



Open Library of Humanities



---

## Article

**How to Cite:** Nowak-McNeice, K., 2018. Belonging to the Human and Non-human Animals in J. M. Coetzee's Recent Novels. *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 6(1): 9, pp. 1–20. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.29>

**Published:** 12 February 2018

---

### Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, which is a journal of the Open Library of Humanities.

### Copyright:

© 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

### Open Access:

*C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

### Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

---

**The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles and monographs.**

## ARTICLE

# Belonging to the Human and Non-human Animals in J. M. Coetzee's Recent Novels

Katarzyna Nowak-McNeice

Universidad Carlos III de Madrid/Wroclaw University, ES

knowakmc@hum.uc3m.es

---

This essay places Coetzee's writing within the context of the recent posthumanist debate concerning the distinction between human and non-human animals, whose contributors include Giorgio Agamben, Rosi Braidotti, Jacques Derrida and Cary Wolfe. I propose a reading of the figures of animals in Coetzee's recent novels, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), which contributes to the questioning of the divide, particularly with reference to such markers of the limits between humanity and animality as taste. Coetzee's characters from his recent novels are an exercise in the adoption of non-anthropocentric positions: they transgress and contest the borders between the human and the non-human configured as angelic, divine, animalistic, or non-material. Coetzee's recent novels question the divide and suggest new ways of understanding the human–non-human continuum. By rejecting binary divisions between human and non-human animals, Coetzee's prose illustrates the idea of entanglement, in which light his characters cannot be perceived as traditional agents endowed with unified identities, but rather, must be seen as radically entangled, with matter and meaning inextricably connected.

---

**Keywords:** Coetzee; animals; entanglement; postanthropocentric subject; divinanimality

---

John Coetzee is a writer unafraid to pose difficult questions: in his novels, as well as in his essays, and in the prose that eludes these categories, he has confronted the issues of racial, gender, and social equality with an unprecedented frankness and directness. In his recent prose, he continues his exploration of the ontological and ethical dimension; his two most recent novels to date, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), confront the elementary question of what

exactly it means to be human. In other words, they participate in the age-old debate, concerning the difference between the human and non-human animal, whose participants include Descartes, Heidegger, and Kant. Recently this debate has been energized by posthumanist explorations, and Coetzee's is an important voice in the debate, provoking and challenging the reader.

Coetzee's prose defies easy classifications. Although it is frequently categorized as postcolonial (Boehmer, 2005; Poyner, 2009; Bethlehem, 2009), or postmodern (Attridge, 2005; Kossew, 1993), it might also be seen in other terms. For example, Dominic Head reminds us that it is often discussed as 'late modernist' (Head, 2009: xi). In an attempt to preserve the wide range of possible readings, Carroll Clarkson claims that 'Coetzee's seemingly opposite preoccupations with history and with postcolonial themes on the one hand, and with self-reflexive postmodern strategies on the other, are inextricably connected' (Clarkson, 2009: 155). Similarly avoiding the temptation to narrowly categorize Coetzee's texts, Boehmer, Iddiols and Eaglestone argue that 'Coetzee's writing reverberates at the cutting edge of debates across the public sphere and in the humanities now' (Boehmer, Iddiols and Eaglestone, 2009: 3). These and other voices testify to the richness of contexts in which his prose might be situated.

One such crucial context is postcolonial theory, but even within this framework Coetzee's prose is not easily categorized. Dominic Head claims that the novelist's prose has dwelled in 'an interim position in a very particular branch of postcolonial writing: the literature of the "postcolonizer"' (Head, 2009: x). Postcolonial studies provide an important critical backdrop for Coetzee's works, not only because of the range of issues that mobilize his prose, such as colonial and postcolonial identity, history and historiography, hybridity and liminality, and the imperialistic/patriarchal language that requires decolonization, but also because of the critical reading that Coetzee himself proposes in his essays and elsewhere in his writing that defies easily drawn boundaries between the categories of fiction and non-fiction. Thus, for example, in *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, the author defines the eponymous literature (written by a people unable to quite identify with either Europe or Africa) as a 'literature of empty landscape,' which he then deems

'a literature of failure, of the failure of historical imagination' (Coetzee, 1988: 9). Attention to environment, a defining feature of ecocriticism, has already found a place in Coetzee's classic postcolonial essays.

