

Rhodes University

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Elephants, Compassion, and the Largesse of Literature

[Slide] Why is it that we do not raise a monument, a mausoleum, nor even a humble gravestone, to mark the death of every elephant? We habitually, even compulsively, do this for other humans, occasionally for treasured pets. Yet we do not do it for the most charismatic, gigantic, culturally resonant land animal we will ever encounter. Why not?

Some possible answers. One: too much work. Another: we regard other animals as less conscious than ourselves; we are the only creatures who *deserve* to have our deaths so commemorated. A third: wild animals are part of wild ecosystems; it is ‘natural’ for them to die and to be reabsorbed namelessly back into those ecosystems. We humans, on the other hand, consider ourselves somehow separate from those ecosystems: we shield ourselves from ‘Nature’ with bricks and literatures while we live, with marble and epitaphs after we die.

These reasons may seem to you obvious, or too narrow. Some of us, at least, think we *are* inseparable from our enveloping ecosystems, and ensure that our loved ones’ remains do reabsorb – as my mother and I did with my father’s ashes when we scattered them along the margin of a Zimbabwean forest. This was ironic, since my father was a Belfast-bred engineer who lived for machines, and paid almost no attention to the forest at all; but my mother was in charge of this operation, and she is a naturalist who loves the forest and its creatures above all else (except maybe me). My father endowed me with a love of books and history, some manual practicality (though I failed miserably to develop compassion for the internal combustion engine), the example of a robust independence of mind, and an insatiable curiosity. My mother endowed me with a tireless work ethic, the genetic gift of writing, and the example of an unconditional, though far from sentimentalised, love of all non-human creatures. To them both I pay tribute. I want also to pay tribute to my spiritual father (though his almost weekly question to me and anyone else who cared to listen, was ‘What exactly do you *mean* by “spirit”?’), the late Don MacLennan. Don taught me almost everything worth knowing about literature and poetry, about the values and wiles of communication and the imagination, above all the

humility of knowing that one knows very little about anything – and to take real joy in that.

This personal history may help answer a question that might be puzzling you: what on earth is a literary scholar doing, talking about *elephants*? During fifteen or so years spent researching and writing about the mythology of Shaka (I suppose also an odd topic for a literature specialist – and I have to thank Julian Cobbing, who set me on that path), I rather belatedly realised that I loved two things even more than history: literature and natural wilderness – and that, astonishingly, I could study both at once. I could even take field trips, the way zoologists and geographers do. Belatedly, I discovered that in that mythical land of many things both great and evil, ‘Overseas’, a whole school of literary study had already been launched, generally abbreviated to something called ‘ecocriticism’. This is the field in which I am now almost wholly absorbed. It is a theoretical wave which looks set to succeed in importance Marxist theory, feminism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism. So it will be worth briefly outlining the history and tenor of ecocriticism. Then I will address the concept of compassion, and try to apply it to some ecocritical readings of texts about elephants. Throughout, I shall try to explain to myself what I thought I meant by the phrase ‘the largesse of literature’.

The term ‘ecocriticism’ was coined by one William Rueckert in 1978 – almost exactly a century after Ernst Haeckel coined the term ‘ecology’ – took off only with the publication in 1996 of *The Ecocriticism Reader*. In the introduction to the reader, editor Cheryll Glotfelty proposed what perhaps is still, just because of its very breadth and looseness, the most useful definition of ecocriticism: ‘the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment’. This is predicated on the idea that ‘literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, *and ideas* interact.’

We can conveniently divide ecocriticism into two main thrusts. The first thrust is to exhume the presence of the natural world in works which do not explicitly feature ‘ecology’ or the ecological crisis as we now think of it; the second examines works which do. In terms of the first thrust, ecocriticism recognises that people have been writing about human-nature relations ever since writing began, ever since the Egyptians invented crocodile gods, and Buddha was conceived by an elephant, and Gilgamesh levelled Enkidu’s forests. In subsequent literary works, from the earliest to the present, the natural world makes its presence felt in ways that include the aesthetics of landscapes, the impact of seasonal agriculture, social class as demonstrated by hunting or ownership of domestic animals, the effects on plot and mood of changes in

weather. One can range from examining the role of the forest in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the tensions between domesticity and wildness in the novels of Jane Austen, or the actual and symbolic connections between water and the Christian faith in South African farm novels. (All topics of essays which my students have written, incidentally.) In such cases, the ecocritic will look to highlight or discern attitudes towards nature which the author may not even have really thought about in the writing, but whose presence is nevertheless palpable. From such investigation we can learn a great deal about past attitudes towards the natural world, both good and bad, and so deal more complexly and accurately with our attitudes in the present.

