

Publications of Coetzee's 'The Humanities in Africa'

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J. M. Coetzee's story, titled 'The Humanities in Africa,' was published in four textually distinct forms between 2001 and 2003. The earliest version, consisting of eight parts, was published as a pamphlet for distribution in Munich to the German audience to which Coetzee first presented it publicly as a lecture.¹ Coetzee subsequently revised the story on every page, adding a ten-page ninth part. In 2003, he allowed this revision to be published in Australia in two editorially shortened versions; the first consisted of a truncated part 1, parts 5–8, and the newly written part 9;² the second consisted of the first three numbered parts only.³ Finally, it appeared in full as part of the book, *Elizabeth Costello*, complete in nine parts also in 2003.⁴ The important things to note are: that the first publication in eight parts represents the whole story as it stood in 2001 (i.e., the eight-part version is not a truncation but an early version); that the 2003 republication in book form in nine parts is a thoroughly revised and extended version; and that the two versions shortened by editors, though published before the book form, derive from that revised version.⁵

There are two stories to tell about the publication of this work. The main story is about the effect wrought by the revisions: that is, by the difference between the eight-part (2001) and the nine-part (2003) versions. My experience of reading these versions suggests that they have radically different effects. The other story, a side-show, was created by the two editorially truncated versions published in Australia. It is important to note that Coetzee may himself have been responsible for submitting the essay story to the editors. He may even have in some way approved of the forms in which the editors chose to represent the work. About them one is compelled, nevertheless, to ask what effects could/did the cut forms achieve and how do those effects compare with the effects of the two full versions. Again my experience of reading them suggests that the effects are radically different from those made possible by either of the full versions.

The existence of two authorial versions and two additional editorially truncated versions offers us an unusual opportunity to follow Coetzee's thinking on the subject of the humanities, not just in Africa, but in general. I will start with the texts and their differences before tackling the larger question of the role or nature of humanities studies, because the differences in the texts form the foundation of that discussion.

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'The Humanities in Africa' is a story of two aging Australian sisters, Bridget Costello, a Catholic Nun doing missionary work amongst the poor in Africa, especially among those suffering from AIDS; and Elizabeth Costello, a world acclaimed author of "*The House on Eccles Street* (1969), whose main character is Marion Bloom, wife of Leopold Bloom, principal character of another novel, *Ulysses* (1922), by James Joyce" (EC 1). Elizabeth's travels to participate in conferences make up the 'lessons' or chapters of the book titled *Elizabeth Costello*. The opening scene of 'The Humanities in Africa' is in South Africa where a university has invited the nun, Sister Bridget, to deliver the graduation address and receive an honorary degree to celebrate her unexpectedly successful book about her missionary and medical work in Africa. Bridget has invited her sister Elizabeth from Australia to be on hand for the occasion. A brief charting of what goes on in each of the nine parts will make it easier to refer to each part in the account of its various publication forms.

Section 1 brings the sisters together after years of separation both in distance and in ideologies. They meet briefly in the hotel before being swept up in the events that have brought them together.

In section 2, Bridget gives her commencement address in which she distinguishes between *studia divinitatis* and *studia humanitatis*, claiming that divinity study was prior in every sense to humanities studies, that the purpose of humanities study had originally been to show the depths of human depravity in order to demonstrate how great a salvation existed in divinity, and that humanities study, she was sorry to have to say in the very bastion of humanities study, the university, had gone seriously wrong when it departed from its secondary position, designed to support *studia divinitatis*, and began considering itself as a secular alternative to salvation.

In section 3, university officials, ever polite and urbane even though feeling that they had been publicly attacked by their own invited guest, take the sisters to a ceremonial dinner where Sister Bridget's particularly Roman Catholic slant on humanities studies is discussed further. Various professors have a rather weak go at raising objections to the nun's points, but then someone identified only as "the young man sitting next to Mrs. Godwin" makes a longer defence of the humanities, focusing particularly on textual scholarship and its basis in investigation, verification, and accuracy — as opposed to acceptance based on authority. Someone then asks Elizabeth to give her opinion as Bridget's sister but more pointedly as a major author in her own right. Elizabeth, too, offers a counter argument, focusing on student uses of literature as a spur to questioning orthodoxies and as guides to richer lives. But it is a weak presentation, which Bridget successfully belittles as vague, contradictory, ineffective and misleading.

In section 4, the two sisters meet again at the hotel and carry forward the dinner discussion, arguing about the merits of Hellenism as an alternative to Christianity, with Bridget again dominating by the force of her personality.

