MIRROR NEURONS AND LITERATURE: EMPATHY AND THE SYMPATHETIC IMAGINATION IN THE FICTION OF J.M. COETZEE

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The Sympathetic Imagination

In his novels J.M. Coetzee explores the frontiers of literary representation and discourse, encouraging the reader to reflect on issues as varied as censorship, poetics, reciprocity, authenticity, truth, confession, ethics, animal rights, and encounters with the other. In two particular essay-fictions, “The Philosophers and the Animals” and “The Poets and the Animals,” that were originally presented by Coetzee at Princeton University as the Tanner Lectures on Human Values in 1997 and subsequently published in *The Lives of Animals*, the character Elizabeth Costello reflects on our attitudes and behaviour towards animals, and proposes that only through a failure of imagination on the part of humans—a failure related to the long philosophical tradition of considering humans superior to other animals—can the industrialized slaughter of animals be wilfully ignored or knowingly accepted. Coetzee employs the persona of Elizabeth Costello, an ageing writer giving lectures at the fictional “Appleton College,” as a means of addressing his own audience at Princeton and beyond, thus producing a narrative mirror that allows for a distance between Coetzee as author and the ideological positions adopted and enunciated by Costello.

Costello’s approach rejects reductive rationalizing: “reason looks to me suspiciously like the being of human thought; worse than that, like the being of one tendency in human thought” (*Lives* 21), and instead proposes employing our sympathetic imagination to relate to the lives and life-experiences of others, especially including, on this occasion, those of the animals.

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1 This volume includes a collection of essays on animal rights written in response to Coetzee’s lectures by a variety of scholars from different disciplines. For a comprehensive account of the academic setting in which Coetzee presented these lectures see Attridge, “A Writer’s Life.” A version of this essay is also included in Attridge’s *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*.

2 Since I am exploring a poetic concept at work in Coetzee’s writing, the author / character division is not especially relevant to my discussion. For a discussion see, for example, Dancygier, Mulhall, Walton, Poyner, and Splendore.
In the first of Coetzee’s two lecture-essays, “The Philosophers and the Animals,” Costello discusses in her lecture how philosophy has provided the ideological framework that emphasizes the human-animal divide, permitting the use, or rather abuse, of animals for human consumption and experimental procedures. According to Geoffrey Baker, Costello illustrates how “Coetzee’s thematization of sympathy operates [...] somewhere between the prescriptive call for political action and the Derridean / Adornian notion of transformation” (45). Costello challenges the common assumption of man’s supremacy over animals, and calls on our sympathetic sensibilities in order to effect change. Baker speaks of “Coetzee’s middle road—a practical agenda for transformative action that occurs on a seemingly non-political plane, at sites of interpersonal sympathy,” which he sees as the “affective aim of Coetzee’s fiction” (29, 27). And Josephine Donovan notes that Coetzee’s protagonists often experience an “intense empathetic identification with animal suffering and loss of dignity” (83). This identification occurs most obviously in Disgrace, over whose narrative course David Lurie’s attitude towards nonhuman animals changes dramatically, but is also evident in Waiting for the Barbarians, in which the Magistrate feels for the “barbarians” who are treated as though they were nonhuman animals. Similar thematics occur regularly throughout the Coetzee oeuvre. This process of identification is closely related to a bodily experience, providing a link to empathy via a visceral response. Both Lurie and the magistrate suffer physical attacks that prepare the ground for a heightened moral awareness aided by what Donovan calls a “visceral empathy” born of suffering (85).