The second thrust is more explicitly driven by one thing: the growing scientific awareness of the fragility of our global ecology. One scientist views our condition this way:

Animals will be seen who will always be fighting against each other with the greatest loss and frequent deaths on each side. And there will be no end to their malice; by their strong limbs we shall see a great portion of the trees of the vast forest laid low throughout the universe; and when they are filled with their food, the satisfaction of their desires will be to deal death and grief and labour and fear and fright to every living thing; [...] Nothing will remain on earth, or under the earth, or in the waters, which will not be persecuted, disturbed and spoiled, and those of one country removed to another.

These animals [that is, humans] will, in short, eat themselves out of their own world. The passage might well evoke for you events such as acid-mine drainage beneath Johannesburg, overfishing off Port Nolloth, the shrinkage of our forests to 5% of what they were a century ago, invasive species, refugees, AIDS, rhino horn poaching, elephant poaching... Except that that was written round about 1500, by Leonardo da Vinci. Today, of course, science even more strongly supports the consciousness that human activity poses an inescapable threat to planetary health. James Hansen – perhaps the most consistently respected climatologist over the last thirty years – puts it this way: Human-induced environmental change ‘threatens not only the millions of other species on the planet but also the survival of humanity itself – and the timetable is shorter than we thought.’

Hence the second thrust of ecocriticism is to examine recent literary works that explicitly address aspects of the current ecological crisis, like Douglas Livingstone's poems of human damage to the Natal coastline, Kim

Stanley Robinson's trilogy of post-icecap meltdown Washington, or Port Elizabeth writer Jane Rosenthal's futuristic story of the Karoo, *Souvenir*. T C Boyle's recent novel, *When the Killing's Done*, revolves around the politics of eradicating invasive species of rat and pig on islands off California, raising highly personalised contestations over the rights of individuals, species, and ecosystems – between, effectively, divergent manifestations of compassion. In the novel, one character quotes Arthur Schopenhauer: 'The assumption that animals are without rights and the illusion that our treatment of them has no moral significance is a positively outrageous example of Western crudity and barbarity. Universal compassion is the only guarantee of morality'. As the novel demonstrates, however, there is no agreement about what 'compassion' is or how it should manifest in pragmatic behaviour, and no agreement that such 'Universal compassion' even exists.

On the other hand, we need not entirely buy into the strong misanthropic streak one finds in some ecological activism, and even some science: the view that we humans have made such a mess of things that the planet would be better off without us. In my view, if we are to develop an equitable compassion towards elephants, say, we need to develop equal compassion towards humans: humans are, *pace* da Vinci, as marvellous and unique an evolutionary creation as elephants are.

If anything marks us as unique, it is our ability to communicate by way of artworks, pre-eminently writing. Even in this age of mass-visual media saturation, writing remains a fundamental component of our humanness and our specific mode of consciousness – a mode by which, as it were, we can bring the universe to a consciousness of itself. But just as there are many variations of compassion, there are variations of representation: good and bad, weak and strong, idiotic and persuasive, fantasial and realistic, romanticised and grounded. So the force of any verbal expression can only be adequately understood and evaluated when tightly contextualised within its historical, cultural, intellectual, material and ecological conditions of utterance. Describing and assessing just how we communicate ideas to one another, persuade and dissuade one another to love or repel, and therefore act or fail to act in relation to the natural world, is the purview of the ecocritic.

Here lies is one sense, perhaps, of what I mean by the 'largesse of literature': that in its most generous definition, literature is *all* that we write, and even say – not only 'highbrow' fiction, poetry and drama. Science writing, travelogue and memoir, journalism, TV documentary voice-overs, even sms's and internet blogs: all are important vehicles of environmental attitude, and so susceptible to ecocritical scrutiny. Hence, ecocriticism becomes inevitably

interdisciplinary. There is moreover no impediment to wielding ecocriticism from any available intellectual angle or ethical persuasion: so one can happily be a Marxist, or a feminist, or a poststructuralist, or a postcolonial ecocritic. This is why I prefer, instead of the compacted term ‘ecocriticism’, something more unwieldy but perhaps more serviceable, such as ‘ecologically-informed, or -orientated, literary criticism’ – or maybe ‘Ecologically Limitless Literary Investigation and Extrapolation’, acronym ELLIE.