Postcolonial context is also important, because it provides a contextual bridge between Coetzee's early novels, which are set in postcolonial locales and display postcolonial preoccupations, and his later novels, which turn to ideas (such as animal rights) not readily associated with postcolonial criticism, yet evidently related in the sense of their ethical subtext. Coetzee's recent novels may be seen as attempts at 'narrowing the ecological gap between coloniser and colonised' which Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue for in their collection *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2010: 2). This postulate means that even though one might distinguish between first world and third world ecological awareness and activism (the tension between them is very often noticeable in Coetzee's texts), the gap between them is not necessarily unbridgeable, even though the sensitivity to ecological issues and the capacity to act are strictly delineated by the worlds in which they originate. The proposed alliance between postcolonial and ecological criticism finds an interesting expression in Coetzee studies, an area of critical activity which at its onset was strictly connected to postcolonial theory and is still embedded in it. That Coetzee criticism would evolve from postcolonial criticism toward ecocritical thought is no surprise: just as the writer proposed a careful and attentive reading of the position occupied by the (post-)colonizer in his earlier works (for example, *Life and Times of Michael K.*, 1983; *Age of Iron*, 1990), now his prose turns to a careful examination of the position occupied by humans in their environment.

As much as the presence and meaning of animal figures in Coetzee's earlier prose has been widely theorized (for example, Richard A. Barney, Tom Herron and Stephen Mulhall have written on the animal figures in *Disgrace*, while Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin, Yoshiki Tajiri and several contributors to Jennifer Rutheford and Anthony Uhlmann's edited volume of essays mention both *Elizabeth Costello*, from 2003, and *The Lives of Animals*, from 1999, in this context), the *Jesus* novels have not yet been discussed as crucial in the light of the discourses about the animal. I wish to argue that even though animals do not constitute the core interest

of Coetzee's most recent novels, they do indeed represent the crux of the ontological question that Coetzee's prose undertakes to investigate.

The question of otherness, a preoccupation of both post-colonial studies and ecocritical writing, pivots on the idea of a unified subject. To define a subject according to traditional humanist criteria means to delineate its distinctiveness *vis-à-vis* other categories. In this confrontation, the animal figure becomes a litmus test for a definition and delineation of the borders of humanity; as Kari Weil states, 'nonhuman animals have become a limit case for theories of difference, otherness, and power' (Weil, 2010: 3). The tension between the need for clear-cut distinctions and their abolition is not, however, exhausted along the species lines, and it is an indication of a yearning for difference in other categories. Dominick LaCapra reminds us, 'A decisive difference between humans and other animals may, in certain contexts, also be linked to the postulation of decisive differences between categories of humans based on gender, sexual orientation, race, and class' (2009: 154), thus pointing to the wide context of the debate about the status of the human. The non-human animal becomes the liminal site; exactly how this liminality is perceived, either in an oppositional way (which Coetzee's prose rejects), or as a proximity and entanglement (which it supports), exposes the limits of our understanding of the position a human being occupies in the environment.

In the present essay, I focus on the idea of entanglement as a category to explain the agential positions of Coetzee's characters, and I situate this category on the spectrum of possible human–non-human relations, alongside proximity and continuity. Proximity, continuity and entanglement are the categories that I choose to designate as posthumanist, in the sense that they correspond to – and are expected to replace – the traditional anthropocentric positions ascribed to non-human animals (as the abject other and as the sacrificial victim), the rejection of which allows us to see the human – animal continuity, and, ultimately, entanglement. Proximity of non-human animals to humans can be understood in at least two senses, the first of which is their existence alongside humans, as companion animals and also animals that are seen as a source of food. The second meaning that the term proximity might take is

human closeness to other animals in genetic and biological terms. One instance of such proximity is that, biologically, the human body cannot be separated from the bacteria in our systems: according to microbiologist Rob Knight, the microbe cells within our bodies outnumber our cells at a ratio of ten to one (Brumfield, 2015); the phenomenon known as horizontal gene transfer (incorporating foreign genes into our genome) is an ongoing occurrence (Crisp & Boschetti, 2015). These and other developments in the natural sciences that suggest human genetic proximity to other animals must also be acknowledged in the humanities, as they point to the need to revisit our understanding of what it means to be human. We can no longer see ourselves as individuals; rather, what is necessary to explain our existence in the world is the adoption of the category of entanglement.