To the rationalist discourse of the philosophers, Costello opposes the sensation of life shared by humans and animals:

To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being—not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the sensation—a heavily affective sensation—of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world. This fullness contrasts starkly with Descartes’ key state, which has an empty feel to it: the feel of a pea rattling around in a shell. (Lives 33)

Costello aims to promote the empathetic faculties of humans, which allow us to engage with other animals in a significant and sympathetic way. She urges all to feel for others—that is, to experience sympathy for others—and to feel with and like others—that is, to experience empathy for them. As Sanford Budick notes in this regard, for Costello “it’s the reversal and reciprocity of a chiastic frame of mind that enables the novelist and reader alike to enter into the being
of a fictional character in a relationship of intersubjectivity.” A sympathetic imagination of this sort, continues Budick, “should enable one all the more to enter into the existence of non-human being” (243). The sympathetic imagination paves the way for an empathetic engagement with others. Costello, in an old-fashioned way, situates this potential in the human chest: “The heart is the seat of a faculty, sympathy, that allows us to share at times the being of another” (Lives 34). Costello calls on her audience to open their hearts and make room for the empathy that lies within. In yet another rebuttal of hegemonic philosophical traditions, she goes on:

Despite Thomas Nagel, who is probably a good man, despite Thomas Aquinas and René Descartes, with whom I have more difficulty in sympathizing, there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination. [...] If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life. (35; emphasis added)

At no point does Costello clearly define what she understands the sympathetic imagination to be, but her lucid comments on Kafka’s Red Peter when she relates Kafka’s parable to the historical story of Wolfgang Köhler’s Sultan, as well as the horror she expresses at factory farming and industrial-scale slaughterhouses, suggest that the sympathetic imagination constitutes, at the very least, a means of opening up to a more positive engagement with the other, in this case the primate Sultan. Unlike Wolfgang Köhler, Franz Kafka made extensive use of his sympathetic imagination in creating Red Peter, encouraging the reader to extend her empathy into the world of other animals. In The Lives of Animals Coetzee continues Kafka’s line of thought in a metadiscourse on fiction exploring how we perceive other animals. Other Coetzee fictions extend the range of others encountered by the main character, including both human and nonhuman animals. These other encounters with otherness in all their variety test the achievements, failures, and limitations of the sympathetic imagination while simultaneously challenging the reader’s own sympathetic imagination.

In Coetzee’s second lecture-essay, “The Poets and the Animals,” Costello conducts a poetry workshop for the fictional Department of English at Appleton College and gives an account of two, actually extant, poetic engagements: first in Rilke’s poem “The Panther,” and then in Hughes’ poems
“The Jaguar” and “Second Glance at a Jaguar.” In favour of Hughes she compliments the way the poems “ask us to imagine our way into that way of moving [‘as the currents of life move within it’], to inhabit that body” and claims them to be the “record of an engagement” with the jaguar (51). In her account of how these Hughes poems encourage us to inhabit the jaguar’s body, Costello emphasizes the role the body plays in the evocation of the jaguar’s “being-in-the-world,” again a technique mirrored by Coetzee, who imbues his characters with physical presence and therefore with the joy and pain that come of inhabiting a body: not only in *Lives* and in *Elizabeth Costello*, but also, and perhaps even more notably so, in earlier characters like Michael K in *Life & Times of Michel K*, the Magistrate from *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and Mrs. Curren from *Age of Iron*. The notion of embodiment described by Costello forms the basis for a process of identification with the other that allows the sympathetic imagination to engage with the embodied other. The congruence of physical being, both in joy and suffering, constitutes a fundamental similarity between humans and animals. In poetry, and in the literary more broadly conceived, this potential for congruence can draw the reader into a momentary or much longer experience of sharing the body of the other, and perhaps also of discovering or rediscovering the joy of being embodied beings:

> By bodying forth the jaguar, Hughes shows us that we too can embody animals—by the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will. He shows us how to bring the living body into being within ourselves. When we read the jaguar poem, we are for a brief while the jaguar. He ripples within us, he takes over our body, he is us. (53)

The notion of embodiment is a prerequisite for the sympathetic imagination to be effective in promoting empathy in both the author and the reader. The physical other comes with a consciousness and a subjective experience of the world. In a derogatory note on the logics of behavioural sciences Costello claims, “We understand by immersing ourselves and our intelligence in complexity” (62). Her lecture on the lives of animals, in which she pauses for a while over Wolfgang Köhler, has already given an example of what such an understanding might look like and how it might work when she imagines herself into the position of the chimpanzee called Sultan under Köhler’s

