Literature as a Site of the Animal Rights Debate

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Introduction

The role of literature in the animal rights debate is a fascinating one. This role is open to many avenues of exploration: writers have addressed the issue in various ways. In order to assess the interplay between literary texts and the reality of the debate, I explore, compare and contrast three primary texts that bring the issue to light from similar standpoints, but that also complement each other.

In Margaret Atwood’s 2003 novel *Oryx and Crake*, marooned Snowman takes on the role of reluctant prophet and protector of an innocent tribe, and struggles to survive himself as the last of his kind among terrifying bio-engineered life forms. The text deals with the complications that arise in an increasingly biotechnologically advanced landscape, cautioning the reader on the dangers of unchecked genetic engineering. Taking a moderate stance on bioethics, Atwood poses a scenario where cavalier attitudes among scientists lead to unforeseen circumstances and suffering in human and nonhuman test subjects. Through the character of Jimmy, Atwood also suggests that prevalent contemporary views on graphic violence and meat consumption are based on social conditioning, as supported by Peter Singer’s notion of childhood compassion and the emergence of speciesism later in life. Juxtaposed by the innocent figures of a young Jimmy as well as the peaceful Crakers, the deterioration in the story’s speculative society becomes palpable. As the text in the selection with the highest degree of fictionality, it is distinct in its motivation and allows for comparison with the other texts which, while written with similar didactic goals in mind, are of a more grounded or concrete nature. It is the first novel in Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy. It, more than its successors, allows for such an investigation as a contained narrative that describes a character experiencing the onset of the bioengineering age, and focuses on the causes of the pandemic that eradicates most of humanity. Dealing with the fallout more than these issues, the rest
of the trilogy are less focused on the issues of animal rights and bioengineering and therefore omitted.

In J.M. Coetzee’s 1999 novella *The Lives of Animals*, esteemed novelist Elizabeth Costello presents a pair of lectures at a prestigious university in which she advocates for animal rights. In doing so, she consistently meets with resistance and receives little understanding, and this wears her down on a deep emotional level. In Costello’s lectures, that examine the animal question in literature and in a number of philosophical traditions, she is an unmistakable author surrogate. I place the text in a tradition of literary activism and analyze its narrative features as a method of opening up an interactive reading experience. I also position the protagonist and the novella in the emerging concentration of animal-standpoint criticism, with the aid of John Berger’s essay “Why Look At Animals?”. Berger’s text scrutinizes the increasingly peripheral role of animals in public life in recent centuries, and identifies the unexpected role that animal welfarism plays in this process of marginalization.

Finally, in Jonathan Safran Foer’s 2009 book *Eating Animals*, Foer documents his endeavor to inform himself on the actual processes behind production in the field of animal agriculture, and struggles with the culturally ingrained traditions that conflict with his ethical convictions. Discouraged by the corporations behind factory farming at most every turn, Foer nonetheless presents a hopeful message of how the world may find solutions for the problems meat consumption pose in an exponentially more populated world. Foer, too, identifies the diminishing presence of animals in our everyday lives that Berger sees. Read alongside Atwood’s novel, Foer’s descriptions of present-day factory farming make the former author’s imagined futuristic farming methods appear all too probable. Then, Foer’s role in
the present-day discourse and the construction of modern day movements is a final consideration that clarifies the attitudes underlying the animal rights debate.

All of these characters or authors, although varying in degrees of fictitiousness, fight in their own way for the belief that there are ideals worth fighting for. And through these texts, these three authors all contribute to the ethical debate surrounding animal rights. Atwood’s cautionary speculative future, Coetzee’s intellectual and literary dissertations and debates, and Foer’s highly personal and concrete account of factory farming all add distinct features to this overview, and taken together they illustrate the ways in which literature can add to, or aid in, the public debate on animal rights.

The intersection of literature and the discourse on animal rights is not one that has received an abundance of critical consideration. This project is posited in an intersection of critical concentrations, and as such an effective grasp on its terminology and concepts is called for. In order to assess the role that literature can play in instilling awareness on the topic in its readers, here follows a framework of activist writing and the history and debate on animal rights.

First, a precise description of activist art in contemporary discourse is ambiguous in light of postmodern modes of thought. Elizabeth Ammons writes on activism and the arts and believes literature will be instrumental in “changing the world”. She is hopeful about the positive influence literature can have, but concerned with the vagaries of postmodernism where meaning is rendered subordinate to form. Although the stimulation of critical reflection is a significant part of bringing about social change, this postmodern malleability of meaning can also pose problems. By definition, an activist champions a particular cause, yet any philosophy can be drawn into question. The study of literature on moral issues is fraught with insecurity,
which Ammons considers perfectly logical considering the “dogma of postmodernism”, to which she feels scholars in the humanities much too readily adhere. This is curious considering the fact that at the same time, these are some of the people who advocate progressive change themselves:

Everything is complex, nothing simple. There are no universals, only socially constructed and highly temporal and historically shifting patterns of belief. There is no right or wrong, only culturally invented versions of both, and no truth, only multiple and constantly shifting ‘truth claims.’ There is no center, no transcendence, no knowledge except that gained through reason, which can and always must be deconstructed. (Ammons 9)

This ‘postmodern fundamentalism’, as Ammons calls it, problematizes much of what activist texts may be trying to accomplish. But she contests the veracity of the notion – in fact, she argues, most people do in fact instinctively believe that texts are capable of containing Truth. “The tremendous value of humanities and especially of the study of literature resides in the power of texts to teach us about ourselves, individually and corporately, including the systems of injustice that we as human beings create.” (14) Similarly, she asks whether we, brought up in “destructive paradigms of dominance and subordination” as we are, “have the courage and wisdom to reorient our values and beliefs so that we affirm and respect life on earth” (29).

The notion of life on Earth and the relation between humans and their surroundings fall, under the broadest sense, under ecocriticism. The field is tied to environmentalism but it would be a mistake to assume ecocritical thought started with that particular development in the late twentieth century. Rather, it touches upon attitudes towards nature that have always existed in human culture. It is this
that makes the ecocritical perspective so timeless – as Louise Westling mentions it can be said to have started with the earliest prehistoric cave paintings of animals – the first instance of humans attempting to make sense of the world around them through art (1).

Many works of literature throughout history allow for meaningful readings in this respect, like George Burns’ poetry which often refers to animals – John Simons, for instance, analyzes him and other poets in a specific ecocritical animal-focused light in his *Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation*. Susan McHugh and Garry Marvin point out how this field, too, has seen a major surge in interest in recent times.

Given the ubiquity of animals in human worlds, it should not be surprising that scholars are interested in the whys, hows and whats of human-animal relations: why animals are represented . . . how they are imagined, experienced, and given significance; what these relationships might signify about being human. (Marvin and McHugh, 2).

This, then, is a major consideration in the field. Although animals have been readily and extensively used in the sciences, Marvin and McHugh explain that thinking of them in relation to human lives is where human-animal studies are novel. Their anthology, featuring notable figures in the field, addresses such issues as what makes an animal wild or tame, and what pet keeping says about materialism.

In examining the role of animals in our lives, ethics, and specifically bioethics, must be considered. Ethical philosophy dates from Ancient Greece, and that is in part where attitudes on biocentric ethics begin. Peter Singer argues that contemporary Western thought on the matter was influenced most by the Bible and Ancient Greek thought. *Genesis* famously holds that man rightfully has dominion
over the beasts, and this inferior attitude toward animals is not mitigated much in the *New Testament*, where Jesus famously sends several thousands of pigs possessed by demons to their deaths (Singer 209). In the Renaissance matters did not become much better save for some thinkers such as Leonardo DaVinci, who abhorred slaughter (Singer 217). René Descartes is one of the most influential thinkers on the matter. He held that only humans have a soul, or indeed even consciousness. Since animals are machines for all intents and purposes, they cannot suffer and humans are entitled to treat them however they please (Singer 218). Some Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire opposed testing on animals, but religious views persisted throughout all this history (Singer 218). In the centuries that followed animal rights societies began to emerge. As Diane Beers explains in an extensive historical overview in her *History and Legacy of Animal Rights Activism in the United States*, it was part of the larger tendency of growing activism in the name of social justice.