Posthumanist critics and philosophers recognize the need for a re-consideration of the categories of human and non-human. Cary Wolfe postulates 'rethinking the relation between language, ethics, and species itself' (Wolfe, 2010: 10); to apply this postulate to the study of subject positions portrayed in literature means assuming 'a postanthropocentric concept of the subject' (Wolfe, 2010: 11). In more general terms, Braidotti explains the role of posthuman theory and the consequences of adopting such optics: 'posthuman theory contests the arrogance of anthropocentrism and the "exceptionalism" of the Human as a transcendental category.... This requires a mutation of our shared understanding of what it means to think at all, let alone think critically' (Braidotti, 2013: 66). I argue that Coetzee's characters from his recent novels are an exercise in the adoption of non-anthropocentric positions: they transgress and contest the borders between the human and the non-human configured as angelic, divine, animalistic or non-material. Contesting the exceptional position humans have long assumed means situating ourselves in proximity to other animals and seeing ourselves in continuity with them, rather than opposed to them. Ultimately, it designates accepting the idea of entanglement between species. These positions are exemplified in Coetzee's latest novels. In this essay, I propose to view Coetzee's prose as a rejection of the binary foundations of the question of human and non-human animals and an illustration of the idea of entanglement. Thus, his

characters cannot be perceived as traditional agents endowed with unified identities, but rather, must be seen as radically entangled, with matter and meaning inextricably connected.

### **The Jesus Books: Divinanimalité**

In the debate concerning the definition of humanity, certain markers have defined humanity: language, appreciation of art, recognition of beauty or divinity and disgust have all been pointed to as decisive qualities whose possession would differentiate the human from the non-human. Descartes famously perceives animals as nothing more than machines, incapable of creation or perception of beauty (Descartes, 2008: 44–46); for Kant, the difference between the human and its other lies in the idea of taste, a category beyond the beautiful and the ugly, approaching a moral distinction (Kant, 2005: 94); for Heidegger, the sublime, self-awareness and understanding, with its by-product – boredom – are the attributes of humanity (Heidegger, 1998: 91). All of these voices situate the animal in a position of muteness and unreadability, and represent the subject of discourse as a solidified, homogeneous entity. In polemics with such theories of subjectivity, posthuman theory urges us to find more inclusive, non-binary ways of thinking about subjectivity, and to reconfigure the very idea of a subject, while Coetzee's recent prose provides us with ample examples of how the new subjectivity might be imagined.

In Coetzee's two most recent novels, animal references do not establish the core thematic interest; still, *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus* employ animal figures to investigate the question of humanity and probe deeper into the problematics of human and non-human animals. Eleni Philippou notes that *The Childhood of Jesus* marks a 'thematic and conceptual shift in the manner in which Coetzee speaks to the animal,' and she specifies it as follows: 'in this novel Coetzee uses the animal to explore an oppositional binary that could loosely be described as the corporeal versus the otherworldly or spiritual' (Philippou, 2016: 218). Yet *The Childhood of Jesus*, I wish to argue, uses these oppositions, which can be extended to the instinctual versus the intellectual, and the animal-in-human versus the inherently human, and presents them as ultimately reductionist and thus

unsustainable, reaching a position that could best be described using Jacques Derrida's term 'divinanimality' (Derrida, 2008: 132). For Derrida, 'divinanimality' refers to the 'ahuman,' that is, what is situated beyond the category of humanity, but also, it designates 'the quasi-transcendental referent, the excluded, foreclosed, disavowed, tamed, and sacrificed foundation of what it finds, namely, the symbolic order, the human order' (Derrida, 2008: 132). Here, in the spirit of radically transgressing the limits of the human, the term indicates a postulated collapse of the distinction between the divine and the animal and, what follows, a re-definition of the human. What is designated as angelic or divine shares crucial characteristics of otherness—the disavowed, the abject, the excluded—with what can be deemed animalistic, which allows for a conflation of these two categories. If human is no longer defined in opposition to either the divine or the animalistic, then the category of the human must too be redefined. Both *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus* are voices speaking against the demarcation of the strict boundaries separating the human and the animal.

### **Proximity, Excess and the Abject Other**

*The Childhood of Jesus* presents a story of a man, Simón, who lands on the shores of an unidentified foreign country and is intent on starting a new life. He is accompanied by a boy, Davíd. The reader learns that on board the ship that brought them to the place, Simón took care of the boy who lost his mother in the commotion of exile. He assumes the position of the boy's guardian and feels it is his mission to find the boy's mother, despite never having seen her. The narrative is by no means straightforwardly realistic and it acquires an allegoric dimension once we consider that, despite the title of the novel, there is no character called Jesus. Whether the reader is expected to treat the *Jesus* narratives as mock-apocryphal, symbolic or allegoric, remains one of the strengths of the novels, as this ambiguity opens them up to a variety of interpretations. Particularly relevant to this article is that, by invoking Biblical characters the texts evoke the divine in order to present its conflation with the animalistic – divinanimality – and thus indicate the need to revise the category of the human.