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3 For a more extensive discussion (including a reprinting of the poems discussed) see Mulhall 110–121.
4 On Coetzee’s use of the body see Conrad Lawrence Marquard Hughes.
5 Roux simply states: Costello’s “advocacy of literature over philosophy can be captured by two terms: embodiment and sympathetic imagination” (25).
experimental tutelage. Köhler supplies food to Sultan with obstacles that require Sultan to figure out how to reach the food. Costello imagines Sultan asking himself what he might have done to deserve such cruel treatment. One might question the acumen of Costello’s arguments against philosophical reasoning, just as one might dismiss or reject the ethical stance she takes on behalf of the nonhuman animals. But Coetzee endows her with the passionate conviction of a sentient being who doesn’t claim to hold a greater truth, and who instead follows her intuition and her experience, both of which lead her to believe that the sympathetic imagination only needs to be awakened in order to make available an empathetic bond with the other. Costello concedes that her lecture lacks rational appeal and philosophical perspicacity, but supplements such deficits by modestly referring her audience to the imaginative realms of more capable poets:

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 that 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 the beast that is prodded down the chute to his executioner. (65)

Sympathy through Empathy

Sympathy means a feeling of compassion or concern for another being, and implies a position of concern for the other’s well-being. Empathy means the capacity to feel yourself into another being.6 Sympathy therefore asserts an outside perspective, whereas empathy implies the notion of attempting to gain

6 The definition of empathy offered here follows Jean Decety’s approach: “In social neuroscience, empathy refers to a psychological construct that involves representations (i.e., memories that are localized in distributed neural networks that encode information and, when temporarily activated, enable access to this stored information, e.g., shared affective representations) and processes (i.e., computational procedures that are neurally localized and are independent of the nature of modality of the stimulus that is being processed—e.g., decoupling mechanism between self and other)” (“Empathy and Morality” 110). Promoting the concept of “radical compassion,” Anita Nowak collected fifty-two definitions of empathy, illustrating the wide range of discourses on empathy. One of Nowak’s sources, Khen Lampert, offers a definition similar to Decety’s that resonates with Costello’s account of the poets’ engagement with animals: “[Empathy] is what happens to us when we leave our own bodies [...] and find ourselves either momentarily or for a longer period of time in the mind of the other. We observe reality through her eyes, feel her emotions, share in her pain” (quoted in Nowak 16). Lampert links empathy to compassion; Costello might be considered sympathetic to such an approach.
an inside perspective or at least an approximation of insight into the other’s experience. Sympathy requires at least a minimal amount of empathy to facilitate grasping the inner state of the other before one can feel with him, her, or it. Empathy, as opposed to pity and sympathy, does not necessarily imply a position of well-meaning concern followed by the intention to help, since it initially occurs in a preconscious affective mode. For the purpose of this paper, the distinction between sympathy and empathy, as here outlined, plays an important part that marks two different stages of engagement with the other. The author’s sympathetic imagination becomes manifest in the mode of representation, including modalities of narrative structure, perspective and devices, and these in turn can trigger the reader’s own sympathetic imagination. The result of such a sympathetic engagement of the imagination within the complexity of a novel can further the reader’s capacity for empathy. Exactly how empathy works has been discussed at length in a large variety of discourses (see Nowak), but the range of answers provided is testimony to the fuzziness of both the term and the lack of specificity in attendant explanations.

The fairly recent discovery of mirror neurons has created yet another discourse on empathy. Interestingly, the findings from neuroscientific inquiry into mirror neurons can in some respects quite easily be applied to literary narrative, especially when perspective-taking is represented and staged in the text. When we take the perspective of a literary character, we can potentially engage with the character empathetically. If the literary figure we are presented with is a character like Elizabeth Costello, we will of course need to remain sceptical ourselves about developments in neuroscience even as we open ourselves to new developments and new possibilities. But there is always a chance that the macro-picture of what it means to inhabit a body in all of the complex fullness of Costello’s sense of embodiment could be supplemented, or otherwise rearticulated—somehow confirmed—within the miniature domain of mirror neurons, for all that neurons know nothing of the fullness of living and probably know nothing per se of ethics.