Elephants provide a particularly rich portal into ecocritical interests. There is a great deal of literature of all kinds on them. People’s emotions become particularly heated in relation to killing them. Their situation, especially in southern Africa, sharpens debates around animal rights and ecosystems management; the aesthetics of wilderness; the philosophical problem of the animal-human interface; the political problem of land-use in South Africa; and so on. Above all, having been charged by elephants a couple of times in the past, I am consequently absurdly fond of them. And there are all the usual reasons for liking elephants [slide]: their sheer size, their contemplative grace, their family dynamics, their calm oddity, their evident intelligence and presumably rich emotional lives, their responses to death and grieving – in short, their paradoxical closeness to the human.

Close to human? Those great grey wrinkly baggy dangerous creatures? It is also their preternatural mysteriousness, their *difference*, that seems to attract us (the word ‘secret’ appears in sundry book titles). This paradox is key: our treatment of them will depend upon how we imagine them to be, and how we represent those imaginings. And on how we ought to treat them there is a great deal of disagreement.

Not long ago at a conference on the elephant culling debate, I heard one local elephant expert talking to a game reserve manager, cursing ‘those bloody interfering animal rights people’, and advising her: ‘Just kill the fuckers.’ I was uncertain for a moment whether he meant the animal rights activists or the elephants. This man had just delivered a paper crammed with numbing monetary tables, expressing his belief that wildlife and wilderness’s only chance to survive is for it to pay for itself, become primarily an economic resource. This is a common and powerful view. Ranged against it is a slew of ‘animal rights’ views, which focus on the right freely to live of the individual sentient being; to kill an elephant is morally tantamount to murder.

I am not qualified to answer this philosophical question of animal rights, but here are some positions. Deep Ecologists argue for a notion of *intrinsic* rights (each creature has a right to live simply by virtue of what it *is*). Others, following Peter Singer, argue that at least some animals possess qualities that

we humans value in ourselves (such as self-awareness, rationality or language). Some have endeavoured to measure quantitatively the possession of such rights-worthy qualities. One method involves the measurement of brain-weight to body-weight ratios, called the ‘encephalisation index’. Humans lie highest on this scale, because of their massive neocortex; elephants lie somewhere halfway between humans and dogs. So should elephants have more, or better, rights than dogs? But *what* rights? And are we to assume, because neurologists tell us that an elephant’s neocortex is large in the same area as the area in the human brain that is devoted to memory, that memory means the same, or is experienced in the same fashion, by both elephants and humans? The short answer is, of course, we haven’t a clue – and no amount of neurological mapping is going to tell us; any more than measuring the level of corticosteroids in elephant dung, which indicates stress levels, will give us access to how the elephant is *experiencing* that stress. We can, in the end, only *imagine* such experience.

Some philosophers try to sidestep the abstraction bedevilling rights discourse. Ralph Acampora, in his book *Corporal Compassion*, proposes what he calls ‘intersomaticity’, by which he means ‘animate experience in which felt senses of bodiment are shared and potentially in dynamic relation’. We can be compassionate towards one another because we share flesh, porous and sensate skin, touch and hearing and sight, and so can en-vision one another within contextualised physical space. I like this idea, but there are limits: no amount of close physical proximity to biting malarial mosquitoes is likely to generate much compassion for them. Other factors have to enter in – and what factors *those* should be will be the subject of endless debate.

One variation on the notion of intersomaticity might be that entertained by French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Following Emanuel Levinas, Derrida proposes that our attitude towards other creatures is often based on our propensity to recognise a *face*. Dogs, cats, horses, certainly have a face which invites first a *response* (which entails some form of communication), secondly a sense of *responsibility for*. Elephants may well be said to possess a face – as evidenced by some artworks [slides]. Certainly some sense of compassion may flow from such recognitions. But only towards some creatures. And only by some humans.

