

The Gates:
Liminality and Grief Tourism in New York City Post 9/11

-- and --

The Lives of Animals:
A Play Based on the Novella by J.M. Coetzee

by

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Abstract:

The simple act of walking Central Park, Ground Zero, and the city streets between in February, 2005, links the public spaces both discursively and performatively during the sixteen days that Christo and Jeanne-Claude's installation *The Gates* held sway over New York City. The nature of public space, public art, the public sphere and the politics of mourning are examined through various theoretical lenses, and through the ways we perform and are performed for in public.

Keywords: Public Sphere; Public Art; Mourning; Memory

Abstract:

"The Lives of Animals" is a script for a performance based on a Tanners Lecture given at Princeton University in 1997 by J.M. Coetzee on the subject of animal rights. The theatrical form, like the allegorical content of the lecture itself, problematizes the divide between man and animal, reason and passion.

Keywords: Critical Animal Studies; Animal Performance, Drama.

Dedication

For Allison, Theo, and Maggie, who made staying up late worth doing. For my father, who never stopped teaching me. And for Peter Dickinson, who never said “no”, not once.

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1. *The Gates*: Liminality and Grief Tourism in New York City Post 9/11

Introduction

Being questioned by American customs officers at a Canadian airport never fails to dislocate me; it is an entirely Canadian phenomenon, I imagine, to be treated like a foreign tourist while still in one's own country. After passing through U.S. Customs at Toronto's Pearson International Airport one is, technically, in America even though one remains, physically, in Canada. The gates for flights to the U.S. sit in a separate extension of the airport, joined to the main terminal only by underground tunnel, and cut off from return by U.S. Customs and security. There I waited, in February of 2005, for my flight to New York, betwixt and between, as it were. Television sets locked on CNN droned on about threat levels and possible terrorist plots. I believe it was "orange" that day, although I'm probably making that up to tie into the topic of my paper. It was at least yellow. Of course, they couldn't explain why we should be on alert, only that it was so.

This liminal space I was in was echoed over and over again during my visit to New York, and, as I shall argue, public liminality played an important role in the discourse and counter-discourse that surrounded the mourning of 9/11 as I witnessed it. Victor Turner describes public liminality as performances that require "framed spaces set off from the routine world", and that "use quotidian spaces as their stage", spaces like town squares. "They merely hallow them for a time" (Turner 1979, 467). I was indeed going to walk on hallowed ground. I was going to New York City to see Ground Zero, and I was going to see *The Gates*, a public art installation in Central Park conceived by the European-born, New York-based conceptual artists Christo and Jeanne Claude. But "seeing" doesn't describe the interaction I had with the two "public" sites. Both demanded walking as the only way to experience them.

Central Park and Ground Zero are, seemingly, unconnected as public spaces. Yet I hardly imagine that I was the only one who toured them concurrently that February given the sheer number of tourists in town; tourists who, like me, wanted to see Ground Zero for themselves. I believe that walking the sites, and the streets between them, linked them, both performatively and discursively, in ways that countered the official narratives — narratives created by the State, city administrations, and the artists themselves — that governed them.

Rosalind Deutsche writes: "How we define public space is intimately connected

with ideas about what it means to be human, the nature of society, and the kind of political community we want” (Deutsche 1996, 269). Even the act of defining the terms “public space” and its subsidiary, “public art”, are themselves fraught with conflict.¹ Employing both Rosalyn Deutsche's and Victor Turner's arguments, I will offer a critique of *The Gates* as a work of public art that, despite its makers' intent, frames and supports a conservative, restrictive formation of an ideal of the public sphere. *The Gates*, I argue, uses public liminality as an operating concept to impose a definition of this sphere as a space of democracy, inclusiveness, and economic strength on a city still fumbling with the public grief, mourning, and conflict that surrounded the hole in the ground that was Ground Zero.

¹ Rosalyn Deutsche claims that “when participants in a debate about the uses of public space removes definitions of public and use to a realm of objectivity located [...] outside debate altogether, they threaten to erase public space itself” (Deutsche 1996, 259). This underscores the contentiousness over claims made on not only on public space proper, but also over the rhetoric surrounding it.

The Gates

By the 1970s, Christo and Jeanne-Claude had become known for wrapping things. They briefly toyed with the idea of wrapping two buildings in New York as an “homage” to the skyline they fell in love with when they first moved to the city in the late sixties. Christo also drew up plans to wrap both the Whitney Museum and the MOMA (Tomkins 2004, 79). However, none of the projects found traction in New York, and the Christos² worked on projects elsewhere until they came up with the idea of building *The Gates* in 1979. Christo explained: “we saw that one of the most fascinating elements of New York City is not the skyline, but the humans – especially the people walking. Manhattan is one of the greatest walking spaces, and you have like a river of people walking” (Simek 2011). Their initial conception called for the use of city sidewalks, but was quickly refocussed on Central Park.

In 1981 the City of New York Parks Commission denied the artists permission to build *The Gates* and the project was shelved for 20 years until Michael Bloomberg was elected mayor in late 2001. Bloomberg was both a patron of the Christos, having bought several drawings for his private collection, and a member of the board of the Central Park Conservancy (CPC)³, a private organization that had taken over the administration of the park from the city, acting like a board of trustees “on the model of a museum or orchestra board” (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992, 507), and which had raised over \$150 million from private donors to restore and protect the park. Bloomberg invited the Christos to his inauguration where he told them of his plan to push *The Gates* through on his agenda (Tomkins 2004, 84).

Their proposal was to erect just over 7,500 16 foot tall orange-coloured structures from which orange cloth would drape like banners. These “gates” would vary in width from 8 to 16 feet, depending on the width of the path they straddled, and would stand 12 feet apart. The original plan called for anchors to be dug into the ground to support the structures. However, despite the Christos' promise that the holes would not damage any roots and would be repaired properly after the exhibit ended, the CPC forced them to devise a system of weighted steel bases that would sit on the paths, reducing the impact of the structures on the park, leaving no imprint when they were removed (Tomkins 2004, 84).

2 The appellation “The Christos” is used in many magazine and newspaper articles as a common referent to both Christo and Jeanne-Claude, notably in Tomkins 2004. I will use it throughout this essay as an abbreviation for both artists.

3 The initials “CPC” will be used to refer to the Central Park Conservancy throughout the paper.

The artists' idea was to “energize the most invisible space – between your feet and the first branches of the trees” (Simek, 2011), *The Gates* not only represented a way to bring order to this space, they echoed, in the minds of the artists, the structures of the buildings that surround the park, defining the park as a space that exists at once outside and inside the city. *The Gates* were also reminiscent of the gaps in the wall which surrounds the park, where iron gates were meant to be installed in order to lock the park at night.

Whether intentional or not — I could find no reference to the effect from the artists — *The Gates* had an oriental quality, with their downward flowing banners and bright orange colour. Several bloggers and journalists noticed a resemblance between *The Gates* and Japanese “torii”, large orange gates that line the entrance to Fushimi Inari shrine, each paid for by successful businessmen in tribute and prayer to Inari, the god of prosperity (Lee 2008). The pathway of *The Gates*, like the paths of the park themselves, would have a serpentine quality that contrasted the grid of the neighbouring city streets. It was designed to create “gentle disturbances” (Simek, 2011) in the unconscious order built into the design of the park and the city itself. *The Gates* would take three years and \$21 million to construct, and stay up only 16 days. The Christos paid for it themselves.

"It has no purpose," Jeanne-Claude said. "It is not a symbol. It is not a message. It is only a work of art" (Kennedy 2005). The Christos insisted that the project had no political or social intent, that it was a purely irrational and aesthetic experience, *l'art pour l'art*. At the same time, the Christos are artists who also insist on having a camera crew follow them throughout all of their public encounters.⁴

With Christo and Jeanne-Claude, the conceptual process — the technical problems, the political arm-twisting, the fund-raising, the public relations-maneuvering and the documentation relating to their projects and, of course, the power play involved in achieving them — is as much a part of their art as the visible, sometimes beautiful but always temporary, end product. (Glueck 2004)

One can only call it a willful naïveté that leads the Christos to claim that it is somehow possible to create a public work of such extraordinary technical, financial and spatial complexity, one that was referred to in the press at the time as “a vast populist spectacle of good will and simple eloquence, the first great public art event of the 21st century” (Kimmelman 2005), while insisting that the public space which it inhabits remains what Nancy Fraser, in addressing Habermas' construction of the bourgeois

4 A feature documentary on the process of building *The Gates* was the result of the filming process. See: <http://www.mayslesfilms.com/films/films/gates.html>

public sphere, calls: “a space of zero degree culture, so utterly bereft of any specific ethos as to accommodate with perfect neutrality and equal ease interventions expressive of any and every cultural ethos” (Fraser 1990, 64).

“Public art” is a term whose definition is complex. What makes public art public? How is it conceived for and by the public? And just who exactly is the public that it serves? This complexity is a natural product of the work, though, because however it is defined, “public art is located in universally accessible public sites [and so] discourse about public art reaches beyond the boundaries of arcane art-world concerns” (Deutsche 1996, 271).

Randy Martin provides some ideas of how public art can be understood. Public art, he says, can be roughly defined, firstly, as art that “uses its immediate environment as part of its formal, aesthetic idea.” Secondly, public art somehow comes into contact with the State and thus contains some notion of “the public good.” And, thirdly, public art is a special occasion, a medium for civic engagement and connection with others (Martin 2006, 3-4).

What Martin may mean by a “special occasion” could easily be interpreted, in this case, by the short time period that *The Gates* was to be in place. “Special occasion” could also simply refer to the fact that a temporary art installation such as this one, as opposed to a commemorative bench or a decorative subway entrance, has no obvious utility or function and therefore can be deemed as making “special” use of public space. The idea of “use” becomes very important in critiquing *The Gates* because, as Deutsche points out in reference to *Tilted Arc*, the public sculpture that was removed from New York City’s Federal Plaza after an administrative review,⁵ the rhetoric of “usefulness” in public art was mobilized by conservative critics to contain debate over privatization and control of public space (Deutsche 1996, 260). Usefulness, they claim, is a standard by which public art, and public space should be measured, and so becomes a measure of the public good.

But equating site-specific art with art that creates harmonious spatial totalities”, writes Deutsche, “is so profoundly at odds with the impulse that historically motivated the development of site-specificity that it nearly amounts to a terminological abuse [...] Site specificity sought first to criticize the modernist precept that works of art are autonomous entities and second to reveal how the construction of an apparent autonomy disavows art’s social, economic, and political functions. (Deutsche 1996, 261)

5 See Deutsche’s “Tilted Arc and the Uses of Democracy” in (Deutsche 1996) for a timeline of the events surrounding the sculpture’s commission, installation, and “destruction”.

That *The Gates* was site-specific seems clear. Equally clear is that site-specificity does not come without its complications. But given how all three of Martin's criteria necessarily touch each other in one way or another, the Christos' positioning of their financial and aesthetic "freedom"⁶ bears further scrutiny as it, rhetorically at least, limits their "contact with the State" to the lengthy and difficult process of securing permission to build *The Gates*.

The permission to construct *The Gates* that was granted by the Central Park Conservancy and its prominent board member, now Mayor Michael Bloomberg, came in a rather tortured form. Firstly, it came at the same time as a CPC initiative to license and approve all artists who wished to sell or exhibit their art in the park; secondly, the CPC demanded a \$3 million payment from the Christos before they could begin the project.

The Christos took exception to the fee they were being charged, which they referred to as "blackmail." The statement was later retracted, an apology made to the CPC board, and the levy paid, all at the behest of Mayor Bloomberg (Tomkins 2004, 84). Their protest on behalf of their "fellow" artists was only slightly more persistent. Christo called it an impingement on free speech and said of the CPC: "they treat Central Park like a museum, and if they could they would sell tickets for it." A letter urging the mayor to reconsider his position was written by the Christos, but their objections stopped short of any further action, because, as Jeanne-Claude explained: "we have to do our bit to help our fellow artists, but we also have to make sure that we get the project done" (Westcott 2003)!

The artists refused the possibility of public funding — "no sponsors, no subsidies, no grants, no patrons" (Tomkins 2004, 77) — choosing instead to raise the \$21 million budget through private sales of their own sketches and memorabilia. "Freedom", explained Christo, "To have this incredible pleasure to do what you like to do" (Simek 2011). The Christos walk a line between using the free market and being used by it in an interesting way. They engage whole-heartedly in marketing and selling Christo's drawings; as far back as 1983, the Christos' holding corporation, CVJ Corp., was ranked by the Wall Street Journal the third most valuable corporate art patron in America, behind Exxon and Phillip Morris. In fact, between 1987 and 2003, they sold more than \$66 million worth of Christo's drawings at prices ranging from \$25,000 for an 8 1/2" x 11" collage to \$480,000 for large architectural renderings of his projects (Tomkins 2004, 83).

One article goes as far so to say "Christo and Jeanne-Claude make canny use of the capitalist system and its intricate financing, but only in ways that do not endanger

6 The Christos insist on curating all shows of their work that museums and galleries wish to mount. See (Tomkins, 2004, 78)

their artistic freedom or interfere with their esthetic decisions” (Harper 2005). Their ability to raise the money for their projects might be taken as consent from their “public” to proceed as they wish, but the question remains, who is their “public”? The “State”, or “the people” in this formula, seem to be cast as monolithic and insensitive to art, while the wealthy investors who buy the sketches play the role of the “cognoscenti”, knowing insiders who understand and believe in the art, and so grant the artist “freedom”.