The underlying mechanism of current neurological speculation about empathy is the mirroring of neurons. The fictional text carries traces of the sympathetic imagination of the author and of his empathy, which can be picked up and adopted by the reader. In this way, empathy takes place both in the creative process on the side of the author as well as on the receptive-creative
side of the reader through a process of neurological assimilation to the representation.\(^7\)

**Mirror Neurons and Empathy**

Elizabeth Costello situates sympathy in the heart, and her discourse in some ways articulates a generally Christian idea of compassion, or, more particularly perhaps, comes to resemble the spiritual approach taken by Khen Lampert. Costello’s commentary is illuminating, moving, and even persuasive, but it remains vague about how the sympathetic imagination works and how exactly it affects our perceptions of others. Despite her reservations about empirical and especially behaviourist practice, Costello’s account concentrates on the effects that an application of the sympathetic imagination can have, and on how it has been successfully applied in poetry, especially. I am interested in the underlying mechanism that allows the sympathetic imagination to become effective in inducing empathy. Side-stepping Costello’s scepticism regarding rational discourses and their scientific applications, I believe neurosciences might help us to understand how literary narrative (not only in narrowly poetic terms) can contribute to activating the sympathetic imagination and trigger empathy.

*Pace* Costello, neurosciences relegate the faculty of sympathy not to the heart, but to the brain and its neurological circuits, further pinpointing mirror neurons as the neurological basis for empathy. While by itself this understanding might to Costello seem reductive and narrow, it retains and perhaps even grounds her idea of embodied cognition, and emphasizes the intimate connection between our bodily and emotional states: it supplements her sense of making sense of the other from another perspective.

The initial discovery of mirror neurons by Giacomo Rizzolatti in 1996 occurred in the context of action perception and consequent simulation in macaque monkeys. The experiments revealed that a certain type of neuron participates in a “mirroring” reaction or response on the part of the experimental subject, who imitates the neurological pattern active in the

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\(^7\) According to Zaboura the mirror neurons evoke “a so-called *direct matching mechanism*, which assimilates the perceived action pattern to the own action repertoire; direct because it happens without mediation. By this process the observer is enabled *symmetrically to co-experience* what goes on inside the other, what moves him—in a literal sense referring to the neurophysiologic level. Due to the almost identical biological configuration of the interacting parties an *intersubjective shift of perspectives* takes place from a third person to a first person perspective, which accordingly is titled *simulation*” (Zaboura 63; my translation, emphasis added).
observed agent. One early experiment involved a macaque monkey observing a man grasping a glass of water and raising it to his lips in order to drink. The neurons activated by the observation mirrored the performed action, revealing a nearly identical activation pattern: as if the observing macaque monkey had performed the action himself. Mirror neurons have now been confirmed to exist in the human brain as well. Vittorio Gallese in 2001 linked mirror neurons to empathy in his “‘Shared Manifold’ Hypothesis” essay. J. Decety in 2005 postulated mirror neurons to be the proximate base of empathy (supported by Dan Batson and Frans de Waal). More recently, in 2009, Nadine Zaboura related these findings to the social sciences and the humanities, ultimately suggesting there might be a more complex network of different types of mirror neurons allowing for more complex functions than just mimetic learning and adaptation. Whether the reading process triggers mirror neurons remains difficult to evaluate, because research on the neurological functioning of the reading process has thus far concentrated on single words; extending the research to integrated text comprehension remains a future goal. So far it seems to be the case that reading a text involves various cognitive areas of the brain, which co-operate to perform a circuit that ends up in the frontal cortex where the final and integrated comprehension of text takes place. This circuit could potentially involve a complex network of mirror neurons resonating with the text.