In section 5, Elizabeth visits Bridget's hospital and mission compound where she meets an aging native sculptor of crucifixes and discusses with him his ideas about art. His art had consisted entirely of carving crucifixes in various sizes. He is uninterested in 'art' or representations of any other sort.

In section 6, Elizabeth carries on the discussion with Bridget, arguing the relative merits and iconographic significance of the difference between crucifixes and Greek sculpture. Elizabeth floats the idea that Africans, particularly Zulus, might find a more kindred spirit in Greek ideals of beauty than in Christian ideas of agony.

In section 7, Elizabeth attends an African Sunday service that is being filmed for TV. The heat, the noise, the smells, and perhaps the contradiction between the image of a suffering Christ and the inexplicable shouts of joy from the congregation cause Elizabeth to faint.

The brief section 8 offers a final exchange between the sisters, with Bridget getting the last word in as Elizabeth departs for home.

Section 9, not present in the first version, consists of ten pages, mostly taken up by Elizabeth's response to Bridget in the form of a letter she never sends. Elizabeth tells the story of her own encounter with another artist, an aging man who used to keep company with her mother. For this old artist she poses semi-nude and, when he is dying in the hospital, she again disrobes for him and fondles and mumbles his privates as an act, she argues, of *caritas* rather than of Eros or mere charity, giving comfort and joy of a human sort as a counter to the vision of shared agony Sister Bridget espoused. This gives Elizabeth's view a strong, final position against Bridget's strong original position. In this version Elizabeth gets the last word.

One might ask the question, how much Coetzee is enough? Clearly the editors of the two Australian venues under discussion thought the excerpted versions would fulfil some purpose, but neither editor suggests in the notes or introductions to the piece what that purpose might be. One imagines that they thought the excerpt was fully representative or that it would whet the appetite for the full text in some other publication. But the situation also raises the old question of whether a literary text should be read as a representation of what the author wished to say or what the author wished the text to be or to do. Obviously, readers familiar with literary theory debates from the 1960s onward might argue that it does not matter. But that does not set the matter at rest. Readers have always also been interested in reaching across the communicative gap that dogs all written

work, including the present one. If one asks, at what point do we have enough of the story in order to have an "authoritative effect," one is asking if the truncated versions achieve the effects the author intended when writing the piece. The fact that we cannot know what the author intended does not in itself render pointless all attempts to answer that question. Each published version is a different length and includes and excludes different parts. My aim is to show that each version has a startlingly different effect; so that it is legitimate to wonder if the shorter versions are incomplete and misleading, or if Coetzee or his editors and publishers are teasing us, or if perhaps they just don't care what readers think.

Of the shortest version (*Resistance and Reconciliation*), one begins with the question, what could the editors have been thinking would be accomplished by stopping after only three parts of a nine-part story? Did it not matter that, by this early point in the story, the issues will have been raised but the discussion and conclusion would all remain hidden? And, did it not matter that the impression given by this excerpt — focusing almost entirely on Bridget's anti-humanist views — would, for readers of the longer version, be completely erased and replaced? By the end of this excerpt basic questions about humanistic study have suffered a beating at the hands of a committed authoritarian spokesman for *studia divinitatis*. The best defenders of the humanities have had a brief go at objecting, but it is clear that the nun has had her day, though she has not satisfied many in her audience. Clearly, too, their dissatisfaction arises in part from their failure to mount significant counter arguments. There is no reason why the story could not have ended there, leaving readers with a similar sense of dissatisfaction which might be enough to counter Bridget's views, but in fact the story did not end there. For readers of this truncated version there is the editor's statement that this is just an extract, but I think it is fair to say that any reader who fails to find and read a longer version will have a very distorted and incomplete notion of what Elizabeth Costello or J M Coetzee actually think of the role of the Humanities in Africa or anywhere else.

The other truncated version, also appeared in Australia, in *The Best Australian Stories 2002*. The editor of this collection, Peter Craven, stated that this was the first published appearance of the work, apparently not knowing about the earlier Munich publication. This version, too, derives from the revised version in which Coetzee had added the ninth section. However, without mentioning the fact, Peter Craven edited the work by cutting the end of section 1 and removing entirely sections 2 through 4, writing a brief bridge passage into section 5. By omitting sections 2-4 he eliminates the whole of Sister Bridget's encounter with academe, her graduation address and the discussions with members of the university at the graduation dinner, and a brief discussion of the dinner between the two