The same article goes on to assert that Christo and Jeanne-Claude have “achieved a sophisticated interface between society's admiration for business, wealth and celebrity and the art system's theoretical disdain for it” (Harper 2005). But like rebellious teenagers from a wealthy family, the Christos’ disdain for the system and its power appears as a show, an act, designed to gain admiration and provide a certain cachet to their patrons, but not really one designed to rock the boat. Letters of protest are written, critical quotes are given to the papers, but the cocktail and dinner parties the Christos organized so assiduously for potential investors, municipal authorities and art world power brokers continue (Tomkins 2004, 79). And so, while privately raised money may buy them freedom from statutory constraints, the inherent constraints of pleasing a wealthy marketplace and powerful investors cannot be seen as liberating by any definition. The sense of freedom the Christos enjoy is derived primarily from a distinct lack of critical awareness that the gulf between themselves and the public for whom they perform is simply not terribly large.

The true complexity of the Christo’s relationship with their investors can be found in the example of Mayor Bloomberg’s private role as an owner of Christo's art, and his public role in bringing the exhibit to life, thereby supporting the value of the sketches and paintings in what is clearly a significant international market for Christo's work. One might argue that, in a reversal of the function of Mayor Bloomberg’s CPC, a private body that performs a public governance function, the Mayor’s office was, in a way, commandeered to sanction a private commission, a commission that was to be paid for by the Christos’ wealthy — what can they be called if not “sponsors” or “patrons”? Either way, the social and economic power to raise the type of funding needed to build *The Gates* seems lacking from the artists’ positioning of their “freedom.” The manner in which the gates of the Inari shrine are paid for by the business community in hope of future prosperity thus resonates even more powerfully in *The Gates*.

Public Space, Performance, and the Public Sphere

Public, in one sense, signifies property rights, government ownership and control of land removed from the real estate market [...] But public property also differs from common property, that is, land or resources to which all members of a community have unrestricted access. (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992, 5)

Rules governing the use of a public space like a park must somehow negotiate the tension between the desires of the individual and the “public good”. This tension also exists in the relationship between the artist and the public space. The conflict between the interiority of the artist and the “needs” of the public is built into the definition of public art. Rosalyn Deutsche points out that the words “public” and “art” are often held to be contradictory, but that to polarize them is to either maintain that the public is a coherent concept, or that one must equate public space with “consensus, coherence and universality and relegate pluralism, division, and difference to the realm of the private” (Deutsche 1996, 281). Either way, the two words create a dialectic that can illuminate the purpose of public art. Suzanne Lacy writes: “what exists in the space between the words public and art is an unknown relationship between artist and audience, a relationship that may itself become the artwork” (Lacy 1995, 20). Crucially, this relationship is centred around and materialized in a physical space, a public site for gathering, with all the complexity that is built into the term “public” thus built into the relationship between the work and its audience.

But from public art emerges a distinction between the idea of an “audience” and that of a “public”. Rosalyn Deutsche elaborates: “the interpretation of public art as art operating in or as a public sphere – whether it follows or rejects the Habermasian model – means that an art public, by contrast with an art audience, is not a pre-existing entity but rather emerges through, is produced by, its participation in political activity” (Deutsche 1996, 288).

The political activity that emerges in a given public sphere has generally been argued, by Michael Warner (2002) among others, to be discourse, talk. Curiously, Christo denies the need for talk: “This project is not involved with talk,” Christo said. “It is real physical space. You need to spend time walking in the cold air -- sunny day, rainy day, even snow. It is not necessary to talk” (Kennedy 2005). David Wittenberg (2002) productively complicates Warner’s theory by insisting that, regardless of how metaphorical the space in which the discursive activity arises, the circulation of texts or the internet for example, it is inherently contained in a *literal* space. He writes:

Any particular public, even a text-based one [such as the public of these essays] has always at some point been *out in* public, and continues to

rely on the postulation of that physical and literal space in which the exchange of discursive capital, so to speak, might once again be realized, like the paper money the value of which still rests on the now almost wholly (but not quite) abstract hypothesis that we could exchange it at the bank for metal. (Wittenberg 2002, 429)

In a similar vein, Rebecca Schneider argues that the act of “walking past” resists the archival hegemony of the monument.

A reader or a viewer is a kind of future passerby, and implicated in a relationship that contains, for both [Walter] Benjamin and [Michel] de Certeau, a ‘secret’ — the secret, perhaps, of the interdependence of anything monumental or fixed with the cross-temporal complicity of walking past or, if you prefer, reading in passage. (Schneider 2011, 54)

From this, I would argue that Schneider further complicates both Warner’s and Wittenberg’s conception of the political activity that emerges within the public sphere by insisting that embedded in any discursive sphere, and any metaphorical or literal space that produces it, is a performance practice, whether it is writing, publishing, reading, making photographs, or walking. In this way, walking *The Gates* produced and continues to produce political activity on two planes. Firstly, walking together in Central Park on a bright sunny day in February of 2005 was not, as Christo would wish, a silent activity. Talk was produced, whether it was in the park while walking, chatting afterwards over a cup of coffee, or writing before, during and after the installation in newspapers and magazines. The discourse continues years later as essays such as this are written and their potential to produce meaning is further realized by being read or presented in conference. Secondly, and even more importantly, Schneider opens the door, through de Certeau, to understanding walking itself as a discursive act, mapping and “counter-mapping” the terrain of the city and the park, scripting the monumental as live, contingent, and ephemeral.

Much critical work on performance in New York post 9/11 has engaged with Michel de Certeau's seminal essay “Walking in the City.”⁷ De Certeau argues: “The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered” (de Certeau 1984, 97). “To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper” (de Certeau 1984, 103). This resonates with my experience living in New York. Life in the city is in the streets, moving from place to place. People don't gather in each others homes, but meet at bars, restaurants, cafes and parks. “Place” is where you're going next, it is what you are about to leave.

The Gates echoes this with its insistence on flow. “They are very invitational,”

7 See chapters 1-3 of Hopkins, Orr, and Solga, eds. 2011.

says Christo, “they are only 12 feet apart, and you are invited to go to the next” (Simek 2011). And indeed, they are invitational, but the relative proximity of one “gate” to the next demands a certain pathway be observed. Stepping out of the path is nonetheless discouraged by the “invitation” of the next gate and, in some spots, fences preventing people from leaving the paths. Moreover, to deviate from the path meant entering into the park, which was itself blanketed with snow, slush, or puddles, and so rather uninviting for gathering or taking a short-cut. You had to stick to the paths and the paths were lined with the gates.

Franck and Stevens (2007) have argued that looseness in a space is not a given. While certain spaces, like Central Park itself, are marked by their potential for looseness, it is the performance of activities within the space, such as skateboarding or taking a nap on the grass, and not the space itself, that generates looseness. Moreover, they write: “the potential of a space to become loose may lie in its relationship to other spaces. When the edge is porous, one can see and move easily between spaces or easily straddle the barrier between them as people sit on a wall around a plaza, watching the scene” (Franck and Stevens 2007, 9). *The Gates* created an interesting conflict: while it organized an activity, walking, that might otherwise produce looseness, and the visual porousness of the installation promised the potential of engagement with the broader park itself, the flow demanded by the orange structures harnessed walking into a controlled discourse, limiting any potential looseness that walking elsewhere or that some other activity, like skateboarding or busking, might create.

De Certeau argues that the lack of proper names in a city like New York, with its grid of numbered streets and building addresses,

makes the city a suspended symbolic order. The habitable city is thereby annulled. Certainly walking about and traveling substitute for exits, for going away and coming back, which were formerly made available by a body of legends that places nowadays lack. (de Certeau 1984, 106)

Walking allows mapping the city subjectively, making turns, retracing steps, stopping to look in a window, stepping in to grab a quick beer, stumbling home drunk through a park. Walking creates the stories of your day, your morning, your evening, your life. Walking makes the city habitable. But why did New York need to make itself habitable again? How did *The Gates*, or more importantly, how did the tourists attracted to visit *The Gates*, help accomplish this habitability? Deutsche helps further this point: “the political public sphere is not only a site of discourse; it is also a discursively constructed site” (Deutsche 1996, 289). What was the discourse that arose from walking *The Gates*?

Central Park

The construction of Central Park was begun in 1858 and was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. Before the park could be built, it had to be cleared of its poor immigrant and African-American inhabitants who had organized themselves into makeshift villages. Their land was purchased and they were evicted under the rule of eminent domain, their villages razed. The conversion of the land from private to public property was seen as a troubling affair at the time (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992, 59), but the act finally resolved the contradiction of whether uptown Manhattan was “a slum or shantytown of twenty thousand squatters or [...] a bucolic watering place of the elite”, the wealthy who had built country estates in the area and were “never more than a small minority of the population” (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992, 61).

By the end of construction in 1873, more than 2.5 million cubic yards of material had been excavated from and brought into grounds. 40,000 cubic yards of manure and compost were brought in to support the 270,000 trees and shrubs that were planted. 166 tons of gunpowder, more than was used at the Battle of Gettysburg, were used to blast and drain the swamp that was once home to squatters and freed slaves (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992, 150).

The resulting park, and the park that exists today, creates what Julia Navarez calls “an aesthetics of order.” Its main operation is enforced through high standards of maintenance, surveillance, and beautification. It also has become a convenient and pleasant barrier between the social and economic strata of the Upper East and West sides, and Harlem to the North, mid-town to the south. Rules and regulations were and are still in place curtailing certain types of behaviour deemed disturbing to the general public: sexual activity, lewd exposure, camping, solicitation. As Navarez writes: “The possibilities for difference that public space affords seem to pose threats and thus in many instances are contained, pre-empted or disciplined” (Navarez 2007, 154).

The location of the park was naturally convenient for the wealthy. It's distance from lower Manhattan, where the poor lived, and the cost of transit were prohibitive, turning the park into a “carriage society” of the well-off (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992, 213). It is no coincidence, then, that the park is now lined with many of the city's important museums: the MoMA to the south, the Met, Guggenheim and Frick to the East, the Museum of Natural History to the West. One can't help but recall Christo's accusation that the CPC was behaving as though the park itself were a museum. To a degree, it became one during the sixteen days of *The Gates*, with the gates themselves

replacing the cordon ropes, and the police replacing museum staff, all of which created a “look but don't touch” framing of the walk through the park.⁸ The Met ran an exhibit of Christo's sketches while also opening its rooftop terrace for free to those who wished a bird's-eye view of the exhibit and had paid for admission to the museum (Glueck 2004).

The social and financial elite of the city were also actively inventing ways to privatize consumption of the exhibit. Intriguingly, there were a number of “Gates”-themed parties hosted by elite city-dwellers who boasted privileged views of *The Gates* from their apartments on the upper floors of buildings that lined the park. Saffron coloured food was de rigueur for the swelling list of invitees. Absent an invitation to one of the cocktail parties, one could pay \$6000 for two hours in a penthouse suite at the Carlyle hotel, champagne included (Kelley 2005). David Moos, curator of contemporary art at the Art Gallery of Ontario, who was to be a guest at just such a party and had himself curated a Christo exhibit at the AGO, said “If you think of Central Park as the great democratic American space, Jeffersonian, Whitmanic, in the heart of the metropolis, it is interesting to contemplate who has access to the aerial view, it puts into relief this political dimension” (Barron 2005). And, indeed, the exclusivity that art institutions and privileged members of the art audience accomplished privately, the park accomplishes publicly. It is on the level of beautification that the Park operates at its most subtle and exclusionary.

Beauty is a social construct that is historic and class-specific... The notion of beauty operating in Central Park currently has its origin in the English pleasure gardens; Frederick Law Olmsted's vision assumed leisure as a quality of life issue used by the elite to educate the masses... Since 1980, the Central Park Conservancy has developed and protected Olmsted's ideas through the restoration of landscapes, completed with private funds, to satisfy the taste and manners of the new elite: the professional middle class that works and lives in the city and the tourists for whom New York City is a preferred destination. (Navarez 2007, 156)

The Gates, in this view, can be seen as contributing to the overall beautification of the park. Visually stunning and inviting to both tourist and citizen alike, its gates pull the participant along, virtually blotting out choice. That being said, there were no obvious physical barriers to entry, no admission fees or tariffs, no political or aesthetic education necessary, or physical virtuosity required. No display of special skill was needed to participate. There were no language requirements or cultural understandings one needed to have. The installation was open to everyone and, in its demand to be walked, acted as a great equalizer of the classes. It was superficially postmodern, its Asian

8 A woman was arrested for placing a sticker on one of the gates. See: (Confessore 2005)

influence creating an intercultural pastiche with the pastoral beauty of the park in winter. It emitted a somewhat undefinable avant garde aesthetic, as though it was “disturbing” or provoking a conflict with the park. But, really, it just enunciated the landscape in a sublime, exciting way, visually lifting the winding pathways from the dull palette of winter colours.