Despite the proviso that much at this point is still speculative, fundamental similarities between Coetzee’s narrative exploration of the other’s consciousness and assumptions made by the neurosciences about mirror neurons and their relation to empathy can be found in both approaches and their respective corollaries. Firstly, the focus on the body both in Coetzee’s fiction (the notion of embodiment) and in the discourse of neuroscience (embodied

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8 These findings resulted from a series of experiments with macaque monkeys made in a spirit not unlike that of Wolfgang Köhler, even though the methods this time are neurologically based: electrodes were implanted into the monkeys’ brains to record the activities of their neuronal networks. In the spirit of Elizabeth Costello we should engage our sympathetic imagination to get an idea, however vague, of how disturbingly invasive such procedures must surely be for the subjects of such experiments. That I am appalled by the methods employed to obtain these results does not discredit the resulting research.

9 Zaboura notes that the search for other types of mirror neurons remains a huge task considering the sheer amount of 100 billion neurons available. While at first mirror neurons where tested only for visual input, by now mirror neurons have been found to respond to acoustic input as well. Zaboura assumes that complex networks of mirror neurons most likely respond to complex combinations of input (75–76).

10 See Poldrack and Sandrack, and Perfetti and Bolger.
cognition) recognizes the importance of corporal being.\textsuperscript{11} Comparable to how Coetzee’s notion of embodiment is a prerequisite for the sympathetic imagination to become effective, bodily perception is a prerequisite for the mirror neurons to be activated and incite a process of recognition and empathy. Another vital aspect of both discourses is the encounter with the other. In Coetzee’s fiction such encounter supplies the testing ground for the effectiveness of the sympathetic imagination, at its best when it reaches epistemological boundaries: in the case presented here, our relation to nonhuman animals seems to demand a rethinking of our epistemology. In the discourse of neurosciences the imagining of self as other (putting oneself into the position of the other) is differentiated from imagining the other as such (intuiting the position of the other while maintaining the autonomy of the self). The first position leads to emotional contagion, whereas the second process allows for a fully empathetic approach. The question of perspective-taking informs both the discourse of Coetzee’s fiction as well as the discourse of neuroscience.\textsuperscript{12} First-person and third-person perspective are the two obvious modes of approaching the other, both in literature and in our social contexts. Coetzee’s early fiction relies heavily on first-person narratives (from Eugene Dawn, Jacobus Coetzee, and Magda, for instance) and engages the reader’s empathetic attention, but hardly much sympathy. Attentiveness is another analogous procedure in the grammar, so to speak, of Coetzee’s narratives and in the discourse of the neurosciences. The relations of the early protagonists to others are stunted, tainted, and hardly empathetic, though Magda at least seems to make an effort. This keeps the reader at a distance to the narrating subjects while providing intimate insight into their psychic life, thereby allowing the reader to practice empathy in spite of an aversion to the characters that Coetzee’s focalizing technique cultivates or guarantees. In his later fiction Coetzee more regularly constructs third-person narratives, which bring the reader closer to the narrating subject. In the ‘memoir’ trilogy this narrative subject is a proxy of Coetzee himself, a constructed version of himself seen in retrospect. \textit{Summertime} adds a polyphonic murmur of voices by adding interviews with a more or less fictional cast of people who knew Coetzee and

\textsuperscript{11} The embodiedness of cognition has been extensively discussed by Antonio Damasio, and by Philip Ledoux.

\textsuperscript{12} Neurological inquiry finds that, due to the almost identical biological configuration of the interacting parties, an intersubjective shift of perspectives takes place from a third-person to a first-person perspective; the shift is called simulation. The significance of simulation and the resulting resonance lies in its capacity to construct intersubjectivity: “A crucial element of social cognition is the brain’s capacity directly to link the first- and third-person experiences of these phenomena (that is, to link ‘I do and I feel’ with ‘he does and he feels’)” (Gallese et al. “Unifying View” 397, quoted in Zaboura 63; my translation of German original).
report their encounters with him, affording a multitude of perspectives which create a multi-faceted image of the persona constructed by the author. Here then we encounter an instance of the sympathetic imagination employed in a process of self-evaluation, a seemingly “endless cathartic exercise” as Julia, one of the interviewees, says (59). Coetzee engages with himself in a mode of empathy; even when the picture he draws is neither flattering nor necessarily favourable (as is often the case) it helps the author gain a new perspective towards some complexly composite versions of himself.

