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Bodily Uniqueness and Symbolization

A wounded animal

In *The Lives of Animals* Coetzee (2004: 59–115) tells the story of a fictional Australian novelist, Elizabeth Costello, who is invited to give a lecture at Appleton College, an imaginary American university. Costello is haunted by the pervasive indifference to the terrible way in which humans treat animals in practices such as factory farming, a violence that she compares to the horror of the death camps during the Shoah (Coetzee, 2004: 62–6). Coetzee’s story has generally been understood as a way of confronting (within a fictional frame) the ethical issue of how we should treat animals. Peter Singer, for instance, takes Coetzee’s story to be a way of presenting arguments for a kind of radical egalitarianism between human and non-human animals (Singer, 1999: 85–92). Cora Diamond has criticized Singer’s position by asserting that the rights discourse somehow distorts and trivializes Elizabeth’s experience of bodily exposure by converting it into a philosophical problem about the moral status of animals (Diamond, 2008: 48). For her, Costello is not just a device to put forward ideas about animal rights; rather she has a significance of her own: the wounded animal at the centre of the story is Elizabeth Costello herself: ‘if we see in the lectures a wounded woman, one thing that wounds her is precisely the common and taken-for-granted mode of thought that how we should treat animals is an ethical issue, and the knowledge that she will be taken to be contributing, or intending to contribute, to discussion of it. But what kind of beings are we for whom this is an issue?’ (Diamond, 2008: 51). We are beings that are physically exposed to vulnerability and mortality, but that rely on argumentation to deflect the difficulty of what it is to be a living, that is, an embodied animal. Humans are beings that are inclined to mistake
the difficulty of philosophy (something which is difficult to substantiate) for the difficulty of reality (something which is resistant to our thinking it) (Diamond, 2008: 57–8). Elizabeth Costello is someone who refuses to speak within the tradition of philosophical argumentation. This is why she does not offer an argument in defence of her vegetarianism, and this is also why she is quick to point to the inconsistency of the fact that she wears leather shoes and carries a leather purse (Wolfe, 2008: 5). The imaginary of the Shoah as well is part of her aversion for philosophical arguments: she knows that her talk of the Holocaust will offend and not be understood (Diamond, 2008: 50). Elizabeth does not want to evade the difficulty of reality, but she wants us to see her as what she really is. In this respect it is significant that Costello, at the beginning of her presentation, compares herself with Red Peter, the educated ape of Kafka’s tale ‘Report to an Academy’ and proclaims: ‘I am not a philosopher of mind, but an animal exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes, but touch on in every word I speak’ (Coetzee, 2004: 70–1). Costello’s description of herself as a wounded animal confronts us not only with the common physical vulnerability between humans and other animals, but also with the most obvious and banal unlikeness between them: it faces us with the simple fact that humans wear clothes (Cavell, 2008: 110).

‘Man is born naked, but is everywhere in clothes (or their symbolic equivalents). We cannot tell how this came to be, but we can say something about why it should be so and what it means’ (Turner, 1980: 112), argues the anthropologist Terence Turner at the beginning of his essay ‘The Social Skin’. Analysing the bodily adornment practices of the Kayapo, a native tribe of the southern borders of the Amazon forest, Turner states that however frivolous their bodily adornment may appear, it is a very serious matter because it covers them in a fabric of cultural meaning which gives them a measure of security they rarely ever derive from their religion (Turner, 1980: 114–15). Turner is not the only one who has emphasized the significance of human clothing. In ‘A Theology of Dress’, the German theologian Erik Peterson argues that the question of clothing is not primarily a moral issue, but rather a metaphysical and theological problem (Peterson, 1993: 559). He starts his theological reflection on nakedness with the biblical account of the Fall. According to Peterson Adam and Eve felt naked only when they were deprived from their garment of mercy and were forced to cover themselves, first with fig leaves and then with the fur of dead animals. Before the Fall there was unclothedness, but this lack of clothing was not yet nakedness because in Paradise man was covered with God’s