Just how the category of the human might be imagined otherwise is suggested by the use of animal figures, which appear in human proximity. In *The Childhood of Jesus*, subtle animal references abound, starting with the first episode, in which Simón and the boy Davíd are forced by circumstance to spend the night out in the open, which provokes Simón to think, 'Only let there be no crawling insects. Crawling insects will be too much' (Coetzee, 2013: 9). This remark is later paralleled in Simón's thoughts right after he finds the boy's mother, when he admits to feeling 'like one of those drab male insects whose sole function is to pass on his seed to the female' (Coetzee, 2013: 108). In the first fragment, animals are the excess and the abject other, impossible to incorporate in the human frame of reference; in the second, human existence is reduced to a biological function, and being precisely that, a reduction, is an unpleasant reminder of the animality in humanity. These two instances illustrate the two opposite poles of human–non-human identification: on the one hand, fear and anxiety are generated in the perception of animals as radically different from humans and excessive in their animality, thus becoming more than humans; on the other, we have the self-imposed comparison in which the human is likened to the non-human, becoming nothing more than an animal. Both ways of imagining animals that appear in human proximity, in a physical and a metaphorical sense, share a characteristic that designates them to inhabit the space of the abject. In this space, as Julia Kristeva tells us, 'There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable' (Kristeva, 1982: 1). Animals, simultaneously imagined as more than human and less than human, are in the position of the abject, the absolute other impossible to incorporate into the human frame of reference. And yet, they exist in proximity to the human, disrupting the divisions between 'us' and 'them.'

Non-human animals living in human proximity are often a category of being, the absolute other, against which human life is measured. The two poles on which philosophy situates the non-human animal, as Dominick LaCapra argues, while pointing out the conflicted character of this division, may take the form of either

ascribing them with a lower ethical status, as for example a 'raw and simple life,' or endowing them with a superior ethical status as an inscrutable other, both within us and outside us: 'Paradoxically, the projection of other animals into a separate sphere may take two seemingly contradictory but at times conjoined forms: the reduction of the other to infra-ethical status . . . and the elevation of the other to a supra-ethical status as sacrificial or quasi-sacrificial victim as well as utterly opaque or enigmatic other' (LaCapra, 2009: 153–54). *The Jesus* novels present animals as both below and above humans, as human life is compared to excrement (Coetzee, 2013: 157), but also deemed 'the pinnacle of creation' (Coetzee, 2013: 129), complicating and undermining such a simple binary distinction.

In the *Jesus* narratives, Simón assumes the position of the guardian of the boy, which affords him an opportunity to teach him about the world and attempt to answer the boy's doubts concerning the human position in it. When called upon to explain the significance of humanity, Simón describes the human condition as having a 'double nature', that is, 'partak[ing] of the ideal,' but also 'mak[ing] poo' (Coetzee, 2013: 157). This distinction, necessarily presented in childish terms in *The Childhood of Jesus*, points to an important debate and may be translated as an acknowledgment of the animal and the ideal in the human; and the element of the ideal, as we may understand from Coetzee's earlier prose such as *Elizabeth Costello* or *The Lives of Animals*, is not so much the ideal in philosophy as the compassionate in literature. The distinction between philosophy and literature remains crucial in the *Jesus* novels, as it corresponds to the distinction between an approach to non-human animals informed by the ideal, that is to say, by the philosophical discourse which does not consider the non-human animals' proximity to the human, and an approach to non-human animals which takes this proximity as its own point of reference, reducing the distance between the human and the non-human. Jacques Derrida helps us understand this distinction, as he famously proposes to understand the idea of poetry in the figure of the hedgehog by equating the two: very much like the hedgehog, a poem remains an unapproachable entity and bristles against our efforts to reduce away its multiple meanings. In a later text, Derrida comments on

his own figuration, stating, 'thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry' (Derrida, 2008: 7). He explains, 'There you have a thesis: it is what philosophy has, essentially, had to deprive itself of. It is the difference between philosophical knowledge and poetic thinking' (Derrida, 2008: 7). Derrida invites us to imagine the distinction between philosophy and poetry with reference to an animal figure, thus coming very close to the position Elizabeth Costello represents,<sup>1</sup> but *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus* take these distinctions further.

Thus, thinking about poetry, about literature, is taking the side of animals: Coetzee's latest novels illustrate this point. To consider that literature is an important part of human life, as Simón does, and to assume that it indeed defines us as humans, quite paradoxically means thinking like a hedgehog,<sup>2</sup> or like a dog, or an insect. This way of understanding the non-human animals in our proximity means a rejection of the discourse that designates for them the position of the abject other; instead, it invites us to think about their proximity as instrumental to our perception of ourselves. As a result, it means accepting aporia at the core of any attempted definition of humanity. Ultimately, it also means accepting the dialogue in which philosophy and literature participate, inseparable from each other, as, in Stephen Mulhall's words, 'for each properly to acknowledge the other would require both to confront the challenge of reconceiving their self-images, and so their defining aspirations' (Mulhall, 2009: 3).