Narrative Empathy

In 2009 Fritz Breithaupt published his study titled *Kulturen der Empathie*, which combines research on mirror neurons with the literary analysis of narrative. Breithaupt provides a possible toolkit for looking at literature and its relation to empathy via the neurosciences. He begins with a fundamental assessment of empathy as an evolutionary pattern that, in its simplest form, cognitively served to allow one to grasp the narrative patterns implied by the actions of others, thereby enabling one to better predict the others’ future actions (just as the macaque monkeys in the early action-perception experiments came to recognize the intention of an action before its completion, and so realized that a hand grasping a water glass is most likely to be congruent with drinking water). In a fashion similar to Costello’s statement on the unlimited potential of the sympathetic imagination, Breithaupt states:

Wir besitzen anscheinend die Fähigkeit, uns wie unbegrenzt in alles einfühlen zu können, um es auf uns vertraute Schemata zu beziehen und dadurch imaginäre Brücken zwischen uns und anderen zu errichten, ohne das tatsächlich Unähnliche als Unähnliches mitdenken zu müssen. (20)

[We seem to possess the ability to feel ourselves into anything without limitations, in order to relate it to familiar schemata and thereby erect imaginary bridges between us and others, without having to think the actually dissimilar as dissimilar.] (my translation)

Breithaupt describes how easily we incorporate our perception of others into structures familiar to us, assimilating dissimilarity and thereby bridging the unresolvable gap between us and others. The production of dissimilarity in fiction challenges our empathetic capabilities. I find Coetzee’s fiction exemplary in this regard, illustrating as it does a deft and complexly nuanced construction of the other and of the occlusion or collision between more or less familiar protagonists and the surrounding otherness they encounter. Breithaupt
goes on to formulate a more complex cognitive empathy that includes a taking of sides by the observer. Empathy relies on the possibility of insight into the motivations and intentions of the parties, which hereby become the “soundbox of experience” [Resonanzkörper des Erlebens] that resonates in the reader (170, 145, 146).

Breithaupt formulates a narrative theory of empathy and assumes a dualistic setting based on the threefold structure of two opposing parties and an observer. The setting must provide the observer with the opportunity to engage with the protagonist and his actions by implicating her in the outlook and predictability of the future course of events. However, in a second step the observer must herself be able to prevent the loss of herself in the identification process: the empathetic process necessarily includes blockades of identification, allowing the observer to stay at a safe distance (otherwise she would risk losing herself in the process of identification). Nearly all J.M. Coetzee’s fictions can serve to exemplify these notions of empathy. The protagonists always suffer in one way or another, and are tragic heroes of a kind. The narrative strategies Coetzee employs allow the reader much insight into the respective characters, but at the same time maintain a distance by questioning narrative authority and reliability, be it of the character or of the author himself.

The theory of narrative empathy is a vital link between the neuroscientific concept of empathy and the sympathetic imagination of Coetzee’s fiction, bridging the gap between literature and neuroscience. By looking at how narrative empathy is evoked by fiction we gain a better understanding of what the sympathetic imagination is and how it works within the fictional space and beyond. Narrative empathy explains the transformation of input into information via mirror neurons: “Erst durch die Filter der narrative Empathie kann aus dem Mitlaufen der Spiegelneuronen Information werden” [Only the filters of narrative empathy enable the coactive mirror neurons to produce information] (Breithaupt 187; my translation). Coetzee’s sympathetic imagination uses narrative to create an intersubjective space that allows a “hypersubject” (Breithaupt 73) or the “intersubjective manifold” (Gallese) to come into being; this in turn offers the perfect stage for the mirror neurons and empathy to play themselves out.