These progressives comprehensively grouped together social causes such as abuse aimed toward children in the same effort:

> few Progressives drew sharp distinctions between animal abuse, child abuse, and domestic abuse, believing instead that each fed on and perpetuated the other: they were elements of the same battle. 3 Animal protection organizations began investigating and publicizing child cruelty early on . . . By 1922, approximately three hundred animal advocacy groups in the United States had integrated activism on behalf of animals and children. Conversely, many Progressive Era child protection societies prosecuted animal cruelty. (Beers 93)
However, society at large can be said to have remained indifferent and vegetarianism, understood as a tangible guideline for animal rights awareness, remained rare. This changed in the second half of the twentieth century. Many credit Singer as the father of the animal rights movement ever since he published his *Animal Liberation* (1975). Although this may not been entirely fair, as the aforementioned historical overview shows, Singer had a tremendous influence on social views and academic thought on the subject alike. It is for this reason that this forty-year-old work, dated as it is in certain domains, is discussed here in some detail. Singer’s philosophical line of thought is utilitarianism. Asking the question of what equality truly is, he points out that equality is equal consideration rather than equal treatment. After all, every individual’s needs are different and it would not do to treat all humans the exact same way, for instance. “Equality is a moral idea, not an assertion of fact.” (Singer 5) Answering the obvious question why we should bother with animal rights Singer refers to Jeremy Bentham, who poignantly stated that the question is not with any other aspect of animal, but rather very simply “Can they suffer?” (qtd. in Singer 11) A preference for members of one’s own species is morally indefensible (11). The main contribution of Singer then is his notion of ‘speciesism’. In the same vein as racism and sexism, speciesism is the belief that one’s own species is more worthy of moral consideration than others, and that it is proper to exploit nonhuman animals for merely this reason. In his book he goes on to describe the practice of animal experimentation and how most experiments cannot be said to have any true merit and lead to much unnecessary suffering. In a chapter on animal agriculture, Singer describes the circumstances of farm animals and the inhumane ways they are transported and killed. Throughout he makes references to numbers that are by now dated; while it is not currently useful as a resource for facts on the matter it should be noted that *Animal Liberation*, which went on to become a
bestseller, brought awareness of these matters to the wider public in a time when this was for the most part unknown. It is for this reason and the fact that he actively encourages his readers to adopt a vegetarian diet, that he can be said to be the seminal voice in the field.
Paradisiacal Innocence: The Worth of the Nonhuman in *Oryx and Crake*

“Meanwhile, the end of a species was taking place before his very eyes. Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species. How many legs does it have? *Homo sapiens sapiens*, joining the polar bear, the beluga whale, the onager, the burrowing owl, the long, long list.” (Atwood 401)

Humankind comprises but one of many species of interest in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*. In the 2003 speculative novel, even *homo sapiens sapiens* is no safer from extinction than any other species. At its core, the novel is concerned with ethical questions about what defines and divides human beings and animals. Atwood challenges the traditional categorization of species by questioning the long-established rigidity of the boundaries between them. In a narrative where many creatures can barely even be called animals anymore, and where life itself appears as pliable as any other resource the discourse on bioethics is of special relevance.

I will explore two aspects of the novel from a critical bioethical standpoint that, taken together, shed light on Atwood’s position in the discourse on animal rights. Firstly, I argue that the novel’s protagonist Jimmy/Snowman represents the prototypical decline of compassion toward animals that is often seen in individuals as they grow up. Secondly, I consider the ethical issues that arise in relation to the practice of bioengineering and the ensuing genetically modified species that appear in *Oryx and Crake*. In both cases, I relate the speculative story to present-day theory and practice. Both aspects show that it is in the moral stance that Atwood’s characters exhibit towards various species, real or otherwise, that the ethics of human-animal relations are most clearly addressed in *Oryx and Crake*. 
The inclination to read literature in a specific ethical light is not a new one. As Simon Haines puts it, “[a]fter twenty-five years of confusion and denial, literary criticism in English is starting to rediscover literature as a distinctive mode of thought about being human, and to regain confidence in itself as a manner of attending to that thought” (21). He argues that it has always been literature more so than philosophical discourse that “has actually been the principal mode of thinking about this problem since the seventeenth century” (Haines 21). The discourse on what it means to be human and how to lead moral lives, then, is highly applicable to a bioethical reading of *Oryx and Crake*. Scholars have identified an activist agenda in the work as well: “[i]ntent, in part, on instructing her readers, Atwood draws openly on the discourse of environmentalism as she emphasizes the effects of global warming on the future world inhabited by her character” (Bouson, 142). Atwood is an active member of the environmentalist community; Greg Garrard calls attention to the fact that she has

addressed environmental issues in [her] writing and [her] public [life] consistently over the past twenty-five years . . . building fictional scenarios around climate change at least a decade before the subject came to public attention in the early 1990. Atwood . . . [has] attempted to integrate scientific ideas in [her] work – both thematically and as structural elements of narrative. (Garrard in Volckmann, 203)

Much academic research on *Oryx and Crake* has focused on ecocriticism and human-animal studies. J.B. Bouson argues that Atwood’s novel should be read as a warning aimed at present-day biotechnological endeavors in its effective ridiculing of today’s “biotechnological world” (139). “Aware of the grave dangers posed by the ‘gene rush’ currently underway and the ‘reductionist mind-set’ of biotechnology as it
heedlessly intervenes in natural processes, [she] voices her concerns for the future.” (Bouson 140) Jovian Parry comments on the cautionary aspect of biotechnology as well by focusing on animal products, which have become an elite food source in the novel. He argues that “human-animal relations are of particular relevance in *Oryx and Crake*: ruminations on the edibility of human and nonhuman animals alike in the narrative . . . the ethical ramifications of genetically modifying nonhuman animals for consumption is clearly one of the novel’s concerns”(Parry 242). Holly Lynn Baumgartner and Roger Davis agree that Snowman is "Atwood’s vehicle to speculate on the future of humanity" (237) considering today’s discourse on looming disasters. In a postcolonial framework, they explore Snowman as an embodiment of the white colonizer who simultaneously symbolizes hope for humanity and neglects to use his position of power in a constructive way (Baumgartner and Davis 237).

Although akin to Bouson’s argument on the satiric and post-human qualities of the *Oryx and Crake* post-apocalyptic universe, and indebted to Baumgartner’s and Davis’ notions on Snowman’s moral culpability, the present reading is distinct in its focus on animal rights and species boundaries. Specifically, it seeks to explore personal ethics in relating to animals and the discourse on bioengineering, which have become a volatile matter in Atwood’s world that, for all its technological wonders, is more like ours than it appears at first glance.

1. From Childhood Compassion to Speciesist Indifference

It is an indication of the extent to which people are now isolated from the animals they eat that a child brought up on storybooks . . . where animals wander around freely in idyllic conditions might be able to live out his entire life without ever being forced to revise this rosy image. (Singer 239-240)
In his trajectory from Jimmy to Snowman, the protagonist of *Oryx and Crake* personifies a typical aspect of contemporary human-animal relations. His gradual change from compassionate child to unemotional hunter in adulthood mirrors the way in which the attitudes of individuals toward animals tend to alter over time, and by virtue of this universal quality the author confronts her audience with their own deeply held beliefs as well as encourages them to question their validity.

The novel is set after the catastrophe that wiped out virtually all of humanity, but through flashbacks, Snowman recalls the various stages of his childhood before these events. In the earliest of these, a five- or six-year-old Jimmy witnesses a bonfire on the OrganInc Compound where he lives (Atwood 17). Thousands of cattle and pigs had to be burned and destroyed after deliberate infection with a bioengineered strain of disease, presumably carried out by a rival corporation for monetary gain (Atwood 21). A telling detail in the passage is found in Jimmy’s boots, which have pictures of ducks on them.

They’d said the disinfectant was poisonous and he shouldn’t splash, and then he was worried that the poison would get into the eyes of the ducks and hurt them. He’d been told the ducks were only like pictures, they weren’t real and had no feelings, but he didn’t quite believe it. (Atwood 17)

At this stage, Jimmy’s concern for animal well-being is such that it extends to lifeless pictures. Although a five-year-old may not yet be fully capable of grasping the difference between a depiction of a live animal and a real one, Peter Singer argues they nonetheless “have a natural love of animals, and our society encourages them to be affectionate toward pets and cuddly, stuffed toy animals” (236). Although what they are told on the matter by authority figures often contradicts their naturally
empathetic views toward animals and confounds them, children accept this as the truth nonetheless. When Jimmy expresses worry about the burning animals, whom he imagines to be in pain, his father disavows the notion. Singer holds that parental figures are complicit in the cognitive dissonance that develops in children despite their natural tendency toward compassion. Picture books presented to young children often feature farms, populated by happy, cageless animals, suggesting to children that “even if animals ‘must’ die . . . they live happily until that time comes” (Singer 237). The fact that such distortions of the truth are passed on to children by their parents speaks to the deeply entrenched nature of speciesism in society, and the novel accurately reflects this.

Up until this point, the narrative is not overly speculative; the flashback might easily be read as taking place in the present day (the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in the United Kingdom in 2001 appears to have been an inspiration for Atwood). It becomes clear that Atwood’s story takes place in a speculative world once she introduces pigoons: pigs that have been genetically engineered to grow human organs. Jimmy’s father, a geneographer for OrganInc Farms, was “one of the foremost architects” of the pigoon project, and he allows him to go see the animals occasionally (Atwood 25). Tellingly, the nature of the pigoons “was explained to Jimmy when he was old enough” (Atwood 26).

He especially liked the small pigoons . . . They were cute. But the adults were slightly frightening, with their runny noses and tiny, white-lashed pink eyes. They glanced up at him as if they saw him, really saw him, and might have plans for him later.