Derrida’s idea is also still based on ‘otherness’, on a persistent sense of one securely bounded ‘self’ encountering another distinct entity or organism. But there are and always have been, other conceptions in which such senses of irreducibly separate selves are breached or blended. To take just one example, Freya Mathews has written about what she calls the ‘ecological self’; on this

view, what we regard as our ‘own’ self does exist, but is ‘really’ only a temporary manifestation of unseen but physical, ever-dynamic energies and materials, a moment caught in a restless wave. One component of those energies is what we have come to call sentience, or mind, or consciousness. Contemporary sub-molecular and subatomic physics indicates, David Abram suggests, that it

may be far more parsimonious, today, to suggest that mind is not at all a human possession but rather a property of the breathing Earth – a property in which we, along with the other animals and plants, all participate. The apparent ‘interiority’ that we ascribe to the mind would then have less to do with the notion that there is a separate consciousness located *inside me*, and another, entirely separate and distinct consciousness that resides *inside you*, and more to do with a sense that you and I are situated *within it* – a recognition that we are corporeally immersed in an awareness that is not ours but is rather the Earth’s.

In some ways, this is not a new idea. Many ancient cultures saw no such clear distinctions between beings, between animals and humans. This can be exemplified by a local, San testimony, collected in the 1870s, and here rendered into poetry by Alan James. It is called “A jackal who is a !gi:xa” (a healer or sorcerer):

a !gi:xa still watches the people with whom he once lived
 and when he sees that they are not at home;
 he turns himself into a jackal and comes to look for them:
 he traces their steps with his nose to where they are working,
 and he trots along past them as a jackal does
 and he sniffs to see whether they have killed any game:
 his nose tells him where they are and what things they have shot;
 and when he smells the scent of the kill
 he knows why they are not at home with other people;
 and when he has seen them and he is ready to leave,
 he barks like a jackal to ask them when they will be going home.

This is on the one hand material observation of jackal behaviour, even an explanation for it; on the other it is imaginatively adopting the jackal’s point of view within the story of a spiritual transformation, of one creature immaterially inhabiting and *knowing* the shape and activity of another; thus a richly unitary

sense of belonging is expressed, one which is both embodied and beyond body. Such apparently a-logical conceptions are not to be haughtily dismissed as merely mythological, or only whimsically imaginative. They are exceptionally powerful, in crucial senses true to what we are as humans, precisely *because* they are imaginative. We do not communicate with each other without imagining something of the position and inner world of the other party. Such imaginings are essential to any breaching of the barriers between participants in the ecosystem. Even a piece as simple as this couplet about elephants does this. It is also a San oral production, and may therefore be the most ancient poem about elephants we know: **[Slide]**

Tall-topped acacia, you, full of branches,
Ebony-tree with the big spread leaves.

Through metaphor, tree, elephant, and human viewer are imagined within a single frame. We keep coming back to that word *imagine*, don't we. We are not just talking about *elephants*. We are also talking about *representations* of elephants. There is a world of difference – the difference between being charged by an elephant in Mana Pools, and reading about a fictional character being charged while you're nestled in your armchair in Minneapolis or Madrid. But there are also ineradicable connections. The way one responds to a wild elephant is very likely dependent on what one has been informed about them. If one's sole exposure to elephants has been the infantilising, anthropomorphised Babar or Dumbo, one might be inclined to wander over and stroke the sweet thing. On the other hand, if you are Arthur Neumann in 1898, already steeped in the hunting literature of Baldwin, Cummings, and Selous, you will go out and kill elephants with a consciously related ethical stance – and style of writing:

Of course, I am prepared to be denounced as cruel. I admit at once that I am. ... One cannot complain of the censure of kind-hearted people who object altogether to the taking of life – on the contrary, I respect them. But the attacks of such superior sportsmen as, while themselves giving us graphic accounts of their exploits in pursuit of the harmless eland, giraffe, and other defenceless creatures ... are harder to bear.

So here we see at least three conflicting attitudes towards elephants, and animals more generally, clearly at odds from within the 'same' culture, all of which contribute to the very rhetoric and structure of the text itself. In many quarters, following Schopenhauer, 'the West' is simplistically panned for

leading the destruction on the environment and its denizens. But the West has never been monolithic in its attitudes towards animals. As Rod Preece intricately documents in his wonderful book *Brute Souls, Happy Beasts and Evolution*, it is a fallacy that the Biblical injunction to ‘have dominion’ over the animals has governed all Christians’ behaviour. It is a fallacy that Descartes’ infamous view of animals as pain-free mechanical automatons was always ‘the West’s’ majority opinion; and a fallacy that Darwin was the first to propose an evolutionary kinship with animals. And it is – as we have seen – a fallacy that everyone now believes in conservation ethics in the same way.