Gates — “thresholds”, as Quentin Stevens refers to them — are liminal spaces where “ the boundary between inside and outside can be opened; space loosens up, and a wide range of perceptions, movements and social encounters become possible” (Stevens 2007, 73). Like the “torii” of the Inari shrine, *The Gates* offered a threshold, a passageway way of sorts. And like a liminal space, the flow and function of *The Gates* created “a constrained site which gathers people together, channeling their movement, focussing their attention and forcing them into close contact with others. It is a passage, a transitional place where people spend time” (Stevens 2007, 75). But if *The Gates* are, like the “torii”, a liminal space, what, while walking *The Gates*, were we betwixt and between?

Liminality is an essential concept in the political and aesthetic functioning of *The Gates*. As Victor Turner writes, “public liminality is the eye and eyestalk which society bends round upon its own condition, whether healthy or unsound” (Turner 1979, 476). Liminality has two related possibilities. In its anthropological sense, as described by Turner, it is a ritual state that stands separate from daily life, suspends time and status, and ends with a re-aggregation into daily life with an altered state of consciousness (Turner 1979, 466-7). However, as noted by Stevens above, it can also be seen as a site of play and transition suspended between two contrasting spaces.

Walking through *The Gates* was, in memory, a lovely experience. The majestic bright orange gates and fabric drapes were set off beautifully against the clear winter sky and barren trees. The drapes fell low enough that I was able to reach up and touch them when the wind allowed. It made, for me, a game of sorts; I played basketball when I was young and was constantly jumping up to do lay-ups at every entrance I passed, and so I jumped occasionally, doing a “lay-up” on the cloth. The crowd that engaged in the exhibit with me seemed to enjoy the experience, talking and taking pictures along the way. This feeling was echoed by many walkers who described their participation as feeling “regal,” and “like I’m in a picture” (Snow 2005). I had always loved Central Park. This only served to make the walk seem more enjoyable, more purposeful. It was an event, a spectacle, and I was there. I was a tourist now. I was neither placeless nor placed. I was just visiting and welcome to do so. I loved New York.

But to view *The Gates* as merely a clever use of spatial liminality is to ignore

what I argue is its larger purpose. Turner differentiates between the liminal and the liminoid, writing that while liminal rites are a characteristic of less complex societies, liminoid phenomena "flourish in societies of more complex structure, where [. . .] contract has replaced status as the major social bond, where people voluntarily enter into relationships instead of being born into them" (Turner 1979, 492). He is referring to cultural structures such as the theatre and events like *The Gates*. Indeed, understanding *The Gates* as a liminoid structure allows it to be placed fairly easily within most of Turner's definitions of the practice. But it is the installation's main reliance on "flow" and "frame" that illuminates its purpose. Turner describes flow as:

a state in which action follows action according to an inner logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part; we experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present, and future. (Turner 1979, 486-7)

He also writes that: "Flow differs from everyday activities in that its forming contains explicit rules which make action and the evaluation of action unproblematic"; and, it "seems to need no goals or rewards outside itself. To flow is its own reward: it is to be as happy as a human being can be" (Turner 1979, 488).

Happiness, unity, reward. These were the words of the day when walking *The Gates*. Turner refers to this phenomenon as "communitas: the mutual confrontation of human beings stripped of status role characteristics -- people, 'just as they are,' getting through to each other" (Turner 1979, 471). All of it points to the emergence of a discourse, as should happen from a public work of that scale. However, whether or not people were "getting through to each other" as a result of this discourse was the subject of much debate at the time.

Gratz and Goldsmith begin their review of *The Gates* by critiquing the lack of true, democratic public spaces in an America where most public spaces are being developed and privatized (Gratz and Goldsmith 2005). This argument is echoed by Deutsche, in her reference to Claude Lefort's term "appropriation," which she defines as a "strategy deployed by a distinctly undemocratic power that legitimates itself by giving social space a 'proper,' hence incontestable, meaning, thereby closing down public space" (Deutsche 1996, 275). But Gratz and Goldsmith go on to argue that Central Park and *The Gates* conquer this phenomenon through inclusivity and the generation of a community-centric discourse. "Strangers talked to strangers. People took one another's pictures. Kids played. Couples strolled. Everyone seemed to smile. This is what democratic public space is all about" (Gratz and Goldsmith 2005). Jesse Lemisch

countered their optimistic view, referring to the discourse as “faux communalism, an uncritical rejoicing in the outpouring of crowds without regard to the quality or content of the crowds' experience” (Lemisch 2005, 84).

Regardless of which camp one falls into, the common ingredient seems to be a sense that there was a distinct lack of conflict in the discourse that arose from *The Gates*; that it was a celebration of community and hope, void, as Lemisch points out, of any critical reflection about who made up that community and what was being hoped for. It is helpful, then, to examine *The Gates* not just in terms of flow, but also of “frame.” According to Turner, who is drawing on the work of Erving Goffman, a primary frame is one where an interpretation of meaning is imposed on a scene. While the Christos insist on the meaninglessness of the event, it is that very insistence that is actually imposing an interpretation of its meaning. Interestingly, Turner argues:

I do not think that flow can often occur in relation to primary framing unless it can be shown early that there are prior shared understandings about, say, the moral or aesthetic values of a given event or action, for negotiating often divides action from awareness. (Turner 1979, 489)

So if the statement “*The Gates* is meaningless” is publicly accepted *a priori*, the flow of the event can take over, as there will be little critical reflection on the part of the public. Whatever conflict that could have emerged from walking *The Gates* was assigned to the purposefully public discourse surrounding the Christos' plight to bring *The Gates* to life. Rosalyn Deutsche elaborates:

Homogeneity and unanimity – frequently cast in the shape of 'community' – become the object of quests for true publicness as some critics, while usefully documenting controversies fought over specific public artworks and even espousing controversy as a natural ingredient of the public art process, continue to associate public space and democracy with the goals of building consensus, consolidating communities, and soothing conflicts. At the same time they place the definition of democratic public space fundamentally outside controversy. (Deutsche 1996, 281-2)

The controversy supposedly inherent in the public sphere that emerges from a work of public art such as *The Gates* was nowhere in sight. And the homogeneous flow of community sentiment surrounding this public cultural work had everything to do with a prominent symbol of private capital that was no longer framed within its sight lines. Once, four years before, you could see the tops of the World Trade Centre towers from several different angles in the park. Now, they were gone, a hole in the skyline and in the ground. One writer argued that *The Gates* “became, for many New Yorkers, a symbol of hope, of transcendence, of healing after 9/11” (Kakutani 2011). But how can this be true of an event that so studiously avoided any political affiliation with the trauma of 9/11, let alone the park itself? New York City in 2005 was still a city grappling with mourning and

the crisis of war. Turner writes somewhat presciently in this context: "In times of radical social change, some of these sacred items and symbolic processes burst out of the secrecy of lodges and enter the public arena as part of the repertoire of prophetic leaders who mobilize the people against invaders or overlords threatening their deep culture" (Turner 1979, 470). It is my argument that the conflict, trauma and instability which defined the hole in the ground that was Ground Zero were being played out politically in *The Gates*.

Ground Zero

I had decided to walk to Ground Zero from 50th and Riverside, where I was staying. As I walked south, signs of 9/11 began to show themselves. A wall of photographs and “HAVE YOU SEEN...” posters adorned a chain link fence in front of St. Vincent's hospital. The faces of the missing were of all colours and shapes, a sad, but true picture of the New York that I knew. The posters were all original, from the days following the attack, but they had clearly been removed, laminated, and carefully replaced. They still conveyed an almost kinetic combination of the hope and despair of the moment, like photographs of dancers caught leaping mid-air. It was easy to feel the embodied desperation of the posterers themselves, who had walked or run from god knows how far away, given that public transport had undoubtedly all but shut down, in order to find their missing loved ones. I could imagine them walking as far down 7th Avenue as they were allowed, hoping to see a familiar, dust-covered face walking toward them out of the gloom. Walking through the city must have had a very different meaning that day and in the days that followed 9/11. Fire stations, which were also the sites of spontaneous memorials in the days after the collapse of the towers (Franck and Paxson 2007, 135), had plaques with the names of the men who had died on 9/11 engraved on them. The stations themselves were clean and well-kept, flags flying on low-angled poles, fresh flowers growing in pots flanking the doors.

The area around Ground Zero had been fenced off from public use, but a perimeter of walkways had been erected around the site. I entered a makeshift “lobby” at the entrance to the walkways. The lobby was the site of a pictorial history of the area which placed emphasis both on what stood in the area before the towers, as well as the building of the towers themselves. This “lieux de memoire” (Nora 1989) was certainly not out of place on a site as well known as this one, but the very fact of the violent upheaval of the space, the literal disappearance from the sky of the seemingly eternal towers, signalling the deaths of the thousands of people in the buildings and planes, begged, for me, a different response, a different act of memory. The display was at once telling us that the hole in the ground that we were about to gaze into was more than simply a burial ground; the display also seemed to be a message that this place had been something else before, and it will be something else again: we will move on. “Unlike Rome,” writes Michel de Certeau, “New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future” (de Certeau 1984, 91).

It is the conflict between personal memory and public history that dominates the

discourse of this site. "Memory privileges the private and the emotional, the subjective and the bodily. Against history's rationality, the reveries of memory rebel. Against history's officialism, memory recalls hidden pasts, the lived and the local, the ordinary and the everyday" (Franck and Paxson 2007, 148). The odd thing is that by virtue of that fact that I witnessed the plane crashing into the second tower and both towers subsequently plummeting from the sky on television, I too have a memory to mourn. My cousin, a journalist, was in town covering the Toronto International Film Festival. He had called early in the day, exhorting me to turn on the television. The festival closed, our daily routines were suspended as we gathered, stunned, to watch the towers fall. We went for Korean food that night. It was one of the best meals of my life. After the days of silence overhead that came with the grounding of flights, the sound of the first jet I heard flying over Toronto felt like a wound being reopened, a dull, throbbing pain.

In the years between 9/11 and my visit to Ground Zero, I had begun to graft my memories of the site onto those I have gathered from 9/11: buying theatre tickets at the TKTS booth in the WTC to avoid the line-ups at Times Square, the dozens of times I took the PATH train to and from New Jersey were sutured together with stories of the day from friends who lived in New York, even one who was just emerging from the PATH train as the first plane hit. I read story after story of phone calls from doomed people in the towers and planes to their families, made in the moments before they died. I quilted my own simulacral memory of the day with a patchwork of other's memories. I created myself as a witness to the events. But was I a witness or a spectator? According to Diana Taylor, it doesn't matter:

The role of the witness as a responsible, ethical participant rather than a spectator to crisis, collapsed in the rubble talk of victims, heroes, and the rest of us. Even though officials invoked the inclusive 'we' to refer to the attack and 'our' determination to fight back, there was no place for us, no participation that could conceivably be meaningful. (Taylor 2003, 243)

I mounted the steps and walked quietly around the walkway. The tight funnel of space herded us around, our view forced inward toward the deep crater that was now a construction zone by a wall behind us and a roof above our heads. Few people spoke, fewer still stopped. It felt like climbing through the Statue of Liberty: with so many people behind you there was no time to stop and look, think or chat; just keep moving, don't hog the view. Ground Zero is privately owned land, but the public claims that are made on a landmark building such as the Twin Towers seem to have exploded to almost mythical proportions since 9/11, with debates of the design and content of any new buildings and their ability to memorialize the catastrophe in an appropriate manner taking on national

and international importance.⁹ The conflict over the use of the space, ironically, might have found its best articulation in its lack of use, in the very indeterminacy that dominates the discourse over its future. It is perhaps true that the empty hole itself is the symbol that offers the deepest resonance of loss and mourning to the grieving city and nation. To quote Peggy Phelan:

My hunch is that the affective outline of what we've lost might bring us closer to the bodies we want to still touch than the restored illustration can. Or at least the hollow outline might allow us to understand more deeply why we long to hold bodies that are gone. (Phelan 1997, 3)

I don't know what I expected. Somehow, I suppose, as I walked toward the site from mid-town, I was searching for signs that I was moving closer and closer to the centre of the trauma, walking against the flow of the crowds I remember from television coverage who ran in panic as the towers collapsed behind them. But even my walk through the city, in which I strained to find some tangible, spontaneous and as yet un-governed expression of mourning and the trauma that precipitated it, was fruitless. Perhaps that was to be expected. As Phelan writes, "... trauma is untouchable, I mean it cannot be represented. The symbolic cannot carry it: trauma makes a tear in the symbolic network itself" (Phelan 1997, 5).

I left the site, walking past another preserved spontaneous memorial to the missing and dead on the fence surrounding St. Paul's church in lower Manhattan. "Heroes Forever," one sign said above a picture of the letters FDNY, letters that emblazoned ball caps and t-shirts in tourist shop windows around town. Rather than "Missing" posters, these were tributes to the dead. They were pictures of the victims, some who were caught in the building, some, firemen and policemen, who went in and lost their lives. Pictures of the lost people, cherished objects, poems, pictures of children and their drawings decorated the wrought iron. The posters were in English and Spanish. According to Jack Santino, spontaneous memorials, unlike Ground Zero itself, allow for a differentiated public to perform memory and loss, and for an even broader range of interpretation by the uncontrolled passers-by. These sites are "places of communion between the dead and the living" (Santino 2004, 130). Santino also points out that these memorials can act as admonitions or indictments of state structures that have willfully forgotten.