“Don’t fall in,” said his father. “They’ll eat you up in a minute.”
“No they won’t,” said Jimmy. Because I’m their friend, he thought. (Atwood 27)

The suspect glances the pigoons shoot at Jimmy foreshadow how radically Jimmy’s views towards the animals later change. At this stage, however, Jimmy sees them as friends first and foremost. He is confronted with the callousness of adults around him when it comes to the question of meat-eating. The staff café of OrganInc Farms, for instance, serves pork products that may or may not have come from pigoons. Jimmy’s parents’ coworkers are unperturbed, making “jokes in bad taste” about the origins of the food to Jimmy, which upsets him: “he was confused about who should be allowed to eat what. He didn’t want to eat a pigoon, because he thought of the pigoons as creatures much like himself” (Atwood 27).

There are more instances where Jimmy expresses concern for the pigoons, such as when his mother announces she has decided to become a stay-at-home mother. According to his understanding of her job as a microbiologist, she is responsible for keeping the pigoons disease-free. He is appalled: to his mind, his mother has stopped caring about the animals under her protection (Atwood 34). These instances characterize Jimmy as deeply empathetic; he shows no speciesism in his demeanor. Jimmy appears to realize that “pain and suffering are bad and should be prevented or minimized, irrespective of the race, sex, or species of the being that suffers” (Singer 19).

However, in Jimmy’s teenage years his characterization undergoes a marked change. As he grows up, he gains new interests and meets his best friend Glenn, who later takes on the name Crake. Jimmy’s compassion for pigoons and other creatures is no longer a fundamental character trait once he reaches high school age. Instead, the two boys appear wholly desensitized to the suffering of others, as the forms of
entertainment they engage with demonstrate. Jimmy and Crake play a videogame called ‘Extinctathon’ that asks players to identify now-extinct animals, as well as several in which they wage historical wars with the specific intent of committing atrocities (Atwood 89). Most shockingly of all, though, “they’d watch animal snuff sites, Felicia’s Frog Squash and the like, though these quickly grew repetitious: one stomped frog, one cat being torn apart by hand, was much like another” (Atwood 65).

With this one sentence, Atwood completely refutes the compassionate animal lover Jimmy was in his early childhood. J.B. Bouson explains how

she . . . uses her narrative as a platform to voice her concern about a trend in contemporary culture that she finds troubling: the mainstreaming of violence and pornography into the mass culture. . . she also conveys her uneasiness as she describes the degradation of culture in a society where violence and pornography have become cheap, and readily available, forms of entertainment. (Bouson 143)

Bouson remarks that Atwood’s satire, such as found in the humorous names of various brands and website names, is used to address serious issues: they parody current trends in entertainment about which Atwood appears to have serious ethical reservations (143). Due to the fragmented narration – Snowman recalls his childhood in a number of instances, rather than recount his life story exhaustively – the steps leading to this surprising turning point are denied to the reader. However, Jimmy’s clearly discernible desensitization suggests that Atwood holds the abundance of violent imagery on television and the Internet at least partly responsible for changing children’s views on violence and empathy. By presenting her audience with a character who is first introduced as empathetic, but experiences a distinct shift in his moral conduct, Atwood addresses the issue from both a compassionate and a
desensitized point of view. Because the reader has traversed these respective phases first-hand through Jimmy's eyes, the change is all the more disquieting. Having first been led to identify with Jimmy in his more sensitive years, the way his innocent morality steeply declines, his sudden callousness forms a bleak contrast.

The shift in Jimmy's moral attitude toward animals first emerges in his teenage years as described above, but it is in his relationship with the pigoons in his adulthood that the change becomes most evident. Snowman does not narrate any memories of pigoons after his early childhood, but engages with them again after the catastrophe. In a poignant contrast with his early childhood, Snowman develops a hostile relationship with the creatures, who by now have escaped from their enclosures and roam the post-apocalyptic wastelands in droves. “[T]he pigoons in particular become Jimmy's fiercest and most dangerous antagonists in the struggle for his own and the Crakers' survival”, as Ursula Heise explains (507). Jimmy's father's prediction that the pigoons would eat him up should they get a chance has come true now that Jimmy has become Snowman, a survivalist reluctantly marooned with the Crakers. In this part of the novel, which constitutes a “classic castaway narrative” (Bouson 141), he is required to give constant battle against the forces of nature, and he is never far from starvation. Snowman must now acquire food wherever he can get it; although the pigoons are large and aggressive, he would relish the opportunity to successfully hunt and kill one.

He could trap a pigoon, bludgeon it to death, butcher it in secret. He'd have to hide the mess: he has a notion that the sight of full frontal blood and guts might take him over the threshold as far as the Children of Crake are concerned. But a pigoon feast would do him a world of good. (Atwood 177)
Although the pigoons are deadly adversaries to Snowman who actively hunt him, as well, the contrast with his childhood self is striking. Once an animal-loving kindergartener who wished nothing more than to shield his pigoon friends from harm, he is now a reduced to the role of hunter-gatherer who sees the animals around him as mere sources of food. Nonetheless, he still recognizes the horror such a bloodbath would instill in the peaceful, herbivorous Crakers who, to a certain extent, are under his personal care. This lingering empathy, then, is what remains of Snowman’s once all-embracing compassion.

It is not the pigoons who have changed since Jimmy was a child; the animals cannot be faulted for their instincts. As humans exercise dominion over animals, the fate of farmed and hunted animals often relies solely on their moral inclinations. In reality it is unlikely one would ever have to defend oneself against the very animals they once found adorable, but this does not reduce the universal quality of Atwood’s reflection on human nature. Even as the alleged last human being alive, Snowman’s morality is not forfeit altogether, but having been brought up in a society that promotes an unfeeling disposition, Snowman’s views on nonhuman animals have been warped to their disadvantage. The form of the speculative novel allows Atwood to engage with this notion in a hyperbolic way, without the text devolving into a barefaced indictment of present-day trends. Instead, she suggests a reflection on contemporary mores regarding contemporary human-animal relations without reducing her text to a polemic. In this way, an internationally bestselling novel such as Oryx and Crake is a suitable illustration of how literature can serve to make millions reconsider their ethical behavior.
2. The Dangers of Biotechnology

“What if they get out? Go on the rampage? Start breeding, then the population spirals out of control – like those big green rabbits?” “That would be a problem,” said Crake. “But they won’t get out. Nature is to zoos as God is to churches.” “Meaning what?” said Jimmy. He wasn’t paying close attention, he was worrying about the ChickieNobs and the wolvogs. Why is it he feels some line has been crossed, some boundary transgressed? (Atwood 242, emphasis mine)

The novel’s interest in human-animal relations goes beyond pigoons. In fact, the pigoons are but one of the many transgenic, or spliced, species that appear. From green rabbits to wolvogs, the man-made species evoke ontological questions on what a species is, as well as ethical dilemmas on whether it is right to meddle with nature in this way. Atwood questions the unchecked advancement of biotechnology in her speculative scenario; she presents astonishing developments alongside dangerous unforeseen consequences. The question emerges of whether progress in this field is worth the numerous complications that may well come with it. In this way, Atwood comments on current affairs and appeals to her readers, asking them whether they deem such a future desirable. By imagining developments that are not possible as of yet, Atwood utilizes the speculative genre to comment on contemporary bioethical issues. She asks whether the mounting advancements in bioengineering can lead to a desirable future, and in doing so challenges readers to assume a position in the debate.

In her introductory work on transgenics, Andrea Bonnicksen explains the present state of the field and the limitations that still exist today, as well as the prevalent perspectives on genetic modification. The hybrid, a staple concept in
biotechnology, is a cultural image first and foremost, and it meets with both disapproval and fascination.

The thought of hybrids gives skeptics reasons to be wary about biotechnology. . . The hybrid is a metaphor for biotechnology leading to the downgrading and depersonalization of humans as work horses or, conversely, to the elevation of animals to traits of greater cunning, prowess, and aggression. It is a symbol of uncertainty about the biotechnological future, and it has provoked calls by some to enact legally enforced bans to ensure that hybrids not be created. . . The imagined hybrid . . . presents dramatic fodder for fiction and fantasy (Bonnicksen 59).