sisters in section 4. What is left standing, so to speak, is the fact that there was a graduation ceremony but no speech and no discussion of it. In addition, Craven cut text amounting to 120 lines here and there, eliminating references to the earlier academic scenes as well as other passages he must have considered irrelevant to his own view of the story. The result is that, in Craven's version, there is really no discussion at all of the Humanities in Africa. Instead, we move directly from section 1 into the account of Elizabeth's visit to Marianhill hospital, from section 5, where she encounters an old carver of crucifixes, a primitive artist, and the sisters have a mildly heated discussion in which Elizabeth says the crucifixions are mean, ugly, deformed, and squalid objects of worship. Bridget's defense is that the suffering Jesus is an object of empathy for the suffering Africans, who find comfort and joy in one who suffers like them and for them. Before she leaves Africa, Elizabeth accompanies Sister Bridget to an African Sunday service in which she faints and the sisters have one more discussion. Finally, Craven retains the ninth part in which Elizabeth's allegorical defense of beauty and *caritas* gets its full airing, though it is never submitted to Bridget's narrow gaze. In this version the two sisters seem to battle it out alone, each using an aging artist as a supporting example of human needs and fulfilment.

I pause here to suggest that a first answer to the question, how much Coetzee is enough Coetzee? is that editors extracting bits from the full version of "The Humanities in Africa" have succeeded only in misrepresenting the story's basic themes and arguments and confusing readers.

Editors are not to blame for another short version, appearing in Munich, Germany, in 2001. In this first-published form the story had only eight parts.⁶ I do not know for sure if, in manuscript, Coetzee's story at that time had only eight parts or if all nine parts already existed. I suspect that it did not have the ninth part at that time because the versions that do have the ninth part are also heavily revised throughout. A witness at the Munich conference where Coetzee delivered the story as a lecture told me that it appeared that Coetzee had just finished the piece before arriving.⁷ Nevertheless, it is definitely a fact that no reader of the story as published in Munich could know that there was a final 'missing' part. It was not until two years later, with the publication of the book titled *Elizabeth Costello*, that it was possible to see that each of the previous versions was incomplete, and in the case of this first published version in Germany, that it was also unrevised. Though it was probably 'complete at the time,' one can still ask the question, is this early version enough, authorial though it was, to produce an authoritative effect? Did this version fulfil Coetzee's purposes in writing the story? Perhaps a more legitimate way to ask this is, what effect does this version have on readers that is different from the effect created by reading the revision?

This early eight-part version contains three distinct arguments about the role of the humanities in Africa. The first of these arguments is Sister Bridget's authoritarian representation of the primacy of the Church and the secondary supporting role of humanities studies, which she claims has been subverted and derailed in academic studies. Its strongest statements are made in parts 1-2, set at the university, and 5-8, set at Marianhill hospital. It is a position that many university members are likely to oppose. Indeed, in section 3, at the official dinner following the graduation address, various academics mount the story's second argument, one that favours academic humanities study as a secular pursuit. The result is, for the most part, weak or ambiguous, perhaps because the proponents were trying to be polite to Sister Bridget as the guest of honour. The third argument about the humanities is served up bit by bit by Elizabeth, beginning in the hotel in section 4, where the sisters briefly discuss the speech and dinner, and is continued during the visit to Marianhill hospital, with the discussion of the aged sculptor of crucifixes. Elizabeth suggests that a focus on the potential for human achievement, beauty, and joy would bring more comfort and purpose and satisfaction to Africans. She sees in the physical beauty and pride of the Zulu nation a parallel to the beauty and grandeur of Greece. But, as she leaves to return to Australia, Elizabeth and the reader both sense that Bridget gets the last word, reinforcing her righteous, authoritarian insistence on the efficacy of her harsh religious views. The story in this version ends here.

Because Elizabeth is the centre of consciousness in this story and yet loses the argument, and because Sister Bridget is so unsympathetic, though she 'wins,' readers of this version might look to academe — the second argument — for a better view of the humanities in Africa. I know I did, and found it in a defence of textual criticism mounted briefly by an unnamed academic. It was only when I read the full version that I decided I had completely missed what I now think of as Coetzee's point — though, of course, it is Elizabeth's. It appears to me that Coetzee himself must have decided that this first version of the story was not enough, and that adding the ninth part, giving full reign to Elizabeth's views, was needed.