I continued on to Wall Street, whose cobblestones and old building facades always seemed to me like a theme-park or a movie set; the men in suits who scurried

9 For a critique of the planned memorial see: Hopkins, D.J., and Shelley Orr. "Memory/Memorial/Performance: Lower Manhattan, 1776/2001." In *Performance and the City*. New York/Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. pp 33-50

about, actors hired to animate the scene. A lone man stood on a pedestal at the steps of the old exchange building, railing against some kind of abuse that was bound to bring the “system” to its knees. He was ignored by all who passed by. I looked up at the hole in the skyline and wondered what exactly had disappeared. A building, yes. People, of course. “Freedom”? “A way of life”? Battered but not down, we are told. Yet something more ethereal had also disappeared (or, perhaps, was “interrupted”?). The soaring view of the city that the towers provided was left in limbo; an abandoned space in thin air, rendered inarticulate but for the cold coordinates of a vector after the bodies that saw it and buildings that framed it tumbled down from under it in what looked like slow-motion.

De Certeau famously opens his essay describing the panoptic view of the cityscape from the top of the World Trade Center (de Certeau 1984, 91). What are the claims we make on a view? “What does it perform, and for whom?” comes the answer. Like my visit to the Statue of Liberty, I had only been to the top of the World Trade Center when taking out-of-town friends and relatives through a tour of the city in the decade before 9/11. De Certeau was a tourist. His was a tourist's view, one that, like a tourist map, rendered the city readable, navigable to those who might be overwhelmed by the sensual chaos below, by the speed and determination of the “ordinary practitioners of the city” (de Certeau 1984, 93) walking at street level. It was the view of those who stood outside a personal narrative of daily life in the city. It was the view of wealthy and powerful members of the financial elite of the city whose offices and apartments are perched high above the ground. It was a view of possession, control. It was also the view of the servant class that catered to both of them, although, having been a member of that class, I might argue that their view is turned inward, away from the windows, or contained in the windowless spaces of kitchens and pantries. In New York City, views are privately controlled, they have an economic value that is not wasted on the poorer classes. Now this “Icarian” view was gone, leaving everyone to scurry around the streets below, perhaps briefly and solemnly observing the site, remembering the optical curvature of the buildings one saw when looking up from the base of the towers, or letting the traumatic scar that sank several stories deep into the ground blend into the background as they walked by on their way.

But the past glories of that view were being joyfully re-performed in Central Park. The wealthy had reclaimed the privileged view from above. *The Gates* itself had rendered the park navigable, legible. Tourists were safe from the unpredictability that might lay in the woods, tunnels and meadows, safe from the danger wrought by crossing the street at Columbus Circle in order to enter the park. Tourists had reclaimed their rightful importance in the economic structure of the city, and the institutions that serve

them hummed along in tune. It was estimated that *The Gates* generated in excess of \$250 million from visitors to the city (Anon. 2005). Hotels and restaurants were filled to capacity. Stores boasted of unprecedented sales (Edelson 2005). “Go shopping,” President Bush had said back in September 2001.¹⁰ This was once again the New York that the President and Mayor Giuliani had hoped for in the mere days following 9/11.

Of greater importance is the impact that *The Gates* had as a performance. *The Gates*, all knew, would disappear. With cloth panels blowing in the wind and footings that danced on, but did not plant themselves in the ground below, they played the part of majestic, man-made forms that were vulnerable to the elements, vulnerable to human interference. They were structures whose solidity came into question with every gust of wind, with every day that ticked away to their demise. They performed the ephemerality of structures for an anxious audience. When finally dismantled they re-performed the disappearing act that the Twin Towers had pulled, except these structures would leave no scars, no wounds, no traces to be grieved, no bodies to be missed. They would leave only a joyful memory of time spent in an eddy of human happiness.

It is in this context that I choose to see *The Gates*. The tangible, spontaneous mourning that popped up in unofficial spaces on my walk through the city was contained and preserved. The constant call to remember the fallen heroes rang from every shop window, every radio and television station. The pictures on the frozen, laminated memorial walls were no longer lost love ones, at least not to the larger public. They were patriots, martyrs to Freedom and the American Way of Life. “When mourning goes wrong, it does so because it refuses to finish the job, becoming addicted instead to remembering the loss of the other.” This “melancholia” (Engle 2007, 61), as Freud described it, had taken on an insistent form of patriotism, the language of revenge, violence, and, what Judith Butler describes as a “Protestant ethic” of loss: here is how we will mourn; this is what it means; this is when it will end (Butler 2003, 11).

Fox and CNN, in 1984-ish style, conveyed the “thinkspeak” that democracy was being fought for in some far away land. But what of the democracy being contained and shaped in the public sphere of Ground Zero and Central Park? Mayor Giuliani, who before 9/11 had “clamped down on street vendors, street performers, community gardens and casitas, and fireworks” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2003, 12), and who, in the weeks after 9/11 halted the creation of spontaneous memorials, was gone. Michael Bloomberg, whose intervention proved so instrumental in reviving *The Gates*, would soon pass a law clamping down on public assembly in Central Park, limiting to six the

10 <http://usgovinfo.about.com/od/thepresidentandcabinet/a/did-bush-say-go-shopping-after-911.htm>

number of times a large group of up to 50,000 people could gather there each year, four of those events allotted to the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic (Lemisch 2005, 92). The walls of pictures would also quietly disappear after *The Gates* had ended (Haberman 2010). But for sixteen days in February of 2005, the city seemed open, free, inclusive and joyful. The timing is important because, I have argued, *The Gates* had a role to play in the mourning of 9/11.

Walking *The Gates* can be likened to an aspect of the Jewish ritual of mourning called “sitting shiva,” in which seven days of intense privacy, dominated by sitting on low stools, are ended by a ritual family walk around the block. The walk signifies a renewal of the family within the public sphere, an exit from the private sphere. It articulates an exit from the past liminal state of mourning that centres so deeply around the lost other. The fractured family reforms itself in the public sphere as a family again, marked by the absence of the lost one. The walk through *The Gates*, its liminal thresholds, its forced re-statement of the habitability of the city, through gates symbolizing a prayer for prosperity and power, signal an official end of the period of mourning. The walkers perform a discourse of the burial of the past, a distancing of themselves from the deeply fractured and contentious democracy that the trauma of the lost towers has left in its wake. The trauma itself cannot be symbolized, but the end of mourning can, and, I believe, that ending was punctuated by *The Gates*. Whatever mourning was still to be done would now take place in the private sphere, in the homes and fire stations of the boroughs and suburbs of New York City, out of the public eye.

In no way, ironically, does this critique diminish the pleasure I and many others obviously had walking through those stunning gates on that bright, crisp winter’s day in February 2005. We buzzed all day about the walk we took. Pictures of *The Gates* adorned banners hanging from street lamps. Billboards advertised its presence. The city had welcomed it and lived in its loving orange glow for those 16 days of its life. It was a spectacle built to the scale of New York. As an object of beauty, an aesthetic experience, it was highly successful.

But I believe there was a price to pay for the willful blindness *The Gates* bore not only to its politicized surroundings, but to the political conflict and violence dug deep into the ground it was built on. “Out of one eye, then, I saw an enjoyable mass art event; out of the other, a telling instance of high kitsch in the Bloomberg-Bush era, a cross between the Yellow Brick Road and a grand opening where the packaging was literally all” (Lemisch 2005, 91). *The Gates*, like the Inari shrine and Central Park itself, signified an assured and prosperous future. Moreover, I, the tourist, was its main target. New York was selling me an experience of mourning, a spectacle for my benefit and bragging: “I

was there, I saw it, I touched it.” It was as though I expected to stand side-by-side with New Yorkers who were there on 9/11 and commiserate as one of them. As though I, having lived in the city for only a couple of years a decade earlier, could be part of their private grief. We tourists played the part of the cousins from out of town who gather in the house of mourning to fill the void left by the lost loved ones. But my feeling of being a “grief tourist” was not unique. Diana Taylor argues: “Those of us who lived here were deterritorialized, not just by the events but by official pronouncements that turned us into tourists, walking through” (Taylor 2003, 252).

The Gates offer a homogenized, sanitized sense of “belonging” to the larger, whitewashed community of spectators, rather than to the private network of loss and grieving that was surely going on elsewhere, just not in Central Park, or at Ground Zero. *The Gates* herded us away from a sphere of diffuse, uncontrollable mourning, confusion and conflict, into a harmonious world of consensus built on the simple pleasure of walking together. By “giving it away” (Tomkins 2004, 85), by raising the money themselves then refusing to “profit” from it, the Christos perform a sleight of hand to convince us that we are capable of transcending the consumerism upon which our freedom and democracy now rest toward a noble sense of “communitas” and strength. But, as Judith Butler might claim, “it does not do justice to passion and grief and rage, all of which tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, implicate us in lives that are not our own, irreversibly, if not fatally” (Butler 2003, 14).

Conclusion

Today, a new tower is finishing its ascent to reclaim de Certeau's view. A memorial has been built at its feet. The name of each person who died in the towers is now engraved on a series of plaques, allowing strangers and passers-by to run their fingers over them.¹¹ These names, carved alphabetically in cold, metallic relief, are a factual accounting of each life lost. It is a staggering archive when taken as a whole. Perhaps the act of touching the letters brings memory, subjective, bodily memory, into resistance against the archive. For me, it is a memory of Korean food, hot, sour, and sweet, consumed on an evening during a late summer heatwave, a cold bottle of beer sweating in my hand, the skies unnaturally quiet and void of the familiar plumes of jet wash that routinely mapped them. Perhaps for another, running fingers over the name of a lost loved one will revivify their sense-memories of stroking hair, holding a hand, or touching a face that now lives frozen in pictures. Like Kaddish, the Jewish prayer of mourning said each year for the dead by their families, we owe our grief at least that much.

¹¹ http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/44483977/ns/us_news-9_11_ten_years_later/t/memorial-plaza-nyc-opens-public/#.T5Av_DJSR4o

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2. The Lives of Animals

Characters

Elizabeth: A famous novelist. 60's- 70's

John: A physicist. Elizabeth's son. 30-40's

Norma: A philosopher. John's Wife. 30-40's

Red Peter: An Ape.

Garrard: Faculty Member. 50's

O'Hearn: Faculty Member. 40's

Ruth: Faculty Member. 60's

Arendt: Faculty Member. 60's

Abraham Stern: A poet and faculty member. 60's

4-6 Students/Dancers

The Lives of Animals is a short performance piece derived from a lecture delivered by J.M. Coetzee at Princeton University on October 15 and 16, 1997 as part of the Tanner Lectures on Human Values.

Setting

Appleton College. A small, New England college.

Staging notes

Actors are asked to prepare their characters using animal exercises. They may determine which animal they are and how to use it on their own unless specified in the play. Elizabeth should not be based on an animal at all.

The set should feature three media screens forming a triptych backdrop. All footage should be original, if possible, and an unedited, single take.¹²

12 I wish, through the use of video images and screens, to call into question the authority that the mediatized derives from referencing the live, and the authority of the live as derived from the mediatized.(Auslander:2008) This theatricalizes, in a way, the authority of Elizabeth's performance derived from Coetzee's performance. The lack of editing in the footage adds to the illusion of "liveness" since it doesn't usurp the authority of continuous time in our perception of the live.

Scene I. The Autobiographical Animal

An Empty Stage. Lights up on John.

JOHN

There is first of all the problem of opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. It's a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge. Let's take it that the bridge is built and crossed, that we can put it out of our mind. It has been two years since I've seen her. I accompanied her to Altoona College in Pennsylvania to receive the Stowe Award. \$50,000 and a gold medal to a "major world writer". And that is what she is, "Elizabeth Costello: Major world writer." Nine novels, two books of poems, a book on bird life, and a body of journalism. She made her name with her fourth novel, *The House on Eccles Street*, whose main character is Marion Bloom, wife of Leopold Bloom, principal character of another novel, *Ulysses*, by James Joyce. A small critical industry has grown around her; there is even an Elizabeth Costello Society based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Born in Melbourne, Australia in 1928. Still lives there; though she spent the years 1951 to 1963 abroad, in England and France. Married twice. Two children, one by each marriage. My sister and me. I teach physics at Appleton College in Massachusetts. Elizabeth has been invited here, to my college, to deliver the annual Gates lecture and meet with literature students. She can speak on any subject she wishes. She has elected to speak, not about herself or her fiction, as her sponsors would no doubt like, but about a hobbyhorse of hers, animals.

(A rear projection shows a airport lobby scenes. Elizabeth joins John. She is tired looking and dishevelled. She is surrounded by suitcases. They face each other awkwardly.)

JOHN

A long flight. You must be exhausted.

ELIZABETH

Ready to sleep. John, what exactly do they want from me?

JOHN

Tonight? Nothing. Tomorrow is a different story. You'll have to gird your loins for tomorrow, I'm afraid. First your lecture followed by a dinner. The next day a seminar with graduate students, then a debate.

ELIZABETH

I have forgotten why I agreed to come.

JOHN

I'm afraid you have to go through with the show. They admire you, they want to honour you. It's the best way they can think of doing that.

ELIZABETH

The best way?

(Beat)

I've brought presents for the children.

(She digs through her suitcase as John addresses the audience.)

JOHN

(To the audience)

I cannot imagine her getting through this trial without me by her side, her loving son. I'm also on the point of becoming her trainer. Distasteful word, but I have come to think of her as a seal, an old tired circus seal.