Although transgenics make for intriguing subject matter in literature, the bioethics surrounding the topic is often overlooked in fiction. Sherryl Vint argues that it is conspicuously absent in much recent science-fiction literature. Although Atwood prefers the moniker ‘speculative fiction’ for Oryx and Crake, Vint’s argument accurately applies to the novel when she claims that what she calls ‘technoculture’ is deeply implicated in the reshaping of human/animal interactions; and sf, as a literature concerned with the social impact of science and technology, can contribute to a necessary rethinking of responsibility and ethics. We are witnesses to the simultaneous disappearance of "natural" species and the creation of new, transgenic ones. (178)

In the novel, this rethinking is an active and ongoing process, since developments in biotechnology occur at an audacious pace. Here too, Jimmy serves as an audience stand-in. When Jimmy goes to visit Crake’s university compound, Watson-Crick (pertinently named after the scientists who discovered the structure and function of
the DNA molecule in the 1950s), Crake offers him a grand tour of the campus. The many research facilities showcase a vast array of salient developments in bioengineering. Here, Atwood presents the wondrous experimental projects through the eyes of the incredulous Jimmy. For instance, Jimmy notices bright pink butterflies with “wings the size of pancakes” and extracts from Crake the admission that they have been genetically modified (Atwood 235). Crake sees nothing unnatural in this; “You know when people get their hair dyed or their teeth done? . . . After it happens, that’s what they look like in real time. The process is no longer important.” (Atwood 235)

Of particular relevance to the animal rights debate, Crake also presents the ChickieNobs project. A purportedly cruelty-free source of meat, ChickieNobs are chickens that have been bioengineered to have no head, brain or nerves. Instead, Jimmy is unnerved when he is confronted with a “large bulblike object that seemed to be covered with stippled whitish-yellow skin. Out of it came twenty thick fleshy tubes, and at the end of each tube another bulb was growing” (Atwood 237). Crake helpfully points out that “the animal-welfare freaks won’t be able to say a word, because this thing feels no pain” (Atwood 238). The ChickieNobs later become a contested bioethical point among animal rights advocates in the novel. In a development that is both telling of Jimmy’s growing moral indifference and of prevalent attitudes toward genetically altered animals in the novel, Jimmy’s utter disgust with ChickieNobs is only of a short duration before he is comfortable purchasing the product: “a franchise had opened around the corner, and the stuff wasn’t that bad if you could forget everything you knew about the provenance” (Atwood 284). This acceptance is not universal; against Crake’s expectations, it is mentioned that after the catastrophe, a fundamentalist Greenpeace-like outfit even
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liberates a ChickieNobs production facility (399). The futility of liberating creatures with no heads or nervous system speaks to the absurdity of both unchecked biotechnology and the limits of idealism. Atwood constructs a dispute between cautious and progressive voices on biotechnology that also exists in today’s world. In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway’s main focus lies with issues surrounding companion animals, but she identifies in all bioethical discussions a common restrictive angst that inhibits progress (136). She does not mince words when she calls the field of bioethics

perhaps one of the most boring discourses to cross one’s path in technoculture. Why . . ? Because too often it acts as a regulatory discourse after all the *really interesting, generative action* is over. Bioethics seems usually to be about not doing something, about some need to prohibit, limit, police . . . Meanwhile, reshaping worlds is accomplished elsewhere . . . all the lively, promising monsters are on the side of science and technology. (Haraway 136, emphasis mine)

Haraway presents the issue in a capricious light and positions herself as liberal on the matter, and a similar attitude is prevalent among the scientists on the compounds in *Oryx and Crake*. The transgenic experiments in the novel are conducted heedlessly: the development of spliced species constitutes “an after-hours hobby” among OrganInc biologists. “There’d been a lot of fooling around in those days: create-an-animal was so much fun, said the guys doing it; it made you feel like God.” (Atwood 57)

This cavalier attitude does not go unpunished in the narrative.
A number of the experiments were destroyed because they were too dangerous to have around – who needed a cane toad with a prehensile tail like a chameleon’s that might climb in through the bathroom window and blind you while you were brushing your teeth? Then there was the snat, an unfortunate blend of snake and rat: they’d had to get rid of those. (Atwood 58)

Mere years later, post-catastrophe, the dangerous potential of the snat experiment seems fully realized. Walking through the compound, Jimmy suspects he may have seen one.

Did that long tail he almost stepped on have a small furry body at the front? . . . The claim was that all the snats had been destroyed, but it would take only one pair of them. One pair, the Adam and Eve of snats, and some weirdo with a grudge, bidding them go forth and multiply, relishing the idea of those things twirling up the drainpipes. (262-263)

In this example, human negligence, or malevolent intentions, are all too easily overlooked. The community of transgenic scientists does not exert as much control over their creations as they believe, and are certainly far from Godlike in their abilities.

Nowhere does the notion of playing God emerge as clearly, however, as in Crake’s magnum opus, the Paradice Project: the creation of a tribe of fully sentient hominids who later worship him as a deity. Crake’s children, or Crakers, are the result of extensive experimentation with human subjects. When he reveals the project to a horrified Jimmy, Crake explains how in order to develop the Crakers, who possess a number of animal features, he “had to alter ordinary human embryos, which we got from – never mind where we got them” (Atwood 356). In doing so,
Crake crosses the ethical boundary of altering human subjects without their consent. It is perhaps the most speculative of all of Atwood’s inventions: Haraway references a panel of scientists who agree that “human cloning should be unacceptable for a long time, because the offspring so likely would be hurt . . . The conditions for flourishing are, put mildly, not met” (137). Bonnicksen agrees that it is simply immoral to subject any human subjects to unknown suffering (56).

Crake does not hold the value of life in high regard, and he is unconcerned by the human cost of his project. Some of the images Atwood produces are overtly satiric – such as prototypical Craker children “sprouting whiskers” and “scurrying up the curtains” when too much feline DNA is mixed into their genome (388) – but “Atwood’s cautionary desire to ‘remain human’ implies that she imagines some kind of essence to humanity, and the anxiety to change or alter the basic genetic pattern may be abominable.” (Baumgartner and Davis 233).

Through his actions, Crake embodies the trope of hubristic scientist who places progress ahead of human and animal suffering alike. He means for the Crakers to be a fresh start for humanity, and in their peaceful demeanor they certainly signal a change from the human race that has been eradicated in favor of their emergence. They pose questions on innocence and culpability: they have no sense of right and wrong, just like young Jimmy didn’t. he was subsequently influenced into losing his childhood compassion, and ironically this is what he is doing with the Crakers who, like children, will believe anything he says. As he thinks of new aspects to add to his ongoing mythology of deities Oryx and Crake, Snowman thinks to himself,
Internal consistency is best. Snowman learned this earlier in his life, when lying had posed more of a challenge for him. Now even when he’s caught in a minor contradiction he can make it stick, because these people trust him (Atwood 111).

A parallel to Jimmy’s early childhood is readily drawn here. The Crakers must learn all their behavior from authority figures, and in this sense offer a reflection on how this is the case for all children. In these ways, Atwood achieves the goal of cautioning her reader by showing Jimmy’s changing attitudes first hand, and by showing how cavalier attitudes will lead to disaster by and by.

She makes her readers assess the developments that her characters have accepted as acceptable, from snuff sites to bioengineered animals and ChickieNobs. By showing the process through which Jimmy comes to accept these matters, she shows that this is learned behavior that does not necessarily reflect our best nature. She asks whether we, as a society, are prepared for a future such as this by holding up a funhouse mirror of a similar yet surreal biotechnological landscape.

The individual and the collective, and the small and the grand, come together in Atwood’s indictment of the grim sides of biotechnology. Just as Jimmy’s childhood development stands for universal tendencies in the contemporary western world, small scale indifferent acts by scientists lead to large-scale ecological disasters. In Oryx and Crake, to play God is not without its dangers. Ultimately, what we do and how we see the world resonates around us. Atwood reminds her readers to look upon their own actions: on the personal scale, all change begins.
In J.M. Coetzee’s 1999 novella *The Lives of Animals*, writer Elizabeth Costello guest lectures on animal rights at a prestigious university while struggling with her powerlessness to change others. Her motivations to engage in advocacy and her ways of doing so are atypical and puzzling to many others, and she emerges as an atypical figurehead for animal rights activism. The novel invites a discussion of the intersection of social advocacy and the arts, and I suggest a place for animal rights activism in this tradition. The form of the narrative is also notable in the ways it allows for a meeting point between activist fiction and the reality of the animal rights debate. Finally, the text can be placed in the emergent body of animal-focused literary criticism which focuses on the viewpoint of the animals that appear in literary texts.

1. Literary activism and animal rights

[M]any people care intensely about altering the world in positive ways and are drawn to literature because, in addition to pleasure, they seek inspiration. . . 
Progressive change begins in the human soul, not just the mind. (Ammons xi)

In the *Encyclopedia of Activism*, Beth Berila writes that

[I]literature has long played a significant role in social justice activism, in part because it gives voice to the political positions of marginalized groups, and because it can break traditional literary form so that we learn to read and
make meaning in new ways. Literature has the power to move people, to create empathy, and to give readers insights into experiences different from their own. (par. 3)

Bhisham Sahni explains that “there have been a number of discussions, sometimes even bitter ones, about the question whether literature should become a vehicle of political ideas and activities or avoid them” (112). He does not consider this a valid point of contention, however: “[i]f literature is concerned with life, and in the act of writing a writer deals basically with life itself, politics, being part and parcel of life cannot be totally excluded or left out” (Sahni 112).

From Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to Banksy’s street art, activism, in the sense of “direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue,” (*Merriam-Webster*) has traditionally held an important place within the arts. In light of famous cases like Stowe’s novel, which has widely been credited with inciting the abolitionist movement in the nineteenth century (Goldner 71), the influence that a single text can have on society can hardly be overstated. Activism and the arts form a pairing that has been productive and influential over the years, and where scholarship has reflected this it has typically focused on one branch of activism as represented in literature such as feminist writing. The specific relation between animal rights activism has not been as prominent an interest. The present chapter aims, in part, to bring attention to this lacuna.