13 Breithaupt chooses a drama by Lessing to illustrate his understanding of narrative empathy, but discusses it as text and not as performance, which indicates that his argument does not depend on the staging and live presentation of the text.
14 “Es gibt viel empathisches Geräusch, aber erst die Blockade erzeugt eine Kultur der Empathie” [There exists a lot of empathetic noise, but only the blockade creates a culture of empathy] (Breithaupt 114; my translation).
Conclusion

Coetzee offers the reader a vast array of situations, character constellations, and conflicts to be added to the already available cognitive or otherwise experiential repertoire of life. All these scenarios enhance the ability of the reader to deal with real-life situations, even though he may never find himself in a think tank designing war strategies, on a desolate farm in the desert, in a military outpost of an empire, in a camp or a burrow, affected by cancer in a racially segregated society, washed ashore on a solitary island, in the streets of Petersburg mourning the loss of a child, in a childhood memory, in a slaughterhouse, in an academic lecture, putting dogs to sleep, breaking a leg in a bicycle accident, or musing on one’s own death. But all these scenarios will have enabled the reader (and author?) to open his heart and let the sympathetic imagination take hold of it. As De Vega puts it: “Scenarios constitute proxy-situated cognition. That is, on the basis of a mapping between a language description and a scenario, proxy-situated cognition can occur. This is because the constraints of reasoning employed in real situations apply by proxy in reasoning with scenarios” (quoted in Sanford 184).

In his analysis of Disgrace in relation to Sophocles’ Oedipus the King, Michiel Heyns tells the story of Laurence Olivier imitating the death cry of a trapped mink to underscore the ultimate realization of Oedipus; noting its effect on the audience Olivier exits with a vindictive smile on his lips. Heyns sees this as “the artistic implementation of the sympathetic imagination”:

It enables Olivier in the first place to enter into the consciousness of the trapped mink and to transpose his sympathetic understanding to his rendering of the character he is playing—in order to activate the sympathetic imagination of the audience: the agony of the mink is transmuted into the audience’s pity and terror. For the trapped mink read dog with maimed hindquarters, for audience read us, the reader, for Oedipus read Lurie, for Olivier read Coetzee, for “Got them” read the near-imperceptible smile on Coetzee’s face on the dust jacket. (215)

This is not to say that Coetzee was ever aiming to achieve the kind of sensationalist effect Olivier obviously intended. Nevertheless, Coetzee’s fiction successfully draws the reader in and activates his or her sympathetic imagination, thereby increasing his or her empathetic sensibilities. The countless encounters with the other, in various forms and guises—recently leading to a grand moment of myriad self-reflection in Summertime, in which Coetzee brilliantly re applies the sympathetic imagination to himself and his public image—have trained Coetzee’s readers to engage with the other and to co-experience moments of shared empathy without eliminating differences.
My reading of Coetzee tries to show how strong an impact his fictions can have on the sentiments of the reader. Other critics such as Timothy Costelloe and Ian Hacking reach similar conclusions, seeing in Coetzee’s literature an attempt to awake the sympathetic imagination in the reader, which they relate to Hume’s “progress of sentiments” (Costelloe 128, Hacking 22). Gareth Cornwell in a similar fashion enlarges the scope of what literature, in particular Coetzee’s fiction, might be able to achieve, or at least to promote:

What literature affords us above all is the opportunity to encounter other minds in their full complexity, to imagine and to empathize with a range of human thought and feeling that it is impossible for us to experience directly. If the ultimate goal of the humanities is full social justice, then a pre-requisite is a sufficient degree of objective self-awareness, of awareness of the extent of our own contingency, the extent to which our values and beliefs are historically and ideologically positioned (conditioned, determined).” (Cornwell 52)

Even though my arguments remain closer to the ground in proposing that Coetzee’s fiction in a very special way allows for empathy to flourish—with a little help from mirror neurons—I cannot resist the temptation of imagining the larger impact and implications all this speculation entails. Even the neurosciences seem to be aware of possible future benefits beyond the seeking of knowledge:

Further studies are required to increase our knowledge about the various factors, processes and (neural and behavioral) effects involved in and resulting from the modulation of empathic responses. This knowledge will inform us how empathy can be promoted to ultimately increase humankind’s ability to act in more prosocial and altruistic ways. (Decety and Batson, “Empathy and Morality” 122)
Works Cited