(Elizabeth takes a ball from her bag and starts to perform like a seal.)¹³

13 Nazi's often forced Jews to perform "like circus animals" for their amusement. (Patterson: 2002, 47) Indeed, performing, "putting on a show" is almost used an epithet in "The Lives of Animals". It seems to be perceived as a form of humiliation. Perhaps this reflects on Coetzee's performance at the lecture, or perhaps performance is used as another trope, by Coetzee, to outline a debased way of being-in-the-world; performance stands below reason since it is located in the body.

JOHN

One more time she must heave herself up on to the tub, one more time show that she can balance the ball on her nose. Up to me to coax her, get her through the performance.

Lights down on Elizabeth.

JOHN

What sort of creature is she, really? Not a seal: not amiable enough for that. But not a shark either. A cat. One of those large cats that pause as they eviscerate their victim and, across the torn-open belly, give you a cold yellow stare. I don't look forward to what's coming. I know her, I know what she's up to. I don't want to hear her talking about death. Neither does the audience. Who wants to hear death-talk?

Black. Lights up on two Podiums.

(Elizabeth steps up to one of the podium. She delivers the following lecture in a flat tone, never looking up from her notes.)

ELIZABETH

Ladies and gentlemen, it is two years since I last spoke in the United States. In the lecture I then gave, I had reason to refer to the great fabulist Franz Kafka, and in particular to his story 'Report to an Academy', about an educated ape, Red Peter, who stands before members of a learned society telling the story of his life – of his ascent from beast to something approaching man.

Red Peter walks onto the stage to the other podium. The screens behind them shows scenes from Lon Chaney's "Hunchback of Notre Dame", Cocteau's "Beauty and the Beast", and Peter Jackson's "King Kong".

(Note: The actor does not wear an “ape” costume. In contrast to Elizabeth, he is an engaging speaker.¹⁴)

RED PETER

The first thing I learned was to give a handshake. The handshake displays candour. Today, when I stand at the pinnacle of my career, may I add to that first handshake also my candid words.

ELIZABETH

On that occasion I felt a little like Red Peter myself and said so. Today that feeling is even stronger, for reasons that I hope will become clearer to you. Lectures often begin with lighthearted remarks whose purpose is to set the audience at ease. I want to say at the outset that that was not how my remark – the remark that I felt like Red Peter – was intended. I did not intend it ironically. It means what it says. I say what I mean. I am an old woman. I do not have time any longer to say things I do not mean.

RED PETER

Speaking frankly, as much as I like choosing metaphors for these things – speaking frankly: your experience as apes, gentlemen – to the extent that you have something of that sort behind you – cannot be more distant from you than mine is from me. But it tickles at the heels of everyone who walks here on earth, the small chimpanzees as well as the great Achilles.

ELIZABETH

Between 1942 and 1945 several million people were put to death in the concentration camps of the Third Reich: at Treblinka alone more than a million and a half, perhaps as many as three million. There are numbers that numb the mind. We have only one death of our own; we can comprehend the deaths of others only one at a time, but we cannot count to a million deaths.

RED PETER

I come from the Gold Coast. For an account of how I was captured I rely on the reports of strangers. A hunting expedition from the firm of Hagenbeck – incidentally, since then I have already emptied a number of bottles of good red

14 Naama Harel(2010) argues that while Red Peter is a symbol, he is not necessarily a symbol of human figures and themes, but rather that he stands for himself. Red Peter, she argues, “is not a metaphor for innocent victims, but he is the ultimate example of such.” (Harel 2010, 63)

wine with the leader of that expedition – lay hidden in the bushes by the shore when I ran down in the evening in the middle of a band of apes for a drink. Someone fired a shot. I was the only one struck. I received two hits.

ELIZABETH

'They went like sheep to the slaughter.' 'They died like animals.' 'The Nazi butchers killed them.' Denunciation of the camps reverberates so fully with the language of the stockyard and the slaughterhouse that it is barely necessary for me to prepare the ground for the comparison I am about to make. The crime of the Third Reich, says the voice of accusation, was to treat people like animals.

RED PETER

One was in the cheek – that was superficial. But it left behind a large hairless red scar which earned me the name Red Peter – a revolting name, completely inappropriate, presumably something invented by an ape. The second shot hit me below the hip. It was serious.

(Red Peter pulls his pants down and shows the scar on his hip.)¹⁵

RED PETER

So far as I am concerned, I may pull my trousers down in front of anyone I like. People will not find there anything other than well cared for fur and the scar from – let us select here a precise word for a precise purpose, something that will not be misunderstood – the scar from a wicked shot. After those shots I woke up – and here my own memory gradually begins – in a cage between decks on the Hagenbeck steamship.

ELIZABETH

Let me say openly: we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing

¹⁵ Violence toward animals is hidden in the public sphere by the zoo. This scar is a trace of that violence. It is a sign that the audience does not want to see. Clothes hide the trauma of the body. (Harel 2010, 56)

them. And to split hairs, to claim that there is no comparison, that Treblinka was so to speak a metaphysical enterprise dedicated to nothing but death and annihilation while the meat industry is ultimately devoted to life is as little consolation to those victims as it would have been – pardon the tastelessness of the following – to ask the dead of Treblinka to excuse their killers because their body fat was needed to make soap and their hair to stuff mattresses with.¹⁶

RED PETER

It was no four-sided cage with bars, but only three walls fixed to a crate, so that the crate constituted the fourth wall. The whole thing was too low to stand upright and too narrow for sitting down. So I crouched with bent knees, which shook all the time, and since at first I probably did not wish to see anyone and to remain constantly in the darkness, I turned towards the crate, while the bars of the cage cut into the flesh on my back. People consider such confinement of wild animals beneficial in the very first period of time, and today I cannot deny, on the basis of my own experience, that in a human sense that is, in fact, the case.

ELIZABETH

Pardon me, I repeat. That is the last cheap point I will be scoring. I know how talk of this kind polarizes people, and cheap point-scoring only makes it worse. I want 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 into the righteous and the sinners, the saved and the damned, the sheep and the goats. Such a language is available to me, I know. It is a philosophical language in which we can discuss and debate what kind of souls animals have, whether they reason or on contrary act as biological automatons, whether they have rights in respect of us or whether we merely have duties in respect of them.

RED PETER

According to what I was told later, I am supposed to have made remarkably little noise. From that people concluded that either I must soon die or, if I succeeded

¹⁶ “What do they know — all these scholars, all these philosophers, all these leaders of the world — about such as you? They have convinced themselves that man, the worst transgressor of all the species, is the crown of creation. All other creatures were created merely to provide him with food, pelts, to be tormented, exterminated. In relation to them, all people are Nazis, for the animals it is an eternal Treblinka.” Isaac Beshevis Singer quoted in (Patterson 2002, 183)

in surviving the first critical period, I would be very capable of being trained. I survived this period. Muffled sobbing, painfully searching out fleas, wearily licking a coconut, banging my skull against the wall of the crate, sticking out my tongue when anyone came near me—these were the first occupations in my new life. In all of them, however, there was only one feeling: no way out. Nowadays, of course, I can portray those ape-like feelings only with human words and, as a result, I misrepresent them. But even if I can no longer attain the old truth of the ape, at least it lies in the direction I have described—of that there is no doubt.

ELIZABETH

I have that language available to me and indeed for a while will be resorting to it. But the fact is, if you wanted someone to come here and discriminate for you between mortal and immortal souls, or between rights and duties, you would have called in a philosopher, not a person whose sole claim to your attention is to have written stories about made-up people. The fact that through the application of reason we can come to understand the rules by which the universe works proves that reason and the universe are of the same being. And the fact that animals, lacking reason, cannot understand the universe but have simply to follow its rules blindly, proves that, unlike man, they are part of it but not part of its being: that man is godlike, animals thinglike.

RED PETER

I had no way out, but I had to come up with one for myself. For without that I could not live. Always in front of that crate wall — I would inevitably have died a miserable death. But according to Hagenbeck, apes belong at the crate wall — well, that meant I would cease being an ape. A clear and beautiful train of thought, which I must have planned somehow with my belly, since apes think with their bellies.¹⁷

¹⁷ Is “human” a performable role? We perform as animals, why not animals performing as humans? Coetzee, after all, is performing as Elizabeth, isn’t he? I want to argue that Red Peter’s ability to “play” a human is also contained within his inability to transcend that role playing to become human, to be treated as human. Coetzee is problematizing his own ability to perform the other. “If man is a sapient animal, a toolmaking animal, a selfmaking animal, a symbol-using animal, he is, no less, a performing animal, Homo Performans, not in the sense, perhaps that a circus animal may be a performing animal, but in the sense that a man is a self-performing animal— his performances are, in a way, reflexive, in performing he reveals himself to himself. This can be in two ways: the actor may come to know himself better through acting or enactment; or one set of human beings may come to know themselves better through observing and/or participating in performances generated and presented by another set of human beings.” (Turner 1995, 81)

ELIZABETH

And that, you see, is my dilemma this afternoon. Both reason and seven decades of life experience tell me that reason is neither the being of the universe nor the being of God. On the contrary, reason looks to me suspiciously like the being of human thought; worse than that, like the being of one tendency in human thought. In the olden days the voice of man, raised in reason, was confronted by the roar of the lion and the bull, and after many generations won that war definitively. Today these creatures have no more power. Animals have only their silence left with which to confront us. Generation after generation, heroically, our captives refuse to speak to us. All save Red Peter, all save the great apes.

RED PETER

One evening in front of a large circle of onlookers - perhaps it was a celebration, a gramophone was playing, an officer was wandering around among the people —when on this evening, at a moment when no one was watching, I grabbed a bottle of alcohol which had been inadvertently left standing in front of my cage, uncorked it just as I had been taught, amid the rising attention of the group, set it against my mouth and, without hesitating, with my mouth making no grimace, like an expert drinker, with my eyes rolling around, splashing the liquid in my throat, I really and truly drank the bottle empty, and then threw it away, no longer in despair, but like an artist. Well, I did forget to scratch my belly. But instead of that, because I couldn't do anything else, because I had to, because my senses were roaring, I cried out a short and good "Hello!" breaking out into human sounds. And with this cry I sprang into the community of human beings, and I felt its echo — "Just listen. He's talking!" — like a kiss on my entire sweat-soaked body.

ELIZABETH

Red Peter was not an investigator of primate behaviour but a branded, marked, wounded animal presenting himself as speaking testimony to a gathering of scholars. I am 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.¹⁸

¹⁸ This leads to the problem of creating meaning out of trauma, of relocating trauma from the body into the realm of thought. Phelan writes: "When writing about the disaster of death it is easy to substitute interpretation for traumas. In that substitution, the trauma is tamed by the interpretive frame and peeled away from the raw "unthought" energy of the body. The unworded is sentenced to meaning." (Phelan 1997, 17)

RED PETER

When I was handed over in Hamburg to my first trainer, I soon realized the two possibilities open to me: the zoological garden or the music hall. I did not hesitate. I said to myself: use all your energy to get into the Music Hall. That is the way out. The Zoological Garden is only a new barred cage. If you go there, you're lost.

ELIZABETH

If Red Peter took it upon himself to make the arduous descent from the silence of the beasts to the gabble of reason in the spirit of the scapegoat, the chosen one, then his amanuensis Franz Kafka was a scapegoat from birth, with a presentiment for the massacre of the chosen people that was to take place so soon after his death.

RED PETER

And I learned, gentlemen. Alas, one learns when one has to. One learns when one wants a way out. One learns ruthlessly. One supervises oneself with a whip and tears oneself apart at the slightest resistance. As I became even more confident of my abilities and the general public followed my progress and my future began to brighten, I took on teachers myself, let them sit down in five interconnected rooms, and studied with them all simultaneously, by constantly leaping from one room into another. And such progress! The penetrating effects of the rays of knowledge from all sides on my awakening brain!

ELIZABETH

Yet we are entitled to ask: In return for the prodigious overdevelopment of the intellect he has achieved, in return for his command of lecture-hall etiquette and academic rhetoric, what has he had to give up? The answer is: Much, including progeny, succession. If Red Peter had any sense, he would not have any children. For upon the desperate, half-mad female ape with whom his captors, in Kafka's story, try to mate him, he would only father a monster.

RED PETER

When I come home late at night from banquets, from scientific societies, or from social gatherings in someone's home, a small half-trained female chimpanzee is waiting for me, and I take my pleasure with her the way apes do. During the day I

don't want to see her. For she has in her gaze the madness of a bewildered trained animal. I'm the only one who recognizes that, and I cannot bear it.

ELIZABETH

The question to ask should not be: Do we have something in common – reason, self-consciousness, a soul – with other animals? I return to the death camps. The horror of the camps, the horror that convinces us that what went on there was a crime against humanity, is not that despite a humanity shared with their victims, the killers treated them like lice. That is too abstract. The horror is that the killers refused to think themselves into the place of their victims, as did everyone else. 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. There are people who have the capacity to imagine themselves as someone else, there are people who have no such capacity – when the lack is extreme, we call them psychopaths – and there are people who have the capacity but choose not to exercise it. I return one last time to the places of death all around us, the places of slaughter to which, in a huge communal effort, we close our hearts. Each day a fresh holocaust, yet, as far as I can see, our moral being is untouched. We do not feel tainted. We can do anything, it seems, and come away clean.