Praising the activist tradition among American authors, Ammons states “[p]ast and present American literature teems with the energy of dissent and anger and idealism and a call to action” (38). Although the dozens of authors she lists are diverse, ranging from Henry David Thoreau to Alice Walker, she considers them united in their understanding that words can contribute to liberal change (38).
Given the tradition of activism concerned with the advancement of equality in society as outlined above, the leap to investigate a particular contemporary author in terms of his works and influence is a logical one. The remainder of this chapter, then, will examine J.M. Coetzee and his novella *The Lives of Animals* as a case study of how literature and animal activism can meet.

### 2. Coetzee and Costello as Activists

When can a person be said to be an activist? Dictionary definitions of the term, limited though they are, tend to emphasize the importance of commitment to a cause, and many agree that vigor is a crucial characteristic in activism (e.g. *Oxford English Dictionary, Merriam-Webster*). It suggests special importance of this quality, implying that a certain belligerence on the part of the activist is a decided requirement. Coetzee, whose actual advocacy will be addressed shortly, bypasses this requirement in his fictional work *The Lives of Animals*: an academic novella where the writer employs an author surrogate instead.

In the interest of clarity, it is worth noting here that although the novella was published on its own in 1999, it was later incorporated into *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003). In its brevity and sole focus on the animal question, the text boasts “a coherence in itself that has been ‘written out’ of the longer work" (Head 109). Some citations may refer to the entire novel, but only “The Philosophers and the Animals” and “The Poets and the Animals” are discussed in any depth – little to no attention will be directed to the remaining six out of eight “lessons” in the later work, as animal rights are not of special importance in them.

Margaret Atwood has well-documented intentions of spreading awareness for the environmentalist cause mentioned in the previous chapter, and similarly
Coetzee’s writing is rich with underlying moral and ethical commentary. However, as he himself says: “a story is not a message with a covering ... There is no addition in stories” (qtd. in Attwell 25). All the same, Attwell believes “Coetzee’s is proving especially resourceful in generating a discussion of ethics in or of the relationships between ethical discourses” (25). As an Afrikaner South African, he is conscious of colonialism and the power structures and learned behaviors that can lead to atrocities, and here he extrapolates to the ethical dimensions of the animal rights debate.

The similarities and differences between J.M. Coetzee and his protagonist warrant discussion. The activist vigor discussed in the dictionary definitions above undeniably suit the protagonist of the novella. The contentious author-turned-advocate Elizabeth Costello, scorned for her militancy near as often as she is lauded for her literary achievements, is “an evident persona” for the author (Donovan 2011, 209). This approach allows for a rhetorical distance from its contents that is perhaps too convenient, as Peter Singer indicates in his reply (one of five responses to the central text that are included in the book). He asks, “are they Coetzee’s arguments? That’s just the point— that’s why I don’t know how to go about responding to this so-called lecture. They are Costello’s arguments.” (92)

Here, Singer gets to the core of the issue; how are Coetzee’s readers to interpret the intentions of Costello’s lectures? Presuming that they read Amy Guttman’s introduction first, they would be aware that Coetzee actually delivered the two lectures at Princeton University in 1997 and 1998 before writing them into The Lives of Animals (Guttman 3). In this sense, the distance that Coetzee creates between him and Costello seems disingenuous. But it is here that the potential for an interactive reading experience opens up ways of engaging with the reader. If the
stimulation of individual critical thinking is understood to be the most desirable outcome of an effective activist text, the novella succeeds admirably.

A composite of conflicting voices, Coetzee’s novel resists a single reading and instead calls upon the reader’s subjective approach for an active construction of the text’s synthesis. With its apparent lack of determinacy, *Elizabeth Costello* develops into what Roland Barthes labels a “writerly text” – a text not restrained by the illusion of realism, allowing for an interpretative pluralism that elevates the reader to the rank of co-writer. (Carstensen 84)

In this way, Coetzee does not impose a specific reading, instead leaving space for personal interpretation. In doing so, he diverges from his earlier works, which tend to be definable as either discursive essays or fiction (Bell 173). “But here, with a mixture of formal ingenuity and apparently casual opportunism, Coetzee has devised a work that genuinely answers to each category and thereby succeeds in radically destabilizing both” (Bell 173). The task of “filling in the gaps” (Carstensen 84) demanded of his readers as well as the continued challenging of traditional notions of authorship make for a narrative that is not typical of Coetzee, but decidedly postmodern. Carstensen explains the text is “constructed as ‘a multi-dimensional space’ in which, as Barthes puts it, various kinds of writings ‘blend and clash.’” (84). He goes on to say that in typical postmodern fashion, Coetzee uses “narrative self-contemplation and thus dissolves the boundaries between fiction and criticism, between storytelling and theoretical reflections” (84).

Coetzee uses Costello to do just this. The question of why he should use a persona in this manner goes beyond even the reasons of reader engagement already mentioned. “Is it perhaps sexier to be a writer than a critic?” asks Mark Currie in his *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (58). He explains that fiction can pose a better way of
getting ideas across than an essay: he calls this ‘theoretical fiction’. “There have always been philosophers and historians who have forsaken theoretical discourse for the advantages of fiction, for its subtle mechanisms of persuasion, for its ability to explore ideas or historical forces as they are lived by individuals” (Currie 58), except Coetzee is not an intellectual first and foremost. Rather, the author is doing what he does best in order to bring attention to a most worthy cause.

His mother does not have a good delivery. Even as a reader of her own stories she lacks animation. It always puzzled him, when he was a child, that a woman who wrote books for a living should be so bad at telling bedtime stories. (Coetzee 19)

This is the essence of the predicament Costello is in. She has a compelling message but lacks the means to effectively express it. It also exemplifies the unsexiness of advocating for animal rights, of talking of death and the unpleasant truth of personal responsibility. Human treatment of non-humans is an unpopular subject, as Singer agrees in his Animal Liberation; “ignorance ... is the speciesist’s first line of defense. ... Ignorance has prevailed so long only because people do not want to find out the truth.” (Singer 240).

If a book such as The Lives of Animals helps shake even one more person out of complacency and challenges them beyond the prevalent views in society, then the text cannot be seen as anything but a success. The writer’s activism can then rightfully be called vigorous.

3. The Lives and Standpoints of Animals

Liberationist activist writing, either subtle or overt, as Ammons is quoted earlier as saying, succeeds or fails in its purpose by virtue of the representation of the subject in question. In this case, the representation of the non-human in literary texts is of
central concern. Through the ages, animals have featured in literature with significant regularity. The variety that exists in acts of animal representation can hardly be overstated, ranging from Biblical parables to Aesop’s fables, and from Orwell’s *Animal Farm* to Coleridge’s albatross. Animal-standpoint critics take a distinct and decidedly activist stance on animal representation in literature. In this section I will offer a survey of the most compelling arguments made in this growing area of scholarly thought as well as defend the point that the animal-standpoint approach is the most valid critical framework in which to place *The Lives of Animals*.

Animal-standpoint criticism is not formally a field of scholarly interest, but it is the name that Josephine Donovan gives to the collective work of scholars who take an approach to animals in literature that diverges from the traditional view. Donovan challenges prevalent speciesist attitudes towards animals that exist in both primary and secondary literature. She summarizes animal-standpoint criticism as a venture that “looks for literature in which animals are taken seriously . . . not ignored or silenced, but with their realities empathetically imagined and in which speciesist ideology—that holds animals are but objects for human use—is broken through, discarded, in favor of a view that respects their subjectivity, their souls” (“Tolstoy’s Animals” 50). She identifies anthropocentric bias in diverse works of literature, such as a Thomas Carew poem in which cattle willingly go to slaughter so as to be an offering to humans, and more respectful uses of animals such as the ‘ethical’ death Tolstoy permits a horse in one of his stories (“Tolstoy’s Animals” 203; 213). Not all literary uses of animals are exploitative according to Donovan; often they are "morally innocuous and creatively productive"; there is no objection, for instance, to similes comparing positive human traits with those of animals (“Aestheticizing Animal Cruelty” 207). However, animals are often used as "an effective way to dramatize human emotions" by means of "the sacrifice of the animal as an
independent being to human aesthetic interests” (“Aestheticizing Animal Cruelty” 208). Although it is an omnipresent device in fiction, Donovan considers it problematic when the "pathos of the death of an innocent animal" is used for the mere purpose of creating an artistically pleasing impact. By doing this, writers do not necessarily "condone their characters’ behavior", but the fact remains they make use of cruelty for their personal aims (“Aestheticizing Animal Cruelty” 208). Animal-standpoint criticism as Donovan explains it is a decidedly in favor of animal rights; she holds that “animals are ... individuals with stories/biographies of their own, not undifferentiated masses” (“Aestheticizing Animal Cruelty” 204).