So, it is not until the publication of *Elizabeth Costello* that "The Humanities in Africa" is published for the first time in full and where it is no longer an isolated story but one of the eight lessons that make up the book — a new completion in a new context. For the first time, all three arguments are given full play, and the triumph of Elizabeth is seen in relation to both authoritarian Catholicism and effete academic humanism. The significance of the revised version rests also on the revision of every page in the first eight sections. The most significant of the changes for me were the ones relating to the discussions at dinner by various academics. In the first version, the strongest statement of the academic position is

made by someone identified only as "a man who has not spoken before." He says:

If the Church had accepted the principle that Jerome's Vulgate was a human production, and therefore capable of being improved, rather than being the word of God itself, perhaps the whole history of the West would have been different . . . If the Church as a whole had been able to acknowledge that its teachings, and its whole system of beliefs, were based on texts, and that those texts were capable on the one hand of scribal corruption and so forth, on the other of flaws of translation, because translation is always an imperfect business, and if the Church had also been able to concede that the interpretation of texts is a complex business, vastly complex, instead of claiming for itself a monopoly of interpretation, then we wouldn't be having this argument today. [49]⁸

Textual critics working with corrupted or at least flawed texts know that corrections to texts cannot be made with certainty or without dispute, and so textual critics at least, among academic humanists, are likely to find this man's view of things to be quite reasonable. But in the revision Coetzee changes his original designation of the speaker from "a man who has not spoken before" to "a young man seated next to Mrs. Godwin," and five times he added the word "young" to references to him. In the final and most telling reference to this now young man, Elizabeth practically sneers: "So young, she thinks, and so sure of himself. He will remain with *studia*" (51/130). This denigration of the only reasonable argument for academic humanities in the story clearly shows that Elizabeth is not impressed. Combine that with the ten-page addition which details Elizabeth's counter arguments and one can hardly escape the notion that Coetzee's own views correspond fundamentally with Elizabeth's — against both Sister Bridget's harsh sectarian authoritarianism and against the university's effete, dry, and ineffective dithering.⁹

The answer to the question how much Coetzee is enough? is that only the full version as published in *Elizabeth Costello* gives the "authoritative" effect. But it may be more important, first, to note that one can go astray easily if one does not know that there is more than one version, and, second, that knowledge of different versions often helps us to see more clearly each of the versions that exist.

Endnotes

¹ John M. Coetzee's *The Humanities in Africa/Die Geisteswissenschaften in Afrika* Munchen: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, 2001. A German translation is printed on the left-hand pages.

² *The Best Australian Stories 2002*, Peter Craven, ed. (Sydney, 2003), 101-119.

³ *Resistance and Reconciliation: Writing in the Commonwealth*, Bruce Bennett, Susan Cowan, Jacqueline Lo, Satendra Nandan, and Jennifer Webb, eds. (Canberra: ACLALS, 2003), 16-28.

⁴ J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2003); (New York: Viking, 2003); and (London: Vintage, 2004). These three editions are listed together because their texts are photographically identical with not one change, not even a missing comma or dot off of an i — at least in the copies I examined. (Comparison was done on a Lindstrand Comparator.) References to this version are indicated by EC in the text.

⁵ Margaret Lenta, in "Coetzee and Costello: Two Artists Abroad" *English in Africa* 31, 1 (May 2004), mistakenly states that "'The Humanities in Africa' . . . is a combination of two pieces which have already been published separately but under the same title. The one appeared in a German publication in 2001 and the other in an Australian collection in a different version in 2002" (114). Later Lenta remarks about the omissions from the Australian version that "[i]t is impossible to know whether the omission was occasioned by the constraints of space in the anthology in which it appeared or whether Coetzee changed his mind twice, producing the three different versions" (116). Wrong on three counts: the final version is not a conflation of the two items indicated (rather, the book is a revision from which the Australian version — Craven's in note 2, above — is an extract); the Australian version, though bearing the date 2002 in the title, did not appear until 2003; and it is not impossible to know.

⁶ John M. Coetzee's *The Humanities in Africa/Die Geisteswissenschaften in Afrika* Munchen: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, 2001

⁷ Email from Hans Walter Gabler.

⁸ The early version says "capable ... of scribal corruption" and the revision says "susceptible ... to corruption" which makes more sense; texts are capable of nothing, being passive bits of paper and ink, but they are vulnerable to accidents and predations by active agents (129 in EC). Likewise, the changes from "business" first to "process" and in the next instance to "matter" remove the implication that translation and interpretation are commercial or interested undertakings. They probably are commercial and certainly are interested ones, but the revisions in fact give the man's articulation of the position a more neutral, less pejorative, tone.

⁹ One reviewer of *Elizabeth Costello* characterized Elizabeth's arguments as the humanities "represented by the Greeks, Apollo, the forms of beauty and reason" (Richard Newman, *Detroit Post Dispatch* 10/19/2003). Another reviewer, Andrew Marr, seems closer to the mark, saying "The evil that Costello identifies is based on the triumph of reason and the downgrading of imagination" (arts. telegraph.co.uk viewed 08/06/2004).