Such an aporetic characterization of proper human qualities is revealed in the dialogues between Simón and Davíd. Simón engages in a discussion as to what it means to be human, trying to pin down, like an insect, the idea of 'human nature,' claiming, 'we all want more than is due to us. That is human nature. Because we all want more than we are worth. . . . We like to believe we are special . . . each of us. But,

---

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Tom Herron notes the connection between Coetzee's fictional characters and Derrida's philosophy. He states: 'By valorizing poetry's animals over the philosophical animal, Derrida comes uncannily close to two of J. M. Coetzee's recent literary creations: the Australian novelist Elizabeth Costello who appears in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and the South African university professor David Lurie of *Disgrace* (1999)' (Herron, 2005: 469).

<sup>2</sup> To paraphrase Aldo Leopold, who urged us to think like a mountain (Leopold, 1966: 114–16).

strictly speaking, that cannot be so. If we were all special, there would be no specialness left' (Coetzee, 2013: 58–9). The idea expressed here might refer not only to the human urge to be considered an individual, with individual characteristics that define us, but it might also be understood as referring to humans as a species, and our centuries-long conviction that as a species, we possess a special status among other animals, which separates us from non-human animals and the animal element within us. If we think that we, as humans, are special, it is because we possess the power over discourse, but it does not situate us in a special position *vis-à-vis* other animals, to whose specialness we have no access. Yet if animals should have a special status, it is to help us recognize our dual nature. *The Childhood of Jesus* makes this connection through the creation of a child character who is 'special': divine, but also passionate, abolishing the distinction between the angelic and the animalistic.

### **Becoming Animal: Disgust and Entanglement**

Animal figures disrupt the link between the divine and the human. 'Divinanimality' might be understood as an evolution, a process which signifies an enlargement of the category of the human and a rejection of the straightforward divisions between humans and non-humans, where non-humans are understood both in the sense of the divine and the animalistic. The abolishing of this distinction is achieved through a series of parallels drawn between human and non-human animals: the boy Davíd and his mother Inés are both defined through their connection with dogs. Commensurate with his status as the trickster figure in *The Childhood of Jesus*, Señor Daga reveals the child's double nature in the following comparison: 'He slept like a dog, like an angel' (Coetzee, 2013: 218). The conflation of the categories provides a subtle link between the animal, the divine, and the human. Similarly, Inés is described as 'a woman with a dog' (Coetzee, 2013: 116), which perhaps suggests her being the chosen one to become Davíd's mother, while the dog, an Alsatian, represents an extension of the human–non-human relationship, represented as stretching beyond human terms and understanding. These connections enforce a redefinition of family, since forming a family requires an acceptance of the animal as its integral part. These characters, whose status as possibly divine is suggested in the title of the two novels

as well as in numerous references to religious scriptures, redefine and extend their humanity to include the animal. The characters of *The Childhood* and *The Schooldays of Jesus* illustrate Derrida's 'divinanimality' in its different aspects, forming unsuspected alliances between the divine, the human, and the non-human.

The creative aspect of the continuity between human and non-human animals, as well as between animality and divinity, is stressed when Simón muses, 'Perhaps . . . a period of seclusion and self-absorption is necessary not only for an animalcule to turn into a human being but also for a woman to turn from virgin into mother' (Coetzee, 2013: 109). The evolving creature, be it a minuscule animal that becomes a human, or a virgin that becomes a mother, is an illustration of the dynamism of natural processes, perceived on an individual as well as a biological level. Becoming human means accepting the animal part, just as becoming a mother means a gradual evolution from a virginal state. In Deleuze and Guattari as much as in Coetzee, these two subject positions, mother and virgin, are not understood in binary terms, but rather, each must be seen as a constant progression and evolution, that is, a state of 'becoming'. These formulations echo terms used by Deleuze and Guattari who write about 'becoming animal': 'Becoming produces nothing other than itself,' they stress, and add, 'Becoming is involution, involution is creative,' making a link between the creative process and becoming animal (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 238). In Coetzee's novels, human characters become animals, reaching beyond the ordinary limitations and revealing the connections with animality that enlarge the definition of the human. In a similar vein, Brian Massumi insists on a link between the animal and the human along the lines of the creative process, saying, 'Take it to heart: animal becoming is *most* human. It is in becoming animal that the human recurs to what is nonhuman at the heart of what moves it. This makes its surpassingly human. Creative-relationally *more-than* human' (Massumi, 2015: 14). An animalcule turning into a human in Coetzee's prose suggests a continuity that neither Deleuze and Guattari nor Massumi seem ready to accept, treating the animal as a figure that never gains the concreteness of a neighbor in our proximity or a companion who must be faced, and who

