestic, a rug of a bear” (70). It is in this sense of the multiple personas, images, and likenesses that Lou maps onto Bear that the narrator explains that “she could paint any face on him that she wanted, while his actual range of expression was a mystery” (72). At this stage in the text Bear is always marked by an absence, always described through analogy, simile, and metaphor, and is repeatedly perceived as a quasi-object (Latour). The contradictory quality of being a subject that is at once “a fur coat” but still stares, or of being “strange, fat mesomorphic manikin” (Engel 113) inscribes the unknowable dimension of Bear’s subjectivity within the text. Lou’s approximations and descriptions of Bear as a strange object-subject indicate his enigmatic quality and the failure of Lou’s language to fully account for his animal presence.

Bear’s status as an absent referent in the text changes, however, when Lou attempts to consummate her relationship with him. As she reaches for his penis, on “all fours in front of him, in the animal posture” (131), Bear “reached out with one great paw and ripped the skin on her back” (131). In this moment Bear defies the logic of the absent referent and declares himself a subject within the narrative. This pain-

ful physical contact forces Lou to realize that Bear is not a mythical symbol of her rebirth but a living, physically present bear. She does not attempt to construct a narrative around her wound, but reads it literally as a wound from a bear: “What had passed to her from him she did not know. Certainly it was not the seed of heroes, or magic, or any astounding virtue. But for one strange, sharp moment she could feel in her pores and the taste of her own mouth that she knew what the world was for” (137). Lou abandons the notion that Bear is somehow a conveyer of mystical, primordial knowledge or a mythological figure, yet she still experiences something of a revelation in this moment of sexuality and violence. This is the moment of textual interruption that Adams describes as “the gestalt shift . . . [that] occurs when the movement of the novel is suddenly arrested” (148) and the subject of the absent referent “breaks into the text” (149). Paradoxically, Lou’s use of metaphor and metonymy enables her to first know Bear, yet she supplements this figurative understanding with her newfound awareness of both Bear and herself as embodied presences. In “bodying forth” Bear (Coetzee 53), the narrative disrupts the logic of the absent referent through an “empathic connection” (Bekoff xxii) based on a “poetic invention that mingles breath and sense” (Coetzee 53). This moment of wounding both pronounces Bear as an embodied presence within the text and also invokes Lou’s own sense of her body, awakening her within her own physicality. Lou goes from having “arms [that] were slug-pale and . . . fingerprints grained with old, old ink” (Engel 12) to an embodied capacity to “feel in her pores and the taste of her mouth that she knew what the world was for” (137). The image of her body at the beginning of the text, “as old as the yellowed papers she spent her days unfolding” (19), connects her disembodiment and bodily torpor with textual representations that deny the presence of the body. Lou moves out of this disembodied mode of existence to gain access to a form of knowledge similar to what Costello describes as “the flow of joy that comes from living not *in* or *as* a body but simply from being an embodied being” (Coetzee 34; emphasis in original). Lou’s experience with Bear brings her into a new embodied awareness of being that “mingles breath and sense,” and her embodiedness enables her to rec-

ognize Bear as a subject in his own right rather than an absent referent for her meaning.<sup>5</sup>

Bear's presence, Lou's repeated use of the absent referent throughout the narrative, and the text's explicit references to representations of animals all indicate the novel's central concern with the problem of representing animals in literature. *Bear*, much like *The Lives of Animals*, both critiques the literary methods that render animals as absent referents while employing a form that disrupts the logic of the absent referent. Lou recalls that "[s]he had read many books about animals as a child. Grown up on the merry mewlings of Beatrix Potter. . . . Yet she had no feeling at all that either the writers or the purchasers of these books knew what animals were about" (Engel 60). She also remembers "the animal tracks in the margin" of novels she read as a child and wonders whether "a life that can now be considered an absence" is truly a life (59, 19). She refers to both her own marginalized existence as well as Engel's broader textual project of recovering the "absent life" from the margins of subjectivity and textuality. Specifically, the text raises the question of whether Bear's presence is always marginal, merely a mirror upon which Lou projects her own image, or if Bear is present in a manner that challenges the marginality of animal subjects. Descriptions of Bear alternate between "he" and "it," and Bear is described as both "the bear" and "Bear". In numerous passages the narrative voice is ambiguous; it is unclear whether Lou or the narrator describes Bear. Does the narrative actually represent Bear's feeling or is this Lou's anthropomorphizing? Is it Lou or the narrator who claims "she could paint any face on him that she wanted, while his actual range of expression was a mystery" (72)? Whereas Coetzee uses complicated levels of focalization to throw the subject into question, Engel instead uses a narrative mode in which speaking subjects are ambiguous to the extent that Lou's perspective, the narrator's perspective, and possibly even Bear's perspective can never be wholly isolated.