RED PETER

I don't want any human being's judgment. I only want to expand knowledge. I simply report. Even to you, esteemed gentlemen of the Academy, I have only made a report.

Lights down on the podiums. Lights up on John.

JOHN

Scattered applause. A strange ending. A strange ending to a strange talk. Realism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things. So when it needs to debate ideas, as here, realism is driven to invent situations – walks in the countryside, conversations – in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them. The notion of embodying turns out to be pivotal.

(Beat)

There is still a dinner to get through. I look forward to seeing how the college will cope with the challenge of the menu. Are they, out of deference to vegetarianism, going to serve nut rissoles to everyone? Are her distinguished fellow guests going to have to fret through the evening dreaming of the pastrami sandwich or the cold drumstick they will gobble down when they get home? Or will the wise minds of the college have recourse to the ambiguous fish, which has a backbone but does not breathe air or suckle its young? The menu is, fortunately, not my responsibility. What I dread is that, during a lull in the conversation, someone will ask The Question: "What led you, Mrs. Costello, to become a vegetarian?" She will produce what my wife and I call The Plutarch Response. My mother has it by heart; I can only reproduce it imperfectly. "You ask me why I refuse to eat flesh. I, for my part, am astonished that you do not find it nasty to chew hacked flesh and swallow the juices of death-wounds." (Beat) Plutarch is a real conversation stopper: it is the word juices that does it.

(Pause)

Why can't she be an ordinary old woman living an ordinary old woman's life? If she wants to open her heart to animals, why can't she stay home and open it to her cats? I wish my mother had not come.

Lights down on John.

Scene II. Food For Thought

Lights up on a dinner table.

(Elizabeth holds a place of honour. At the table are seated several faculty: Garrard, Ruth, O'Hearn, and Arendt. Also there are John and Norma, his wife. One chair is conspicuously unoccupied. They eat soup while talking. Very mannered.)¹⁹

RUTH

... the chimp insisted on putting a picture of herself with the pictures of humans rather than with the pictures of other apes. One is so tempted to give the story a straightforward reading, namely that she wanted to be thought of as one of us. Yet as a scientist one has to be cautious.

ELIZABETH

Oh, I agree. In her mind the two piles could have had a less obvious meaning. Those who are free to come and go versus those who have to stay locked up, for instance. She may have been saying that she preferred to be among the free.

GARRARD

Or she may just have wanted to please her keeper by saying that they looked alike.

O'HEARN

A bit Machiavellian for an animal, don't you think?

ELIZABETH

Machiavelli the fox, his contemporaries called him.

O'HEARN

But that's a different matter entirely – the fabulous qualities of animals.

ELIZABETH

Yes.

¹⁹ Margaret Visser writes “Table manners maintain and protect taboos and assumptions that seem self-evident within the culture that embraces them. (Visser 2008, xi) Indeed, this scene is about taboos.

GARRARD

Interesting how often religious communities choose to define themselves in terms of dietary prohibitions.

ELIZABETH

Yes.

GARRARD

I mean, it is interesting that the form of the definition should be, for instance, 'We are the people who don't eat snakes' rather than 'We are the people who eat lizards.' What we don't do rather than what we do do.

O'HEARN

It all has to do with cleanness and uncleanness. Clean and unclean animals, clean and unclean habits. Uncleanness can be a very handy device for deciding who belongs and who doesn't, who is in and who is out.

JOHN

Uncleanness and shame. Animals have no shame.²⁰

O'HEARN

Exactly, animals don't hide their excretions, they perform sex in the open. They have no sense of shame, we say: that is what makes them different from us. But the basic idea remains uncleanness. Animals have unclean habits, so they are excluded. Shame makes human beings of us, shame of uncleanness. Adam and Eve: the founding myth. Before that we were all just animals together.

GARRARD

But that can't be how the mechanism works. It's too abstract, too much of a bloodless idea. Animals are creatures we don't have sex with – that's how we distinguish them from ourselves. The very thought of sex with them makes us

²⁰ "For shame involves the realization that one is weak and inadequate in some way in which one expects oneself to be adequate. Its reflex is to hide from the eyes of those who will see one's deficiency, to cover it." (Nussbaum 2001:196) Nussbaum further argues that "good development will allow the gradual relaxing of [infantile] omnipotence in favor of trust" (196). Here, one thinks of Derrida standing naked before his cat, feeling shame. Perhaps it is a fear of rejection, of the cat's imperviousness to its own imperfection that mirrors or highlights Derrida's own sense of imperfection. The cat might reject Derrida. Coetzee alludes to this earlier in the play. Red Peter pulls his pants down and fails to exhibit shame. But his description of his "imperfection", his "weakness", is that it was inflicted on him by man. He was not born with it. This "indifference", and its contextualization of our own difference and presence, that the animals shows to us is echoed in the last scene in Elizabeth's speech about frogs.

shudder. That is the level at which they are unclean – all of them. We don't mix with them. We keep the clean apart from the unclean.²¹

NORMA

But we eat them. We do mix with them. We ingest them. We turn their flesh into ours. So it can't be how the mechanism works. There are specific kinds of animals that we don't eat. Surely those are the unclean ones, not animals in general.

O'HEARN

The Greeks had a feeling there was something wrong in slaughter, but thought they could make up for that by ritualizing it. They made a sacrificial offering, gave a percentage to the gods, hoping thereby to keep the rest. The same notion as the tithe. Ask for the blessing of the gods on the flesh you are about to eat, ask them to declare it clean.

ELIZABETH

Perhaps we invented gods so that we could put the blame on them. They gave us permission to eat flesh. They gave us permission to play with unclean things. It's not our fault, it's theirs. We're just children.

GARRARD

Is that what you believe?

ELIZABETH

And God said: Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you. It's convenient. God told us it was OK. (*Beat*) Norma is right. The problem is to define our difference from animals. The ban on certain animals – pigs and so forth – is quite arbitrary. It is simply a signal that we are in a danger area. A minefield, in fact. The minefield of dietary proscriptions. There is no logic to a taboo, nor is there any logic to a minefield – there is not meant to be. You can never guess what you may eat or where you may step unless you are in possession of a map, a divine map.

NORMA

But people in the modern world no longer decide their diet on the basis of whether they have divine permission. If we eat pig and don't eat dog, that's just the way we are brought up. Wouldn't you agree, Elizabeth? It's just one of our folkways.

²¹ This plays off Red Peter's "lover", a chimpanzee who, no one seems to notice, is not of his species. Red Peter's disgust is not registered.

ELIZABETH

There is disgust. We may have got rid of the gods but we have not got rid of disgust, which is a version of religious horror.

NORMA

Disgust is not universal. The French eat frogs. The Chinese eat anything. There is no disgust in China. So perhaps it's just a matter what you learned at home, what you're mother told you it was okay to eat and what was not.

ELIZABETH

What was clean to eat and what was not.

NORMA

Maybe the whole notion of cleanness versus uncleanness has a completely different function, namely, to enable certain groups to self-define themselves, negatively, as elite, as elected. "We are the people who abstain from a or b or c, and by the power of abstinence we mark ourselves off as superior": as a superior caste within society, for instance. Like the Brahmins. It's a simple way for an elite group to define itself. Other people's table habits are unclean, "we can't eat or drink with them".

(Pause)

ELIZABETH

Have you read Ghandi's autobiography, Norma?

NORMA

No.

ELIZABETH

Ghandi was sent off to England as a young man to study law. England, of course, prided itself as a great meat-eating country. But his mother made him promise not to eat meat. She packed a trunk full of food for him to take along. During the sea voyage he scavenged a little bread from the ship's table and for the rest ate out of his trunk. In London he faced a long search for lodgings and eating-houses that served his kind of food. Social relations with the English were difficult because he could not accept or return hospitality. It wasn't until he fell in with certain fringe elements of English society – Fabians, theosophists, and so forth –

that he began to feel at home. Until then he was just a lonely little law student.

NORMA

What is the point, Elizabeth? What is the point of your story?

ELIZABETH

Just that Ghandi's vegetarianism can hardly be conceived as the exercise of power. It condemned him to the margins of society. It was his particular genius to incorporate what he found on those margins into his political philosophy.

O'HEARN

In any event, Ghandi's is not a good example. His vegetarianism was hardly committed. He was a vegetarian because of the promise he made to his mother. He may have kept his promise, but he regretted and resented it.

GARRARD

But your own vegetarianism, Mrs. Costello: it comes out of moral conviction, does it not?

ELIZABETH

No, I don't think so. It comes out of a desire to save my soul.

(Pause)

GARRARD

Well, I have great respect for it. As a way of life.

ELIZABETH

I'm wearing leather shoes, I'm carrying a leather purse. I wouldn't have overmuch respect if I were you.

GARRARD

Consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds. Surely one can draw a distinction between eating meat and wearing leather.

ELIZABETH

Degrees of obscenity.

ARENDR

I too have the greatest respect for codes based on respect for life. I am prepared

to accept that dietary taboos do not have to be mere customs. I will accept that underlying them are genuine moral concerns. But at the same time one must say that our whole superstructure of concern and belief is a closed book to animals themselves. You can't explain to a steer that its life is going to be spared, any more than you can explain to a bug that you are not going to step on it. In the lives of animals, things, good or bad, just happen. So vegetarianism is a very odd transaction, when you come to think of it, with the beneficiaries unaware that they are being benefited. And with no hope of ever becoming aware. Because they live in a vacuum of consciousness.

(Pause)

JOHN

Perhaps it's time.

ELIZABETH

Yes, it's time.

GARRARD

You won't have coffee?

ELIZABETH

No it will just keep me awake. (To Arendt) That is a good point you raise. No consciousness that we would recognize as consciousness. No awareness, as far as we can make out, of a self with a history. What I mind is what tends to come next. They have no consciousness therefore. Therefore what? Therefore we are free to kill them? Why? What is so special about the form of consciousness we recognize that makes killing a bearer of it a crime while killing an animal goes unpunished? There are moments ---

O'HEARN

To say nothing of babies. Babies have no self-consciousness, yet we think it a heinous crime to kill a baby than an adult.

ARENDR

Therefore?

O'HEARN

Therefore all this discussion of consciousness and whether animals have it is just a smoke screen. At bottom we protect our own kind. Thumbs up to human babies, thumbs down to veal calves. Don't you think so, Mrs. Costello?

ELIZABETH

I don't know what I think. I often wonder what thinking is, what understanding is. Do we really understand the universe better than animals do? Understanding a thing often looks to me like playing with one of those Rubik cubes. Once you've made all the little bricks snap into place, hey presto, you understand. It makes sense if you live inside a Rubik cube, but if you don't...

(Beat)

NORMA

I would have thought...

(John rises from the table. Others join him.)

GARRARD

A wonderful lecture, Mrs. Costello. Much food for thought. We look forward to tomorrow's offering.

JOHN

Ready, Mother?

ELIZABETH

I need the washroom.

ARENDT

I'll show you the way.

JOHN

We'll wait here.

(Elizabeth leaves with Arendt. John and Norma are alone.)

NORMA

Are you going to her seminar tomorrow?

JOHN

I'll have to.

NORMA

What's it on?

JOHN

"The Poets and the Animals."

NORMA

I'm glad it's on something she knows about. I find her philosophizing rather difficult to take.

JOHN

Oh?

NORMA

To say that rational accounts are merely a consequence of the structure of the human mind; that animals have their own accounts in accordance with the structures of their own minds, to which we don't have access because we don't share a language with them?

JOHN

What's wrong with that?

NORMA

It's naive, John. It's the kind of easy, shallow relativism that impresses freshmen. Respect for everyone's worldview, and so forth.

JOHN

Doesn't a squirrel have a worldview?

NORMA

Yes, a squirrel has a worldview. Its worldview comprises acorns and trees and weather and cats and dogs and automobiles and squirrels of the opposite sex. It comprises an account of how these phenomena interact and how it should interact with them to survive. That's all. There's no more. That's the world according to a squirrel.

JOHN

We are sure about that?

NORMA

We are sure about it in the sense that hundreds of years of observing squirrels has not led us to conclude otherwise. If there is anything else in the squirrel mind, it does not issue in observable behaviour. For all practical purposes, the mind of the squirrel is a very simple mechanism.

JOHN

So Descartes was right, animals are just biological automata.

NORMA

Broadly speaking, yes.

JOHN

And human beings are different?

NORMA

Human beings invented mathematics, they build telescopes, they do calculations, they construct machines, they press a button, and, bang, Sojourner lands on Mars, exactly as predicted. Reason provides us with real knowledge of the real world. It has been tested, and it works. You're a physicist. You ought to know.

JOHN

Still, isn't there a position outside from which our doing our thinking and then sending out a Mars probe looks a lot like a squirrel doing its thinking and then dashing out and snatching a nut?

NORMA

But there isn't any such position! There is no position outside of reason! (Beat) I am tired and you are being irritating! This whole thing is an exercise in power. It's nothing but food-faddism. I have no patience when she arrives here and tries to get people, particularly the children, to change their eating habits. And now these absurd public lectures! She is trying to extend her inhibiting power over the whole community!

JOHN

She's perfectly sincere.

NORMA

She has so little insight into her motives that she seems sincere. Mad people are sincere.