possibly not only reacts but responds, and who becomes more than either a sacrificial victim or an angelic presence. In Coetzee's prose, the distinctions between the animal and the divine are provocatively blurred. Coetzee's characters are radical in their acceptance of both animality and divinity, which extends the limits of the human and points to the need for a redefinition of humanity to include the aporetic elements.

Becoming animal as the most human is portrayed in Coetzee's prose through the inclusion of a dog into the human family, but animals other than human in our proximity also provoke fear or disgust. These moments, when human characters are faced with a recognition of the other animal in their proximity, require a consideration of which animals are allowed in human circles and which are deemed too disgusting. One such aporetic moment in the *Jesus* books is embedded in a discussion about eating animals, which reproduces long-rehearsed arguments in support of vegetarianism. In the words of Jonathan Safran Foer, 'we need to explain . . . why we eat wings but not eyes, cows but not dogs' (Foer, 2009: 12). Safran Foer stresses the necessity to clarify our dietary choices as he makes an explicit connection between the habits of eating certain foods and the narratives we create about them. This is to say, the stories substantiate our choices, but they do not necessarily follow strict logic; rather, the underlying principle behind those narratives is an emotional investment in the idea of certain animals and our perception of them.

Another way to answer the question of why in certain cultures pigs are considered edible, but not cats or rats, is to refer to the idea of disgust, itself a culture-specific concept. Martha Nussbaum explains the mechanism of disgust in the following way: 'Disgust . . . is typically unreasonable, embodying magical ideas of contamination, and impossible aspirations to purity, immortality, and nonanimality, that are just not in line with human life as we know it' (Nussbaum, 2004: 14). In our paradoxical approach to animals, we consider some of them disgusting and sentence them to become our food, while others we elevate to the quasi-divine position; the *Jesus* narratives explore the aporia of this approach to expose its biased anthropocentric foundations.

In *The Schooldays of Jesus*, the discussion between Simón, Davíd and Inés rehearses common concerns about vegetarianism. Simón claims, 'Animals don't feel anything when they are slaughtered. They don't have feelings in the way that we do.' Davíd questions the logic of Simón's argument, asking, 'Why do they have to die to give us their meat?' (Coetzee, 2016: 76), and when he does not receive a satisfactory answer, he presses on, 'why don't we eat people?' Tired with the child's nagging, Inés cuts the discussion short: 'Because it is disgusting. . . . That's why' (Coetzee, 2016: 77).

The issue of disgust that is raised in this conversation requires a closer look, since inevitably it is linked to aesthetic and moral considerations which lie at the core of Coetzee's prose. For Kant, for example, it is one of peculiarly human characteristics, a distinguishing factor for human societies linked by common taste, beyond the categories of the beautiful and the ugly or the good and the bad. Taste, an elusive category, combines the moral with the aesthetic, allowing Inés to say that eating humans would be disgusting while eating non-human animals would not be so. Inés herself, however, is identified as the woman with a dog, which complicates the issue of entanglement between human and non-human animals. Inés's retort might point to an interpretation in which it is not eating people that is deemed disgusting, but human meat, and, by extension, humans. In other words, the unintended meaning revealed unwittingly by the character is that it is the humans who eat other animals who are ultimately disgusting.

Disgust is revealed as a human measure against which animality is assessed, thus introducing a new element into the discussion of a postulated abolition of the division between the human and the non-human, enlarging it to include animality within humanity. Disgust is used to distinguish us from our absolute other, from our animality and our mortality. Nussbaum makes explicit the connection between animality and the idea of disgust as a distinguishing category: 'disgust has been used throughout history to exclude and marginalize groups or people who come to embody the dominant group's fear and loathing of its own animality and mortality' (Nussbaum, 2004: 14). When Inés says that eating humans would be disgusting, she

draws the line between who is admissible as human and who is not. Inés's invocation of disgust as the main determinant of humanity also suggests the disturbing presence of the animal within the human.