Like Coetzee's use of focalization, Engel's deployment of ambiguous perspective is a narrative technique for inscribing animals into narrative without claiming to speak for them or represent them literally. This method evokes Costello's statement that she has "a literal cast of mind"

that paradoxically employs the figurative trope of the cast to make her claim about literality. Literality is, therefore, always evasive: simultaneously desirable and impossible. In place of literality, Coetzee and Engel render subjects present in narrative through the faculties of sympathy and the representation of the body, but that presence is always shadowed by its own impossibility. Wright argues that Coetzee’s narrative form suggests an alternative to the strict logic of reason and that the ambiguity of speaking subjects “establishes a third and perhaps more sentimental place from which to write against the primary binary opposition of the animal/human” (197). She writes:

[T]he performative voice that Coetzee inhabits when he speaks Elizabeth Costello, . . . is neither Coetzee’s nor Costello’s, neither male nor female, neither fully rational nor emotional. This is the voice that not only problematizes the dichotomous logic responsible for the binary oppositions of colonial and patriarchal thought, including the animal / human dualism, but that also disrupts the privileging of the rational over the emotional by calling into question assumptions about author, narrator, protagonist, text, and audience. (200)

Both Coetzee and Engel develop an ambiguous narrative voice that undermines categories of author, narrator, protagonist, and text as well as the relationship between subjects more generally. Engel’s textual mode enables her to inscribe Bear as an unknowable presence within the novel: he is present but the extent to which the reader is able to access “Bear” independent of Lou or the narrator’s construction of him is unclear. This uncertainty about Bear’s presence transforms the impossibility of a full representation of animals within narrative into a principle of narrative structure.

These narrative forms contribute to what Plumwood identifies as the “kinds of imaginative literature which write nature as agent, re-subjectivising and re-intentionalising the non-human as an ethical and intentional subject of narrative” (54). In their attention to notions of sympathy, critique of dominant forms of reason, insistence on writing the body, and ambiguous narrative voice and focalization, both Engel

and Coetzee call on readers to rethink the relationship between human, animal, and environment as one between subjects. Yet they also insist on the impossibility of Adams' "privileging of the literal" (117) and instead transform the impossibility of literality and the continuing interplay between presence and absence into a formal element of their "ecological conception of textuality." Their formal choices are akin to Margot Norris' conception of biocentric textuality, which she describes as "[t]he task of finding a language and voice for that animal and its interior life" (224), which typically employs "the Derridean antimetaphysical concepts of the trace" (21).<sup>6</sup> In the texts that Norris examines, however, the effort to find a voice for the animal is always subservient to "the biocentric agenda of reappropriating the animal in the human" (225). Coetzee's and Engel's environmental cultural texts are instead concerned not with appropriating the animal in the human but with establishing Wright's "third place" from which they represent the animal in narrative while simultaneously transforming the impossibility of writing animals into a principle of narrative form.

Coetzee's and Engel's ambiguous narrative voices, complex focalization, and attention to the body and the sympathetic imagination work against "reductionism at the level of formal representation" as well as "at the ideational level" (Buell 13). Both authors call on readers to offer an "ambidextrous response" (Buell 13) that is attuned to the impossibility of speaking for animals but recognizes that impossibility as a necessary condition of trying to read and know animals in literature. It is in this sense that they differentiate themselves from Adams' general distrust of metaphor, particularly when she asks, "Could metaphor itself be the undergarment to the garb of oppression?" (46). Coetzee and Engel do not deny the efficacy and power of metaphor; nor do they join Adams in her "vegetarian privileging of the literal." Instead they employ metaphors (as in Costello's "literal cast of mind") in which the relationship between tenor and vehicle is in constant flux. Lou's use of tropes enables her to know Bear in her own human-centric schema of understanding. However, it is only when she recognizes that "[w]hat had passed to her from him she did not know" (Engel 137) that she complicates the tropes and learns to view the unknowable aspects of Bear's presence as part of

her understanding of him. Coetzee’s complicated layers of focalization and Engel’s ambiguous perspectives undo the logic of the absent referent without abandoning figurative and imaginative writing altogether. Instead, readers must engage in an “ambidextrous response” that retains both the literal and figurative meanings of metaphor simultaneously in view and under erasure. As Bekoff notes, “[b]y engaging in anthropomorphism we make other animals’ worlds accessible to ourselves and to other human beings. By being anthropomorphic we can more readily understand and explain the emotions or feelings of other animals” (48). Bekoff, Coetzee, and Engel agree that some degree of anthropomorphism is unavoidable if one is to depict animals in imaginative writing. Therefore, Coetzee and Engel strive to keep their own anthropomorphic gestures in view in order to neither reduce the animal to an absent referent nor surrender the animal to absolute unknowable otherness.