JOHN

You're ranting.

NORMA

I'm not ranting. I would have more respect for her if she didn't try to undermine me behind my back, with her stories to the children about the poor little veal calves and what the bad men do to them. I'm tired of having them pick at their

food and ask, 'Mom, is this veal?' when it's chicken or tuna-fish. It's nothing but a power game. Her great hero Franz Kafka played the same game with his family. He refused to eat this, he refused to eat that, he would rather starve, he said. Soon everyone was feeling guilty about eating in front of him, and he could sit back feeling virtuous. It's a sick game, and I'm not having the children play it against me.

(Pause)

JOHN

I take her straight for the airport from school tomorrow. Just a few more hours and she'll be gone, then we can return to normal.

NORMA

Good. Say goodbye to her from me. I'm not getting up early.

(Norma leaves. John is alone for a beat and then Elizabeth enters. She looks around the room. She notices the one chair that was empty through the dinner.)

ELIZABETH

Who was the empty chair?

JOHN

Abraham Stern. A poet. Quite well respected, I believe. He's been here donkey's years. Strange, he attended the lecture.

ELIZABETH

A protest?

JOHN

Who knows?

(They leave the room. Stern enters. He should be the same actor who played Red Peter)

STERN

Dear Mrs. Costello. Excuse me for not attending last night's dinner. I have read your books and know you are a serious person, so I do you the credit of taking what you said in your lecture seriously. At the kernel of your lecture, it seemed to me, was the question of breaking bread. If we refuse to break bread with the executioners of Auschwitz, can we continue to break bread with the slaughterers of animals? 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 died like Jews, you say. That is a trick with words which I will not accept. You misunderstand the nature of likenesses; I would even say you misunderstand willfully, to the point of blasphemy. 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. The inversion insults the memory of the dead. It also trades on the horrors of the camps in a cheap way. Forgive me if I am forthright. You said you were old enough not to have time to waste on niceties, and I am an old man, too. Yours sincerely, Abraham Stern.²²

Lights down on Stern.

²² Richard Posner writes that "Analogy is a treacherous for of argument." (Posner 2004, 57). The word treacherous might be too strong but it certainly is problematic if only because analogy must be reductive, it must simplify or negate the differences between the things being compared and in so doing, cause them to disappear from consideration on their own. A previous note indicates the problem of removing trauma from the body and assigning it rational meaning. Here, another difference in the Holocaust analogy that shouldn't be discounted so readily is that no one ate the victims of the concentration camps. Cora Diamond writes "if the point of the Singer-Regan vegetarian's argument is to show that the eating of meat is, morally, in the same position as the eating of human flesh, he is not consistent unless he says that it is just squeamishness, or something like that, which stops us eating our dead. If he admitted that what underlies our attitude to dining on ourselves is the view that a person is not something to eat, he could not focus on the cow's right not to be killed or maltreated, as if that were the heart of it." (Diamond 2004, 96). This does not, in my view, eliminate the argument against the slaughterhouse, but perhaps it does make us focus more on the human ability to conceive of and employ technologies of mass-scale slaughter, and the ethical questions that arise from that consideration. Like Stern, I feel that equating the moral plight of cattle to the moral plight of Holocaust victims is a bridge too far.

Scene III. The Jaguar: A Fugue of Words and Bodies

Lights up on a student. The screens show an image of a jaguar pacing in a cage. The clip should be original, in one take, close-up to the point of claustrophobia and with sound.

STUDENT 1

His vision, from the constantly passing bars,
has grown so weary that it cannot hold
anything else. It seems to him there are
a thousand bars; and behind the bars, no world.
As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,
the movement of his powerful soft strides
is like a ritual dance around a center
in which a mighty will stands paralyzed.
Only at times, the curtain of the pupils
lifts, quietly--. An image enters in,
rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles,
plunges into the heart and is gone.

(Elizabeth starts to speak. Lights up on her at the head of a conference table. Around the table sit several students, at least four, as many as six. The student who has just read begins moving, using the poems and dialogue as /his/her text.)

ELIZABETH

Animals stand for human qualities: the lion for courage, the owl for wisdom, and so forth. In Rilke's poem the panther is there as a stand-in for something else. He dissolves into a dance of energy around a centre, an image that comes from physics, elementary particle physics. Rilke does not get beyond this point – beyond the panther as the vital embodiment of the kind of force that is released in an atomic explosion but is here trapped not so much by the bars of the cage as by what the bars compel on the panther: a concentric lope that leaves the will

stupefied, narcotized.

(Ted Hughes' voice is heard reading his poem "The Jaguar". The other students get up and begin moving.)

HUGHES (*Recording*)

The apes yawn and adore their fleas in the sun.
The parrots shriek as if they were on fire, or strut
Like cheap tarts to attract the stroller with the nut.
Fatigued with indolence, the tiger and lion

Lie still in the sun. The boa-constrictor's coil
Is a fossil. Cage after cage seems empty, or
Stinks of sleepers from the breathing straw.
It might be painted on a nursery wall.

But who runs like the rest past these arrives
At a cage where the crowd stands, stares mesmerized,
As a child at a dream, at a jaguar hurrying enraged
through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes

On a short fierce fuse. Not in boredom-
The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,
By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear-
He spins from the bars, but there's no cage to him

More than to the visionary his cell:
His stride is wilderness of freedom:
The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.
Over the cage floor the horizons come.

Lights up on Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH

Hughes is writing against Rilke. He uses the same staging in the zoo, but it is the crowd for a change that stands mesmerized, and among them the man, the poet, entranced and horrified and overwhelmed, his powers of understanding pushed beyond their limit. The jaguar's vision, unlike the panther's, is not blunted. On the contrary, his eyes drill through the darkness of space. The cage has no reality to him, he is elsewhere. He is elsewhere because his consciousness is kinetic rather than abstract: the thrust of his muscles moves him through a space quite different in nature from the three-dimensional box of Newton – a circular space that returns upon itself. So Hughes is feeling his way toward a different kind of being-in-the-world,²³ one which is not entirely foreign to us, since the experience before the cage seems to belong to dream-experience, experience held in the collective unconscious. In these poems we know the jaguar not from the way he seems but from the way he moves. The body is as the body moves, or as the currents of life move within it. The poem asks us to imagine our way into that way of moving, to inhabit that body. With Hughes, it is a matter not of inhabiting another mind but of inhabiting another body – by the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will. That is the kind of poetry I bring to your attention today: poetry that does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead a record of an engagement with him. What is peculiar about poetic engagements of this kind is that, no matter with what intensity they take place, they remain a matter of complete indifference to their objects. In this respect they are different from love poems, where your intention is to move your object. Not that animals do not care what we feel about them. But when we divert the current of feeling that flows between ourselves and the animal into words, we abstract it forever from the animal. Thus the poem is not a gift to its object, as the love poem is. It falls within an entirely human economy in which the animal has no share.

(By now, the students have returned, one-by-one, to their chairs.)

²³ Compare this with Norma's argument, in the previous scene, that "there is no position outside reason". There is the body, the feeling body, which, from without, the ability to reason cannot stand.

ELIZABETH

Does that answer your question?

Lights down leaving only the jaguar's eyes burning in the dark. Black.

Scene IV. The Animal That Therefore I Am

The screen projects an image of a large window shot from inside an office. Rain falls heavily outside. Lights up on two podiums. Elizabeth stands behind one, O'Hearn behind the other.

O'HEARN

My first reservation about the animal rights movement is that by failing to recognize its historical nature, it runs the risk of becoming, like the human-rights movement, yet another Western crusade against practices of the rest of the world, claiming universality for what are simply its own standards. When it comes to human rights, other cultures and other religious traditions quite properly reply that they have their own norms and see no reason why they should have to adopt those of the West. Similarly, they say, they have their own norms for the treatment of animals and see no reason to adopt ours – particularly when ours are of such recent invention. The notion that we have an obligation to animals themselves to treat them compassionately – as opposed to an obligation to ourselves to do so – is very recent, very Western, and even Anglo-Saxon. As long as we insist that we have access to an ethical universal to which other traditions are blind, and try to impose it on them by means of propaganda or even economic pressure, we are going to meet with resistance, and that resistance will be justified.

ELIZABETH

The concerns you express are substantial, Professor O'Hearn, and I am not sure I can give them a substantial answer. You are correct, of course, about the history. Kindness to animals has become a social norm only recently, in the last hundred and fifty or two hundred years, and in only part of the world. You are correct too to link this history to the history of human rights, since concern for animals is, historically speaking, an off-shoot of broader philanthropic concerns – for the lot of slaves and of children, among others. However, kindness to animals – and here I use the word kindness in its full sense, as an acceptance that we are all of one kind, one nature – has been more widespread than you imply. Pet keeping, for instance, is by no means a Western fad: the first travellers to South America encountered settlements where human beings and animals lived higgledy-piggledy together. And of course children all over the world consort quite naturally

with animals. They don't see any dividing line. That is something they have to be taught, just as they have to be taught it is all right to kill and eat them. While I concede your main point about Western cultural arrogance, I do think it is appropriate that those who pioneered the industrialization of animal lives and the commodification of animal flesh should be at the forefront of trying to atone for it.

O'HEARN

In my reading of the scientific literature, efforts to show that animals can think strategically, hold general concepts, or communicate symbolically, have had very limited success. The best performance the higher apes can put up is no better than that of a speech-impaired human being with severe mental retardation. If so, are not animals, even the higher animals, properly thought of as belonging to another legal and ethical realm entirely, rather than being placed in this depressing human subcategory? Isn't there a certain wisdom in the traditional view that says that animals cannot enjoy legal rights because they are not persons, even potential persons, as fetuses are? In working out rules for our dealings with animals, does it not make more sense for such rules to apply to us and to our treatment of them, as at present, rather than being predicated upon rights which animals cannot claim or enforce or even understand?

ELIZABETH

To respond adequately, Professor O'Hearn, would take more time than I have, since I would first want to interrogate the whole question of rights and how we come to possess them. So let me just make one observation: that the program of scientific experimentation that leads you to conclude that animals are imbeciles is profoundly anthropocentric. It values being able to find your way out of a sterilized maze, ignoring that fact that if the researcher who designed the maze were to be parachuted into the jungles of Borneo, he or she would be dead of starvation in a week. In fact I would go further. If I as a human being were told that the standards by which animals are being measured in these experiments are human standards, I would be insulted. It is the experiments themselves that are imbecile. The behaviourists who design them claim that we understand only by a process of creating abstract models and then testing those models against reality. What nonsense. We understand by immersing ourselves and our intelligence in complexity. There is something self-stultified in the way in which scientific behaviourism recoils from the complexity of life. So for animals being too dumb and too stupid to speak for themselves, consider the following sequence of

events. When Albert Camus was a young boy in Algeria, his grandmother told him to bring her one of the hens from the cage in their backyard. He obeyed, then watched her cut off its head with a kitchen knife, catching its blood in a bowl so that the floor would not be dirtied. The death-cry of that hen imprinted itself on the boy's memory so hauntingly that in 1958 he wrote an impassioned attack on the guillotine. As a result, in part, of that polemic, capital punishment was abolished in France. Who is to say, then, that the hen did not speak?

O'HEARN

I make the following statement with due deliberation, mindful of the historical associations it may evoke. I do not believe that life is as important to animals as it is to us. There is certainly in animals an instinctive struggle against death, which they share with us. But they do not understand death as we do, or rather, as we fail to do. There is, in the human mind, a collapse of the imagination before death. And that collapse of the imagination – graphically evoked in yesterday's lecture – is the basis of our fear of death. That fear does not and cannot exist in animals, since the effort to comprehend extinction, and the failure to do so, the failure to master it, have simply not taken place. For that reason, I want to suggest, dying is, for an animal. Just something that happens, something against which there may be a revolt of the organism but not a revolt of the soul. And the lower down the scale of evolution one goes, the truer this is. To an insect, death is the breakdown of systems that keep the physical organism functioning, and nothing more/ To animals, death is continuous with life. It is only among certain very imaginative human beings that one encounters a horror of dying so acute that they then project it onto other beings, including animals. Animals live, and then they die: that is all. Thus to equate a butcher who slaughters a chicken with an executioner who kills a human being is a grave mistake. The events are not comparable. They are not of the same scale, they are not on the same scale. I want to apologize in advance to our lecturer for the seeming harshness of what I am about to say, but I believe it needs to be said. Of the many varieties of animal-lover I see around me, let me isolate two. On the one hand, hunters, people who value animals at a very elementary, unreflective level; who spend hours watching them and tracking them; and who, after they have killed them, get pleasure from the taste of their flesh. On the other hand, people who have little contact with animals, or at least with those species they are concerned to protect, like poultry and livestock, yet want all animals to lead – in a non-economic vacuum

– a utopian life in which everyone is miraculously fed and no one preys on anyone else. Of the two, which, I ask, loves animals more? It is because agitation for animal rights, including the right to life, is so abstract that I find it unconvincing and, finally, idle. Its proponents talk a great deal about our community with animals, but how do they actually live that community? Thomas Aquinas says that friendship between human beings and animals is impossible, and I tend to agree. You can be friends neither with a Martian nor with a bat for the simple reason that you have too little in common with them. We may certainly wish for there to be a community with animals, but that is not the same thing as living in a community with them. It is just a piece of prelapsarian wistfulness.