Several other scholars addressing Coetzee’s works have focused on animals, and not only in The Lives of Animals. Maria Lopez points out that Coetzee’s depictions of animals have received special attention ever since the publications of Disgrace and The Lives of Animals, but that “animals have always played a role, however minor, in all of Coetzee’s novels” (29). Louis Tremaine similarly argues that “consideration of Coetzee’s narrative use of animals ... is to reveal a deeper, foundational concern with the condition of living beings, one that at least partially accounts for the source of Coetzee’s response to the various forms of human oppression that he records” (588). Don Randall in turns appears to agree with this, but also believes that Coetzee means to comment on what he calls a much wider ecology of opposing oppression. In his view, the power structure that exists between humans and non-humans is only part of an “ecological understanding” that requires additional thinking on the reader’s part (210). “Ecology . . . does not dispense with social and political sciences, though it does contextualize them and qualifies their claims to status as autonomous realms of knowledge and enquiry.” (210) The animal, then, is at its core considered a tool Coetzee utilizes to make this point: “the category of the animal, and the animal analogy by which it is most commonly deployed, have a
deep and detailed history in the legitimating discourses of social systems of discrimination and subordination” (Randall 222-223).

As compelling an argument Randall makes, though, his is a position that is significantly removed from the animal standpoint stance. Although the term never appears in the book, Donovan readily calls Costello an animal-standpoint critic in the way she critiques the tropological way in which animals are often used. “In a public lecture that lays out her animal-standpoint approach to literature, Costello rejects literature where ‘animals stand for human qualities; the lion for courage, the owl for wisdom, and so forth” (“Aestheticizing Animal Cruelty” 208). Instead, it is right to fully appreciate animals as they are and as they live their experiences, rather than human-centric images and ideas of them.

John Berger is another writer who can be seen as animal-standpoint oriented, and who like Coetzee writes on it in a tone straddling the academic and the conversational as in a collegiate lecture. Known mainly for his novels and his writings on aesthetics, Berger is also something of an activist, “[having] been involved in many public debates and controversial political campaigns. In Mexico Berger met, wrote about and drew the Zapatista rebel leader Subcomandante Marcos. Other causes with which he has been associated include fighting political repression in Turkey and the plight of the Palestinian people” (Wroe par. 5). In his essay titled “Why Look At Animals?” Berger tackles the animal issue from the standpoint of cultural studies and aesthetics. Taken together and contrasted and compared with aspects in The Lives of Animals, I would argue that animal-standpoint criticism emerges as a highly coercive position that allows for meaningful analysis on both the cultural and literary level.

To begin with Berger, his essay is a relatively short and semi-scholarly one. Focusing on the actual act of looking between species, he makes the point that the
main reason humans have as distorted a relationship to animals is their slow relegation to the periphery of society in the last several hundred years. The act and circumstances of looking at animals is analogous to these changes in human-animal relations.

It is in her first lecture, “The Philosophers and the Animals” that Costello goes into animal awareness most thoroughly, but it is in her staged debate with Professor O’Hearne near the very end of the story that is more representative of the society-wide animal rights debate. It takes the form of three statements and three replies by O’Hearne and Costello, respectively. Taken together they offer a relatively well-rounded overview of the most prevalent arguments brought up by proponents and critics of animal rights.

The first argument brought up by O’Hearne is a cultural one. Calling animal rights advocacy “very recent, Western, Anglo-Saxon”, the philosopher denies the claim that the western view is necessarily the right one (Coetzee 104). Costello concedes the existence of western cultural arrogance. Nonetheless, it is our fault as imperialist nations that many power structures are currently in place, and it is western culture that is responsible for so much cruelty to animals. “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.” (Coetzee 105) The time frame that Costello offers here is of particular interest in comparison to Berger’s essay. The movement of kindness to animals in the west began with various welfarist associations in the nineteenth century – but to Berger, this new attitude towards the non-human is the main problem, rather than the solution. Berger goes into a brief historical survey of animal representation and finds that Aristotle was ostensibly overtly anthropomorphically in the way he assigned ‘human’ qualities and emotions to animals. However, this was not considered out of the ordinary until the Industrial
Revolution took a hold in the western world. As a literary example, Berger brings up Homer, who lyrically describes a horse dying on the field of battle at one point in the Iliad that is not presented as any less detailed or as any less tragic than the heroic death of a Greek hero (19). In order to demonstrate how the world has changed since then, Berger directs the reader’s attention to zoos and pet-keeping. Zoos and pet-keeping, he holds, emerged as a way for westerners to bring the animal back into their lives. In the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution limited the number of animals that could be found in society (Berger 23). However, there are now more pets than ever that are no longer work animals (Berger 24). Culturally, pets signify that the autonomy of both humans and their companion animals is lost. Pet owners use their companion animals as part of their identity just as pets depend on their human guardians for all their needs. Berger does not overtly address the debate or even the notion of animal rights, maintaining a more distant cultural scope in this essay – but the contrast is stark.

Professor O’Hearne’s second argument is that of personhood and cognition. “The best performance the higher apes can put up is no better than that of a speech-impaired human being with severe mental retardation,” he says, and therefore there is no use in assigning rights to creatures who cannot understand or enforce them (Coetzee 107-108). In typical animal-standpoint fashion, Costello replies that we measure animal intelligence by our own standards, which makes such tests by definition limiting. She considers animals extraordinarily intelligent, yet it is the experiments that are “imbecile” (109). It seems to me however, that Costello still views animals from a somewhat human lens in this instance. Berger appears to distance himself from the non-human more so than Coetzee when he describes his notion of the “abyss of non-comprehension” when animals and people look at each other (14). However, the point could be made that it is in this way that the animal is
treated with more respect. John Simons, too, holds that a “true understanding of the non-human experience” is simply beyond us (139). Even a truly non-speciesist critical practice poses problems: “reading as a pig is not possible” (Simons 182).

Touching upon what is perhaps the most poignant issue, O’Hearne then presents his final thesis: animals do not fear death as we do. In fact, they do not even have knowledge of it. Although he believes that “life is as important to animals as it is to us”, and that there is certainly a clinging onto life, they do not share true fear of death with humans. Rather, death simply happens to them (Berger 112). He ends with the notion that animal rights activism nowadays is simply too abstract. He isolates two types of animal lovers: hunters who have a primal connection to animals, “who spend hours watching them and tracking them” before the kill (Berger 112). Then, he holds, there are advocates who do not actually come into contact with farm animals but nonetheless believe that all animals ought to lead “a utopian life” (Berger 112). This observation could well have been paraphrased from Berger’s essay.

Animals, Berger holds, used to be central to our lives and every person would come into contact with them, by necessity. Their marginalization from our lives, however, is cultural as well as physical (Berger 25). What remains is a dream-like idea of animals, expressed in such cultural expressions as Disney films that could not be further from reality. Costello does not reply to O’Hearne’s statements as fairly and straightforwardly as she did earlier. Instead, turning hostile, she openly questions whether those who oppose animal rights even possess reason – the very thing they deny the non-human could ever possess. The debate ends sourly, and then the novella does so on an emotional note; Costello cannot bear the cruelty of the world.

In the inability to truly see, to truly know, the experience of others – be it animals or the meat-eaters whom Costello can no longer comprehend – dissociation and the potential for cruelty arises. And it is this that animal rights activism warns against, as
flawed as its proponents are. Costello, then, is perhaps the most truthful representative of the movement Coetzee could have possibly come up with.
Chapter Three

Eating Dog, Ditching Turkey: Foer’s Attack on Animal Agriculture

We can’t plead ignorance, only indifference. Those alive today are the generations that came to know better. We have the burden and the opportunity of living in the moment when the critique of factory farming broke into the popular consciousness. We are the ones of whom it will be fairly asked, What did you do when you learned the truth about eating animals? (Foer 127)

A work of investigative journalism on factory farming in its essence, Jonathan Safran Foer’s 2009 book *Eating Animals* also comprises personal anecdotes, interviews with food industry professionals, and musings on human nature. It has received both praise and criticism, but scholarly attention has been minimal, perhaps because of its form. *Eating Animals* is a departure from the author’s earlier, well-received novels, with a didactic slant not found in his earlier work. Whereas Atwood presents a work of fiction, and Coetzee one that can be considered semi-fictional, Foer’s text is chiefly a straightforward non-fictional piece of long-form journalism. The question remains whether such a text can be as insightful as a novel, or perhaps in a different way. The intentions and functions of fiction and non-fiction differ, but both can be didactic in nature. Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley, for instance, laud the function of fiction as an abstraction of actual experience, but cautiously admit the necessity of the non-fictional as well when they argue that “literary narratives are . . . substantially less simple than other more explicitly didactic representations of social information that tend to be non-narrative in structure” (177-178).