Coetzee’s and Engel’s attention to acts of reading and literary interpretation also call on critics to develop new methods of interpreting animals in narrative that neither strive for literality nor reduce animals to absent referents. Both Costello’s position as a novelist speaking at a university and Lou’s academic profession indicate that the authors’ critiques are partially directed at scholars. Graham Huggan affirms that “[t]he simulated form of the lectures allows Coetzee to reflect ironically on the gap between ivory-tower academicism and real-world social practice” (710). Engel engages a similar critique in her narrative’s parody of the “whirl of scholars [that] whizzed from fact to fact, all of them weeding and verifying” (56). Weeding suggests the manner in which scholarship marginalizes elements of narrative, pruning and removing the seemingly unimportant or problematic aspects.<sup>7</sup> Literary criticism which does not engage environmental cultural texts with a “fullness of being” or that does not allow space for literality works against the logic of such texts and reifies categories of reason and subjectivity.

A criticism that embraces Plumwood’s call for environmental culture would read these narratives against the logic of the absent referent, where subjects do not necessarily stand in as signifying objects for some broader textual meaning but are instead present in and of themselves. This would be a critical language that engages texts in a way that “min-

gles breath and sense” and “bring[s] the living body to being within ourselves” (Coetzee 53). This mode of criticism would give due attention to the literal meaning of narrative in addition to possible figurative or implied meanings. Animals are not a periphery component of these texts but are every bit as central to the narrative as any question of form, subjectivity, reason, or affective knowledge. *Bear* is not just a text about expanding concepts of knowing or finding an alternative to abstract reason in embodied being; it is also a text about a bear. Similarly, Coetzee’s text and Costello’s lecture are both about animals. A mode of analysis that embraces embodied, sympathetic subjectivity must recognize the potential for misrepresentation and violence inherent in metaphor and critical methods must be developed which question the logic of the absent referent in both texts and criticism. At the very least some scholarly attention must be paid to the literal meaning of these texts, particularly as the impossibility of literality produces a unique form of presence unto itself. Furthermore, this ecocritical practice must also indicate the unique capacities of fiction and poetry to enliven the “sympathetic imagination” and offer forms of critical anthropomorphism that represent animal subjects in ways that plain prose and scientific accounts cannot. Yet *Bear* and *The Lives of Animals* do not only gesture toward a new mode of critical analysis just as they do not merely argue for expanded modes of subjectivity and reason. These texts are about animals and animals must be located at the centre of the narratives in any ecocritical analysis. Coetzee and Engel discuss the problem of describing animals, but they also discuss animals themselves, and this final point is key to any critical response that takes seriously the challenge of developing environmental culture.

## Notes

- 1 For additional criticism on these works, see McKay and Turcotte (1995).
- 2 Costello uses this phrase to describe Rilke’s Panther and points out that it is “an image that comes from physics” (50). John’s career as a physics professor and his position as the central focalizing point in the narrative who is simultaneously present while also absent as a subject unto himself make this a fitting description of John’s place in the narrative.



- 3 While the similarities between Coetzee and Costello are clear, the given name shared by Coetzee and John Bernard also implies an affiliation between Coetzee and Elizabeth's son.
- 4 It is not, strictly speaking, accurate to claim that *The Lives of Animals* contains no “reference to real-life relations with animals.” Costello's multiple references to animals are, however, always interpreted through the framework of narrative rather than immediate experience. This at once circumvents the difficulty of writing animals directly into the narrative while also echoing Costello's point that it is through narrative, poetry, and the sympathetic imagination that one can come to know and understand animal beings.
- 5 The wound that Bear leaves on Lou's back can be read as a metonymic marking of his movement into embodied subjectivity. The wound is a bodily sign of the vulnerability of the subject that calls on an other to sympathize. The wound is also, however, a sign of the very limits of signification, a failed signifier of the expression of pain and subjectivity that exist beyond symbolization. It is in this context that Costello, during her lecture, describes herself as “not a philosopher of mind but an animal exhibiting yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word I speak” (Coetzee 26). The image of this wound that she touches “on in every word [she] speak[s]” recalls her “literal cast of mind” and connects her embodied subjectivity with the pain and vulnerability that emerge from her language of sympathy.
- 6 Norris' conception of biocentric textuality treats representations of animals and animality as “the masks of the human animals who create them” and focuses on the “human being as a cultural creature, as implicated in the Symbolic Order” (3). Her interpretation of Kafka, Lawrence, and others is concerned with identifying the manner in which these authors appropriate the animal as metaphor for the biocentric subject and as a rebuke of mimesis and idealism. Biocentric textuality is distinct from an ecological textuality as these texts are marked by “the invention of artistic and philosophical strategies that would allow the animal, the unconscious, the instincts, the body, to speak again in their work” (5). Yet in her reading, “the animal” is contiguous with “the unconscious, the instincts, [and] the body” such that animals remain strictly located within a human-centric structure of meaning. In her study animals are present solely as a gesture to the repressed, external, inarticulate functions of language and subjectivity and never as presences in and of themselves.
- 7 This image of weeding arises later in the text when, having had a sexual encounter with Bear, Lou, “for her sins, went to the garden and worked for an hour, painfully weeding” (94). Weeding implies a reordering of parts and an attempt to marginalize problematic components of a narrative in order to reconstruct a fragmented whole. Philips ironically transforms this metaphor, arguing that ecocritics “treat literary theory as if it were a noxious weed” (589).

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