ELIZABETH

Anyone who says that life matters less to animals than it does to us has not held in his hands an animal fighting for its life. The whole of the being of the animal is thrown into that fight, without reserve. When you say that the fight lacks a dimension of intellectual or imaginative horror, I agree. It is not the mode of being of animals to have an intellectual horror: their whole being is in the living flesh. (*Beat*) If I do not convince you, that is because my words, here, lack the power to bring home to you the wholeness, the unabstracted, unintellectual nature of animal being. That is why I urge you to read the poets who return the living, electric being to language; and if the poets do not move you, I urge you to walk, flank to flank, beside a beast that is prodded down the chute to his executioner. (*Beat*) You say that death does not matter to an animal because the animal does not understand death. I am reminded of one of the academic philosophers I read in preparing for yesterday's lecture. It was a depressing experience. It awoke in me a quite Swiftian response. If this is the best that human philosophy can offer, I said to myself, I would rather go and live among the horses. Can we, asked this philosopher, strictly speaking, say that the veal calf misses his mother? Does the veal calf have enough of a grasp of the significance of the mother-relation, does the veal calf have enough of a grasp of the meaning of material absence, does the veal calf, finally, know enough about missing to know that the feeling it has is the feeling of missing? A calf who has not mastered the concepts of presence and absence, of self and other – so goes the argument – cannot, strictly speaking, be said to miss anything. In order to, strictly speaking, miss anything, it would first have to take a course in philosophy. What sort of philosophy is this? Throw it out, I say. What good do its piddling distinctions do? To me, a

philosopher who says that the distinction between human and non-human depends on whether you have a white or black skin, and a philosopher who says that the distinction between human and non-human depends on whether you know the difference between a subject and a predicate, are more alike than they are unlike. (Beat) Usually I am wary of exclusionary gestures. I know of one prominent philosopher who states that he is simply not prepared to philosophize about animals with people who eat meat. I am not sure I would go as far as that – frankly, I have not the courage – but I must say I would not fall over myself to meet the gentleman whose book I just have been citing. Specifically, I would not fall over myself to break bread with him. Would I be prepared to discuss ideas with him? That really is the crucial question. Discussion is possible only when there is common ground. When opponents are at loggerheads, we say: 'Let them reason together, and by reasoning clarify what their differences are, and thus inch closer. They may seem to share nothing else, but at least they share reason.' (Beat) On the present occasion, however, I am not sure I want to concede that I share reason with my opponent. Not when reason is what underpins the whole long philosophical tradition to which he belongs, stretching back to Descartes and beyond Descartes through Aquinas and Augustine to the Stoics and Aristotle. (Beat) If the last common ground that I have with him is reason, and if reason is what sets me apart from the veal calf, then thank you but no thank you, I'll talk to someone else.²⁴

Lights down.

²⁴ "Coetzee enacts a rant: Elizabeth Costello's 'excitable speech,' in Judith Butler's sense, consists of 'utterances made under duress, usually confessions that... do not reflect the balanced mental state of the utterer' (Butler 1997, 15). Because the persona he speaks is a woman, this speech is feminized and negatively connotated; in the critical arenas of Appleton College and in critical academic discourse about *The Lives of Animals*, it becomes a rant characterized by sensible and feminine bodily reaction." (Wright 2006, 196-7)

Scene V. At The Zoo

(No visual background. Instead, an aural landscape, suggested by elements of the scene. For example: airplanes; a slaughterhouse floor; frogs.)

Lights up on John and Elizabeth.

JOHN

Do you really believe that poetry classes are going to close down the slaughterhouse?

ELIZABETH

No.

JOHN

Then why do it? Why have you become so intense about the animal business?

ELIZABETH

It's that I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible that all of them are participating in a crime of stupendous proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet everyday I see the evidences. The very people I suspect produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to me. Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money. It's as if I were to visit friends, and to make some polite remark about the lamp in their living room, and they were to say, 'Yes, it's nice, isn't it? Polish-Jewish skin it's made of, we find that's the best, the skins of young Polish-Jewish virgins.' And then I go to the bathroom and the soap-wrapper says, 'Treblinka – 100% human stearate.' Am I dreaming, I say to myself? What kind of house is this? Yet I'm not dreaming. I look into your eyes, into Norma's, into the children's, and I see only kindness, human-kindness. Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else come to terms with it, why can't you? Why can't you?

JOHN

There, there. There, there. It will be over soon.

Lights down on John and Elizabeth. Lights up on a gate.

(The gate is a metal detector like those commonly found at airport security checks. A guard stands to one side. A cleaning lady is mopping the floor on the other side. Elizabeth stands in the gate.)

The gate's alarm lights up.

GUARD

Step forward. Arms up to your side.

(He scans her with a baton)

GUARD

Step back and walk through again.

(Elizabeth does so. The lights go off again as she steps in. She stops.)

GUARD

Anything in your pockets?

ELIZABETH

No.

GUARD

Please remove your shoes and try again.

(Elizabeth does so. The lights go off again)

ELIZABETH

Can I pass through?

GUARD

Do you have a statement?

ELIZABETH

Make a statement? To whom? To you? I should think you would be more interested in my toothpaste or my passport.

GUARD

We don't accept passports at this gate. I need a statement.

ELIZABETH

A statement of what?

GUARD

Belief. What you believe.

ELIZABETH

Belief. Is that all? Not a statement of faith? What if I do not believe? What if I am not a believer?

GUARD

We all believe. We are not cattle.

ELIZABETH

I am a writer. You have probably not heard of me here, but I write, or have written, under the name Elizabeth Costello. It is not my profession to believe, just to write. Not my business. I do imitations, as Aristotle would have said. I can do an imitation of belief, if you like. Will that be enough for your purposes?

GUARD

Make the statement as required.

ELIZABETH

Only a bureaucracy could conceive of such a hackneyed theatrical device. But very well. A statement. I am a writer, a trader in fictions. I maintain beliefs only provisionally: fixed beliefs would stand in my way. I change beliefs as I change my clothes, according to my needs.

GUARD

That is not a belief.

(Beat)

ELIZABETH

Can I glance through? Just to see if it's worth all this trouble?

GUARD

Step through. Stop. There, satisfy yourself. (*Beat*) You have seen. The record will show that. Now you have seen. Now you will try harder. Please step back.- Your statement.

ELIZABETH

I am a writer, and what I write is what I hear. I am a secretary of the invisible, one of many secretaries over the ages. That is my calling: dictation secretary. It is not for me to interrogate, to judge what is given me. I merely write down the words and then test them, test their soundness, to make sure I have heard it right. A good secretary should have no beliefs. It is inappropriate to the function. A secretary should merely be in readiness, waiting for the call. In my work a belief is a resistance, an obstacle. I try to empty myself of resistances.²⁵

GUARD

Without beliefs we are not human.

ELIZABETH

I do not claim to be bereft of all belief. I have opinions and prejudices, no different in kind from what are commonly called beliefs. When I claim to be a secretary clean of belief I refer to my ideal self, a self capable of holding opinions and prejudices at bay while the word which is her function to conduct passes through her. To put it another way, I have beliefs but I do not believe in them. My heart is not in them. My heart and my sense of duty.

GUARD

You are not an unbeliever then?

ELIZABETH

No. Unbelief is a belief. A disbeliever, if you will accept the distinction.

GUARD

But in your books, as a writer, you make one judgement upon another, it must be so. What guides you in these judgements? Have you no beliefs as a writer?

²⁵ "In one sense, then Coetzee's fiction unequivocally rehearses the failure of Costello's sympathetic imagination, the failure of the literary endeavor itself [...] It is as if attentiveness to the difference of the other becomes possible only in the wake of the failure of the project of the sympathetic imagination, the failure to think one's way into the reality of other lives." (Durrant 2006, 120) This speaks to me of Derrida's hyperbolic ethics, the constant need to question ones beliefs, never taking anything for granted.

ELIZABETH

Every morning I seat myself at my desk and ready myself for the summons of the day. That is the secretary's way of life. I am open to all voices, not just the voices of the murdered and the violated. If it is the murderers and violators who choose to summon me instead, to use me and speak through me, I will not close my ears to them, I will not judge them.

GUARD

Is that what it is to be a secretary: to write down whatever you are told? To be bankrupt of conscience?

ELIZABETH

Do you think the guilty do not suffer too? 'Do not forget me!' — That is what they cry. What kind of conscience is it that would disregard a cry of such moral agony?

GUARD

So these voices that summon you, you do not ask where they come from?

ELIZABETH

No. Not as long as they speak the truth.

GUARD

And you- you, consulting only your heart, are judge of that truth?

ELIZABETH

Yes.

GUARD

Go on.

ELIZABETH

That is all. You asked, I answered. Would you prefer I say: 'I believe in the irrepressible human spirit', or 'I believe that all humankind is one'?

GUARD

Do you?

ELIZABETH

Now and then.

GUARD

Now?

ELIZABETH

I'll say anything if it will get me out of this cliché.

(The phone rings)

GUARD

Yes. Yes. *(to Elizabeth)* Please stay here.

(He exits. The cleaning lady moves closer, mopping.)

CLEANING LADY

How is your confession going?

ELIZABETH

It is not a confession, it is a statement of belief.

CLEANING LADY

We call them confessions here.

ELIZABETH

Really? I would not call it that. Not in English. Perhaps in Latin, Italian.

CLEANING LADY

What are you saying in your confession?

ELIZABETH

That I cannot afford to believe. That belief is an indulgence, a luxury. That it gets in the way.

CLEANING LADY

Some of us would say the luxury we cannot afford is unbelief — entertaining all possibilities, floating between opposites — it is the mark of a leisurely existence, a leisured existence. Most of us have to choose. Only the light soul hangs in the air. Let me offer a word of advice. They may say they demand belief, but in practice they will be satisfied with passion. Show them passion and they will let you through.

ELIZABETH

Passion? I would have thought passion leads one away from the light, not towards it.

CLEANING LADY

It is not belief they are after. The effect of belief is enough, the effect of belief. Show them you feel and they will be satisfied.

ELIZABETH

I do not give shows, I'm not an entertainer. I cannot drum up what you call passion when it is not there. Cannot turn it on and off.

(The guard returns. The cleaning lady stops mopping. She stands at attention beside Elizabeth. In support, not so much on guard)

GUARD

You are being asked to revise your statement. Please proceed.

(The sound of frogs starts low and rises through the monologue)

ELIZABETH

What I believe. I was born in the city of Melbourne, but spent part of my childhood in rural Victoria, in a region of climatic extremes: of scorching droughts followed by torrential rains that swelled the rivers with the carcasses of drowned animals. When the waters subsided, acres of mud were left behind. At night you would hear the belling of tens of thousands of little frogs rejoicing in the largesse of the heavens. The air would be as dense with their calls as it was at noon with the rasping of cicadas. Where do they suddenly arrive from, these thousands of frogs? The answer is, they are always there. In the dry season they go underground, burrowing further and further from the heat of the sun until each has created a little tomb for itself. And in those tombs they die, so to speak. Their heartbeat slows, their breathing stops, they turn the colour of mud. Once again the nights are silent. Silent until the next rain comes, rapping, as it were, on thousands of tiny coffin lids. In those coffins hearts begin to beat, limbs begin to twitch that for months have been lifeless. The dead awake. As the caked mud softens, the frogs begin to dig their way out, and soon their voices resound again in joyous exultation beneath the vault of the heavens.

(Pause)

ELIZABETH

Excuse my language. I am or have been a professional writer. Usually I take care to conceal the extravagances of the imagination. But today, for this occasion, I thought I would conceal nothing, bare all.²⁶

GUARD

Why?

ELIZABETH

Because today I am before you not as a writer but as an old woman who was once a child, telling you what I remember of the mudflats of my childhood and of the frogs who live there, some as small as the tip of my little finger, creatures so insignificant and so remote from your loftier concerns that you would not hear of them otherwise. In my account, the life cycle of the frog may sound allegorical, but to the frogs themselves it is no allegory, it is the thing itself, the only thing.

GUARD

And so what do you believe?

ELIZABETH

I believe in those little frogs. I believe that the mudflats are real, the frogs are real. They exist whether or not I tell you about them, whether or not I believe in them. It is because of the indifference of those little frogs to my belief, it is because of their indifference to me that I believe in them. And that is why this afternoon, in this lamentably rushed and lamentably theatrical presentation I thought I would offer myself to you without forethought, without notes, *toute nue* so to speak. I speak to you of frogs. Of frogs and of my beliefs. Because they exist.

(The cleaning lady begins to clap. The Guard looks at her. She stops.)

GUARD

You believe in life?

²⁶ This scene, to me, is a performance of Derrida's "words that are, to begin with, naked, quite simply, words from the heart." (Derrida 2008, 1)

ELIZABETH

I believe in what does not bother to believe in me.

GUARD

A stone does not believe in you. A bush. But these frogs of yours embody the spirit of life, which is what you as a storyteller believe in.

ELIZABETH

If you like.

(The phone rings. The guard answers.)

GUARD

Yes. Yes.

(He hangs up)

ELIZABETH

Do I stand a chance of passing through?

GUARD

We all stand a chance.

ELIZABETH

Do you see many people like me, people in my situation?

GUARD

We see people like you all the time.

(He exits)

The sound of frogs rises. Lights down.

END

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