*Washington Post* critic Joe Yonan opines that it is convenient to label Foer
a cocky, self-involved writer who woke up one day and discovered factory farming. . . But Foer's particular brand of modernist prose, as made famous in his novels . . . does serve to bring another round of scrutiny -- and a new demographic of reader -- to the kinds of farms that, as he puts it, "treat living animals like dead ones." (par. 2)

Yevgeniya Traps writes that in the horrifying descriptions of factory farming, certainly well-trodden ground, “Foer's abilities as a writer are particularly relevant . . . rather than attempt to astound with never-before-revealed disclosures, he wisely focuses on presenting the material in a compelling, attention-getting, attention-keeping way” (24). *New York Times* critic Michiko Kakutani calls it “An earnest if clumsy chronicle of the author’s own evolving thinking about animals and vegetarianism, this uneven volume meanders all over the place, mixing reportage and research with stream-of-consciousness musings and asides”, but Traps identifies “[u]nderneath this first, this official story. . . a *bildungsroman* of sorts, the tale of how Jonathan Safran Foer became a vegetarian and realized his best, most conscientious self” (24).

The criticism Foer has endured, where it concerned his subject matter, is typical for the animal rights and animal welfare movements. Much like Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals*, critics have called Foer elitist. By examining a concrete text like Foer’s, the intellectual points made by writers like Berger and Coetzee gain a level of depth.

In recent history, the marginalization of animals has led to factory farming. The way in which Foer confronts the reader with his disconcerting argument and seeks to raise awareness on factory farming in his audience, situates the author in a novel position in the discourse on animal rights.
1. The Rise of the Factory Farm

“People are so removed from food animals now” laments a traditional turkey farmer interviewed by Foer (59). He is the last of his kind, the only American farmer left who tends to healthy, free-roaming turkeys in the old-fashioned way. In Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* and Berger’s “Why Look At Animals?”, the argument remains intellectual in nature. Foer sustains this philosophical line of reasoning, but also eliminates the safe distance that Margaret Atwood and J.M. Coetzee maintain. Specifically, Berger looks to the past for answers, and Atwood to an imagined future, while Foer focuses on the present – where these come together and action and self-reflection are of the greatest urgency.

Our relationship with animals is ageless, but it has been subject to many changes in its nature. The global tendency towards the ever further marginalization of animals in the public sphere is the focus of Berger’s essay, and many of his arguments mirror those made by Foer. Tellingly, they both address the gaze of the animal as an essential demonstration of the unbridgeable distance that exists between human and non-human, “the narrow abyss of non-comprehension” (Berger 13). Both writers agree that we are forced into self-reflection in this act of looking: “Silently the animal catches our glance. The animal looks at us, and whether we look away . . . or not, we are exposed” (Foer 21).

Insofar as such a thing is possible, the origin of human-animal relations warrants an explanation. “Animals came from over the horizon,” writes Berger (16), focusing on the otherness and mythical qualities ascribed to animals by the first modern humans. He believes they were probably the very first metaphors, and all over the world, “animals . . . lent their name or character to a quality, which . . . was, in its essence, mysterious” (Berger 18). Foer discusses this by addressing an early homo sapiens:
[t]he animals you know have power: they have abilities humans lack, could be dangerous, could bring life, mean things that mean things. . . You draw them in sand, in dirt, and on cave walls — not only animal figures, but also hybrid creatures that blend human and animal forms. Animals are what you are and are not. You have a complex relationship with them and, in a sense, an egalitarian one. (Foer 51)

This changed with the beginning of human dominion over the animal kingdom. The newfound intimacy between animals and humans upended their former relationship and is widely believed to have been consensual. “However, this ‘myth of consent’ is just that, a myth. It was always people who made choices regarding the animals.” (Foer 53)

Farms, where this bond, be it consensual or not, comes to the fore most obviously, evoke compelling images and are seen as a core cultural landmark of the western world, and this is especially the case in Foer’s home country, the United States. Both Foer and Berger attribute value to traditional pastoral values, as practice or as a cultural. Both agree that the traditional farmer with long-established methods is not the problem – the problem is that he is not there anymore. Only two percent of Americans are employed in agriculture nowadays, versus twenty percent in 1930 (Foer 84). Automated systems have made many jobs obsolete, and this diminishes the role of animals in our lives to the periphery.

Earlier generations were more familiar than we are with both the personalities of farmed animals and the violence done to them. . . Having little exposure to animals makes it much easier to push aside questions about how our actions might influence their treatment. (Foer 53)

Although a peasant may “become fond of his pig and is happy to salt away its pork” (Berger 16), small-scale farming is not such a hotbed of cruelty that it deserves scorn
in the eyes of either writer. Foer often emphasizes that although factory farming produces the vast majority of animal products in the United States, one percent still comes from family farms. Although it is not enough to compel Foer personally to eat meat, he considers the practices of family farms he visits ethically defensible.

Both Berger’s essay and Foer’s text discuss the history of how factory farming became the norm. It is striking that “[f]or thousands of years, farmers took their cues from natural processes. Factory farming considers nature an obstacle to be overcome” (Foer 19). As discussed in the previous chapter, there was no watershed moment where animals vanished from public life, but historically the tendency can be traced back some two hundred years: both in terms of the culturally diminished role of animals and their physical removal and diminished status. Animals, already used as ‘machines’ in the Industrial Revolution – it was in this time that conveyor belts were introduced to slaughterhouses (Foer 54) – experienced a further degradation to being “treated as raw material. Animals required for food are processed like manufactured commodities” (Berger 23). Urbanization and the rapid growth of the population necessitated larger amounts of food. As technology advanced, automation led to a decrease in farm jobs and an increase in animal cruelty. "Ironically, it is our unprecedented technical power over the physical world that heightens our moral dilemmas about how to use that power" writes James Jasper (2), and factory farming is the quintessential demonstration of this.

In Oryx and Crake, Margaret Atwood presents a speculative future of rampant capitalism and, seemingly, an exaggerated view of animal cruelty. The creatures she invents like genetically engineered pig(oon)s and headless chickens, however, seem far from improbable in view of the reality of factory farming and the industry surrounding it, described at length by Foer. “[T]hey’re not exactly farmers anymore; they’re corporations” (119), he observes, and this sentence encapsulates what is
wrong with present-day factory farming. “The factory farm has succeeded by divorcing people from their food, eliminating farmers, and ruling agriculture by corporate fiat.” (Foer 120) The facts that Foer presents are sobering and present a view that rivals Atwood’s fictionalized account of a dystopian future.

The most prominent animals that feature in Oryx and Crake are genetically altered. Read with Eating Animals in mind, however, there can be no question that this may be one of the least futuristic notions in Atwood’s novel. In what is perhaps the most horrifying section in his text, Foer explains the part genetics plays in the horrors of factory farming.

For nearly all farmed animals . . . their design destines them for pain. The factory farm, which allows ranchers to make sickly animals highly profitable through the use of antibiotics, other pharmaceuticals, and highly controlled confinement, has created new, sometimes monstrous creatures. (Foer 82)

Foer describes how just after World War II, farmers faced the challenge of feeding the world. In 1946 a chicken breed was designed that would provide an optimal amount of breast meat in terms of feed needed. Today’s chickens are all descended from a controlled gene pool that not only causes immense suffering, but poses a health risk to the world as well. The following passage illustrates Foer’s detailed, unflinching way of bringing this cruelty to light.

The muscles and fat tissues of the newly engineered broiler birds grow significantly faster than their bones, leading to deformities and disease. Somewhere between 1 and 4 percent of the birds will die writhing in convulsions from sudden death syndrome, a condition virtually unknown outside of factory farms. Another factory-farm-induced condition in which excess fluids fill the body cavity, ascites, kills even more (5 percent of birds globally). Three out of four will have some degree of walking impairment, and
common sense suggests they are in chronic pain. One out of four will have such significant trouble walking that there is no question they are in pain. (Foer 55)

It all begs the question of whether Atwood’s pigoons and ChickieNobs truly seem as outlandish in this light, or indeed the potentially pandemic diseases that are transmitted through food animals in the novel — today, the World Health Organization agrees that the next global pandemic resulting in a death toll in the millions will all but certainly reach us through animals administered too many antibiotics, and the bird flu is merely a mild precursor of this grim future (Foer 75).

Capitalism, is also under scrutiny in Atwood’s novel; the compounds and the pleeblands are an extreme example of the unrestrained free market where the largest companies effectively rule. Most of the meat is ersatz – real meat has become a luxury in Atwood’s world, as it will likely become in ours – but the artificial nature of the homes in the compounds is a similar nostalgia to that towards family farms and traditional farming. Foer references this when he says that “[t]he destruction of the basic infrastructure that supported small poultry farmers is nearly total in America . . . At stake is the future of an ethical heritage that generations before us labored to build” (Foer 119). In this sense, humanity’s shared past with animals, the state of that relationship today, and speculation on what the future may bring form a representative view of the various lines of inquiry within the debate. Foer wonders if making efforts to combine “the best of modern technology and traditional husbandry to reinvent a more humane and sustainable — and democratic — farm system” could be a solution; but the statistics do not suggest a brighter future.
2. Convictions and Contention

If someone abstains from meat-eating for reasons of taste or personal economics, no moral or philosophical question arises. But when a vegetarian attempts to persuade others that they, too, should adopt his diet, then what he says requires philosophical attention. (Devine 481)

Whenever anyone speaks out against eating meat, an ethical explanation is required. After all, it is an intrusive suggestion to many, cutting to what is often a core point of one’s identity. This is a crucial point of contention in the public debate, and Foer addresses this. There is no question that there exists “something about eating animals that tends to polarize. . . These opposing positions . . . converge in suggesting that eating animals matters” (Foer 18). Foer’s personal conclusion from the three years he spent researching *Eating Animals* is a commitment to vegetarianism (136) but he refrains from proselytizing. He is realistic enough to realize that it is “completely improbable that the likes of you and me would have real influence over factory farming” (132). Fighting the urge to offer the cliché that we all make a difference he nonetheless maintains that consumers as a collective do hold sway over corporations.