Animality-within-humanity provides an additional dimension to the question of continuity and entanglement between humans and non-humans. The inclusion of an animal element within humanity is represented through an enlargement of the circle of familial intimacy to include a companion animal. Simón says about the dog, 'We are Bolívar's family. We look after Bolívar and Bolívar looks after us' (Coetzee, 2016: 82). Admitting a dog in the predominantly human family complicates the question of disgust: eating an animal companion appears as repulsive or almost as repulsive as eating humans, which reveals that disgust itself is a distinguishing category arbitrarily composed. Similarly, the unit of family is presented as more welcoming to other species, comprising humans and non-humans alike. The animal in human proximity is included in the familial circle, which points to the ultimate entanglement between its human and non-human members. From animals perceived as the abject (the crawling insects), through animals serving as food material and the disgusting other, to a family member: the animals in human proximity might be seen in a variety of ways. However, the admission of animals to human proximity suggests that it is impossible completely to disentangle one species from another; they are intimately connected.

Perhaps it is in the scene when Simón strips naked that the matter of continuity between human and non-human animals is presented in its starker fashion. When Simón meets the headmaster of Davíd's school, the Academy of Dance, Juan Sebastián Arroyo (a playful direct translation of Johann Sebastian Bach into Spanish), it is by the lakeside where the schoolchildren are having a weekend outside of town. Juan Sebastián comments on the dog's appearance, and then 'Together they contemplate the handsome beast. Gazing over the water, Bolívar pays them no heed. A pair of spaniels edge up to him, take turns to smell his genitals; he does not deign to smell theirs' (Coetzee, 2016: 94). The contemplation of beauty here is one-sided, as the dog does not pay any attention to the humans' nakedness, retaining its

autonomy, and thus resisting any anthropomorphic representation. Rather, it is the human who is seduced by the promise of animalistic-within-human. Simón talks about being naked as a 'surprisingly easy [act]. One slips back into being an animal. Animals are not naked, they are simply themselves' (Coetzee, 2016: 100). Animality here designates an edenic unity with nature, one's own or outside, as being 'simply oneself,' and becoming animal would mean sliding back into the state of luxurious non-distinctiveness, closing the gap between us and the world.

This postulate, however, must be taken with caution. Being oneself – that is, being human – requires of us an amount of reflection that cancels the dream of a paradisiacal connection between us and the world.

Thus, the postulate of continuity between humans and non-humans requires a dose of skepticism to rule out a naively sentimental viewpoint from which a non-human animal would be deprived of its autonomy and reduced to a symbol of human nostalgia for the state of an edenic coexistence. Rather, admitting a non-human into the circle of a predominantly human family provides a realistic alternative, and illustrates a human–non-human entanglement: not as a postulate of an idealistic past or future, but as a modest model for the present.

## Conclusions

Recognizing a need for an updated reconsideration of human–non-human connections, Rosi Braidotti calls for 'a system of representation that matches the complexity of contemporary non-human animals and their proximity to humans. . . . [A]nimals are no longer the signifying system that props up the humans' self-projections and moral aspirations' (Braidotti, 2013: 70). Coetzee's recent prose seems an apt response to this demand. In his latest novels, the animal figure becomes a liminal test for the delineation of the borders of humanity, pushing beyond the traditional humanist definitions of the species. In *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*, human and non-human characters cannot be perceived in isolation from one another, which illustrates the polemical stance Coetzee's prose takes against the anthropocentric standpoint defining the human in an oppositional way against its non-human other.

The two novels illustrate different agential positions, challenging the reader to reconsider new ways of imagining subjectivity. They enter a dialogue with the anthropocentric, humanist distinctions between the human and the non-human, which rest on binary oppositions and designate the non-human animal to the position of the abject other (which LaCapra calls an 'infra-ethical status') or elevate them to the position of the sacrificial victim (of 'supra-ethical status'). They dismiss the traditional markers of humanity, such as the capability for disgust, in favor of a representation of the categories of humanity and animality in continuity.

Coetzee's novels are a voice in the debate concerning 'human nature': they take the radical stance of problematizing the distinctions between the human, the divine and the animalistic, and in this gesture, they go beyond Agamben's 'openness to a closedness' of animals (Agamben, 2003: 50), approaching what Derrida terms 'divinanimalité'. Thus, the ties between the human and the non-human characters are impossible to unravel, and must be perceived in terms of proximity, continuity, and entanglement.

Edward O. Wilson warns us against the continuing destruction of the earth's species and environment, saying, 'To let more of Earth's biodiversity—perhaps we should say more simply the rest of life—continue its slide into extinction will turn the Anthropocene into the Eremocene, the Age of Loneliness' (Wilson, 2014: 132). One way to prevent this is to recognize our entanglement with the animals around us, and bridge the gap between human and non-human animals, as Coetzee's prose invites us to do.