It is perhaps wise that Foer takes an understated stance towards changing behavior, preserving a distance from the animal rights movement as exemplified by such figures as Elizabeth Costello. Nonetheless, his argument that consumers are directly responsible is a resolute one.

To accept the factory farm feels inhuman. To accept the factory farm — to feed the food it produces to my family, to support it with my money — would make me less myself, less my grandmother’s grandson, less my son’s father. (Foer 135)
Foer comments on his trepidation at embarking on a liberationist mission and places himself in the movement and the debate in the same instant when he asks himself,  

— but what the hell have I gotten myself into? I am not a journalist, activist, veterinarian, lawyer, or philosopher — as, to my knowledge, have been the others who have made such a trip. I am not up for anything. (Foer 43)

The fact that the author cannot be considered a vocal animal rights advocate writing yet another manifesto is telling and vital. Foer is personally motivated. A now committed vegetarian, his recent fatherhood has spurred him on to learn about the origins of the food he eats. He is sharing what he has learned, and rather than speaking from an established, arguably elitist point in the debate – as J.M. Coetzee does – Foer admits ignorance and maintains a curious attitude. His distance from the movement helps the author. Animal rights advocates must take on “dominant cultural beliefs that humans are allowed to use animals, that using animals is part of the status quo, and that animal rights is radical and extreme. These beliefs . . . provide a structure of similar challenges to the movement” (Cherry 451).

Nonetheless, it can be argued that movements have been instrumental in forming the moral framework of modern society. From the Civil Rights movement to gay rights activism, protest movements have brought about tangible social change. Still, convincing the public of their personal agency in matters of morality is often difficult.

To make morality anything but personal choice . . . is a severe challenge for diverse modern societies. . . Protest movements are a good place to look for collective moral visions, with the good and the bad they entail. (Jasper xiii)

Jasper goes on to ask, “why do our thoughts about the world lead us so often to want to change it? . . . There are, after all, many other ways to respond to what displeases us. . . we can simply ignore what we dislike, as so many Americans do, concentrating
on the pleasures of private life” (Jasper 4). The criminologist Lois Presser, writing on
the question of harm in the general sense, focuses on harm done toward animals in a
series of interviews that are very telling of prevalent social views. She identifies a
clear “avoidance of knowledge” (57), and considers this a pressing problem – we are
ignorant when facts are readily available. One interviewee suggested when asked
about eating meat,

“I think it’s probably acceptable? Because people got to eat. You know, you
have to eat.” Ann commented, “Harming an animal . . . keeping them caged up
. . . sometimes is a necessity.” Tara addressed industrialized farming in
particular: “If we didn’t produce the meat the way we do, it would lead to
starvation.” . . . He concluded that “something has to be done” about deer
overpopulation. But most who channeled survival spoke rather abstractly,
using common codes such as “It’s eat or be eaten” (Beezer), “chain of life”
(Alison), “circle of life” (Susan), and “food chain” (Michelle). (Presser 58)

Factory farming corporations go to great lengths to uphold the idea of the necessity
of animal products, and Presser’s interview illustrates the success the industry has
had. In the face of common perceptions such as these, it is no wonder those in favor
of animal rights are often still not seen in a favorable light. The animal rights
movement faces special difficulty in stimulating public outcry over matters like
factory farming. “Nonhumans are left out of all sorts of ethical discussions,” as Lois
Presser puts it (53). Sunaura Taylor writes on “the social stigma one will face if they
“go veg”—the eye rolling, the teasing comments, the weird looks” (758). She
references Foer, who focuses on the social aspect of eating and the desire to do what
everyone else is doing. “Those who care about animals are often represented as
abnormal in contemporary American culture.” (Taylor 758)
Culture, indeed, is a major part of eating: dining together binds people together like nothing else, and many traditions like American Thanksgiving dinners seem incomplete without a turkey.

The Thanksgiving turkey embodies the paradoxes of eating animals: what we do to living turkeys is just about as bad as anything humans have ever done to any animal in the history of the world. Yet what we do with their dead bodies can feel so powerfully good and right. (Foer 100)

It is in instances like this that Foer acknowledges the temptations everyone faces, rather than place himself above the typical omnivore. Whether we ought to give up important cultural rites like in Foer's case, the Passover tradition of eating 'gefilte fish', is considered beyond merely demonizing the practice. Foer sees solutions: he proposes that we find new memories and alter our traditions, employing Passover as a useful example. The Biblical story of Exodus concerns “the weak prevailing over the strong in the most unexpected of ways”, and leaving out animal products at the meal proved enriching for Foer; “perhaps in these situations tradition wasn’t compromised so much as fulfilled” (100).

In all of these ways, the text presents is not prescriptive; it is more nuanced than many expressions of outright animal rights advocacy. Foer leaves the drawing of conclusions up to the reader. Many activists may disagree with Foer’s approach; the abolitionist effort does not condone even the most animal-friendly family farms, as one PETA member explains in the text (89) – but the case is easily made that Foer’s look into what it takes to produce meat would be enough for many to come to the same conclusion Foer does.

Unlike the horror-like image of Atwood’s genetically altered animals and derailed capitalism, and the moral resoluteness of Coetzee’s protagonist, Foer presents the reality of farming, adding a welcome dimension of nuance to the debate.
There is a safe abstract distance in the intellectual animal rights debate (Foer 115), and although philosophy is obviously important in the discussion, the topic does not come alive until we see the reality in today’s world. Foer yields scorn from many, alienating stubborn carnivores and committed animal rights activists alike, but this nuanced point reflects the grey-shaded reality of today’s world in a way that fiction and dogma both fail to capture accurately.
Conclusion

The stories we read both keep us away from, and help us arrive at the truth. Perhaps they are the most vital way we can learn of injustice and be part of meaningful change. Understood in this way, activist authors have a crucial role to play when they speak for those creatures who cannot speak for themselves.

In Chapter One, I conclude that Atwood’s vision of the future in *Oryx and Crake* shows clear analogies with technologies and tendencies that are already looming, developing or fully present in today’s western society. In this way, she cautions the reader that the continuation of destructive, unchecked capitalism and questionable moral behavior may have unforeseen far-reaching consequences for future generations. At the same time, the novel provides a depiction of the character of Jimmy or Snowman, whose compassion toward animals deteriorates in a way that is typical of most people. In this way, Atwood brings the universal issue of diminishing respect toward nature and animals to the fore in an effective personal story arc, against the backdrop of the large-scale collapse of civilization due to this very same attitude towards Nature. I conclude that Atwood’s outlandish and exaggerated future America is nonetheless characteristic of the short-sighted focus on personal gain so common today, and acts as a compelling warning and mirror for the reader, and in doing so adds to the environmentalist and especially animal-rights cause.

In Chapter Two, I conclude that Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* is best read as a convincing intersection of a philosophical, intellectual and literary case for animal rights, as well as a commentary on the difficulty of feeling alone in one’s moral convictions. Elizabeth Costello’s acidic demeanor distances herself from others, which in return causes her to despair in the face of society’s near-unanimous
indifference and ignorance toward the cause she believes in. This illustrates the imperfection and fallibility that is universal even in those with the best of intentions. I also conclude that Coetzee’s narrative device of an evident persona for himself invites a postmodern engagement with the text that is particularly effective in his goal, which I take to be the situation of Coetzee the author into the literary tradition of activist writers and the new concentration of animal-standpoint critics in particular.

In Chapter Three, I conclude that Foer’s *Eating Animals* situates the author in a unique position compared to Coetzee and Atwood. Whereas Coetzee discusses philosophical ideas dating back as far as antiquity in an intellectual, abstract manner, and whereas Atwood describes her vision of a possible future Western world in a way that remains extraordinary enough to be refuted, Foer confronts his reader with the reality of today’s factory farms. I conclude that his approach is primarily effective because of Foer’s framing device of his personal motivation. He is moved to inform himself on the actual goings-on in modern-day animal agriculture after having a son and must choose how to mold the next generation, but also struggles with family values and old traditions. Industry is increasingly impersonal and moving away from the values of small scale family farms, but there is hope in changing consumer preferences, and it is industry misinformation rather than humanity’s knowing participation that makes factory farming as powerful as it is. Instead, it may be possible for the world to collectively alter its consumption and arrive at compromise in tradition, after all.
Works Cited