## Funding Information

This project has received funding from the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under grant agreement nº 600371, el Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad (COFUND2013-40258), el Ministerio de Educación, cultura y Deporte (CEI-15-17) and Banco Santander.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## References

- Agamben, G., 2003. *The Open: Man and Animal*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Attridge, D., 2005. *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Barney, R., 2016. On (Not) Giving Up: Animals, Biopolitics, and the Impersonal in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. *Textual Practice*, 30(3): 509–30. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1158941>
- Bethlehem, L., 2009. *Elizabeth Costello* as Post-Apartheid Text. In Boehmer, E., Iddiols, K. and Eaglestone, R.J.M. (Eds.), *Coetzee in Context and Theory*. London: Continuum, pp. 20–35.
- Boehmer, E., 2005. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Boehmer, E., Iddiols, K. and Eaglestone, R., 2009. *J. M. Coetzee in Context and Theory*. London: Continuum.
- Braidotti, R., 2013. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Brumfield, B., 2015 (March 13). You May Be Your Germs. Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/03/13/health/microbe-genes-human-dna-evolution/>.
- Clarkson, C., 2009. *J. M. Coetzee: Countervoices*. Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230245440>
- Coetzee, J.M., 1983. *Life and Times of Michael K*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Coetzee, J.M., 1988. *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. New Haven: Yale.
- Coetzee, J.M., 1990. *Age of Iron*. London: Random House.
- Coetzee, J.M., 1999. *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Coetzee, J.M., 2003. *Elizabeth Costello*. London: Secker and Warburg.
- Coetzee, J.M., 2013. *The Childhood of Jesus*. London: Vintage.
- Coetzee, J.M., 2016. *The Schooldays of Jesus*. London: Harvill Secker.
- Crisp, A. and Boschetti, C., 2015. Expression of Multiple Horizontally Acquired Genes is a Hallmark of Both Vertebrate and Invertebrate Genomes. (March 13).

- Available at: <http://genomebiology.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13059-015-0607-3>.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F., 1988. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. London: Athlone.
- Derrida, J., 2008. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Trans. David Wills. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Descartes, R., 2008. *Discourse on the Method*. Trans. John Veitch. New York: Cosimo.
- Head, D., 2009. *The Cambridge Introduction to J. M. Coetzee*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511816901>
- Heidegger, M., 1998. What Is Metaphysics? Trans. David Farrell Krell. In McNeill, W. (Ed.), *Pathmarks*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 82–96. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812637>
- Herron, T., 2005. The Dog Man: Becoming Animal in Coetzee's *Disgrace*. *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 51(4): 467–90. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/0041462X-2005-1004>
- Huggan, G. and Tiffin, H., 2010. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. London: Routledge.
- Kant, I., 2005. *The Moral Law: Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*. London: Routledge.
- Kossew, S., 1993. 'Women's Words': A Reading of J. M. Coetzee's Women Narrators. *Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies*, 37. Available at: <http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/readingroom/litserv/SPAN/37/Kossew.html>.
- Kristeva, J., 1982. *Powers of Horror: The Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- LaCapra, D., 2009. *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Leopold, A., 1966. *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation from Round River*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Massumi, B., 2015. Supernormal Animal. In Grusin, R. (Ed.), *The Nonhuman Turn*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, pp. 1–18.

- Mulhall, S., 2009. *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Nussbaum, M., 2004. *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Philippou, E., 2016. Dogs, Horses, and Red Herrings: The Animal in J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 57(2): 217–27. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2015.1046589>
- Poyner, J., 2009. *J. M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship*. Burlington: Ashgate.
- Rutheford, J. and Uhlmann, A. (Eds.), 2017. *J. M. Coetzee's The Childhood of Jesus: The Ethics of Ideas and Things*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Safran Foer, J., 2009. *Eating Animals*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- Tajiri, Y., 2016. In Quest of 'Other Modes of Being': J. M. Coetzee's Ontological Inquiries. *Textual Practice*, 30(3): 381–97. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1158927>
- Weil, K., 2010. A Report on the Animal Turn. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 21(3): 1–23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2010-001>
- Wilson, E.O., 2014. *The Meaning of Human Existence*. New York: Norton.
- Wolfe, C., 2010. *What is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

**How to cite this article:** Nowak-McNeice, K., 2018. Belonging to the Human and Non-human Animals in J. M. Coetzee's Recent Novels. *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 6(1): 9, pp. 1–20. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.29>

**Published:** 12 February 2018

**Copyright:** © 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

OPEN ACCESS