So we do not possess more than the roughest agreement about what ‘compassion’ means, not even towards other humans, let alone towards an animal so physiologically distant as a two-ton elephant, one which, given half a provocation, will stamp you flat. **[Slide]** We can’t now get into detailed semantic distinctions between such terms as caring, empathy, sympathy, love, and so on: I’ll confine myself to a justification for using ‘compassion’. I select it *not* because of what my dictionary tells me of its etymology, which derives the word from the Latin *pati*, *passus*, to suffer, and therefore equates it with pity. Pity implies an inequality of conditions, an hierarchy of privilege over deprivation: as William Blake wrote, ‘Pity would be no more/ If we did not make somebody poor.’ I want rather to place ‘compassion’ in an echo-chamber of communal rather than strictly etymological meanings, to relate it to the Latin *passus* meaning ‘step’, so that to be compassionate also evokes the idea of being companionably in step with, understanding. I want to snuggle it up with the words ‘compass’ and ‘encompass’, so that to be compassionate also means finding direction together with the other, and within some encompassing envelope, an ecosystem, if you like. Compassion says to the other, whether human or elephant: Hey, we’re on this journey together.

This, then, is my primary *ecocritical* question: how do our literatures represent elephants, and what do these representations tell us about our compassion, about why some feel it and others do not, and what does this mean for our ecological future? Descartes himself wrote, in a letter to Henry More in 1649, ‘Though I regard it as established that we cannot prove that there is any thought in animals, I do not think that it can be proved that there is none, since the human mind does not reach into their hearts.’ Yet we persist in trying to express in literature what we think or believe to be going on in the mind of another creature – including human creatures. Literature is the primary vehicle of such empathetic speculations; it is not about proving anything, in the way in which Descartes speaks: it is about proving, in an older usage, that is *testing* a what-if hypothesis: what if we *could* ‘reach into their hearts’, what would their

world look like? Clearly, such a reaching out is no longer a simple representation of an animal ‘from the outside’, one distinct self gazing at another. But nor does it pretend that the words on the page simply mirror the animal’s inner reality: it knows it cannot. What such imagining is really doing – and this is the true largesse of literature – it is creating new worlds, new conjunctions of relationship and vision, correlations and emotional fusions which simply never existed before, and which potentially rework the operation of compassion.

One way in is to examine the most important genres of writing about elephants: precolonial indigenous testimonies, children’s literature, hunting literature, poetry, fiction, game ranger memoirs, coffee-table books. In all these cases, we have to consider difficult and persistent questions of the relationships between style and content, between representation and reality, between intention and reception. Throughout, conflicting attitudes make themselves felt, metonymic of deeper currents in the cultures in which the writers are embedded. It is my contention that only good literary and stylistic analysis can make those entanglements adequately visible, and that comprehending and accounting for them is necessary to overcoming the stark, simplistic dichotomies that tend to dominate discussions of elephant treatment.

Hence, there seems to me a profoundly important set of connections between compassion, communication, and the exercise of the imagination. This is nowhere more evident than in the recent appearance of the so-called ‘elephant whisperer’ – a term originating with Nicholas Evans’s book *The Horse Whisperer*, massively expanded by television’s *The Dog Whisperer*, and finding its local manifestation in Lawrence Anthony’s memoir *The Elephant Whisperer*. This is only one of many works which accord particular importance to elephantine communication systems – not only communications amongst elephants, but also between elephants and humans. How these overlap, and affect compassionate behaviour in all directions, fascinates both many writers and myself. Katy Payne, in her book *Silent Thunder*, relates how she was the first to scientifically record and document elephants’ infrasonic communications. More recently, Caitlin O’Connell, in *The Elephants’ Secret Sense*, has taken this further and, through a series of cunning experiments among wild elephants in the Caprivi, shown that they communicate additionally through ground vibrations and the soles of their great feet. Even without specialised equipment, humans can become sensitive to elephantine communication. Payne opens her book with her startled awareness that her very body was responding to unheard emanations from a nearby zoo elephant. Lawrence Anthony relates how he gradually came to ‘know’ that he was near

his group of wild elephants, well before he could see them, by a distinct bodily sensation which he could only attribute to infrasonic rumbles from them. And once this level of sensitivity is realised, even though it hardly amounts to a conversation as such, even scientists cannot remain immune to compassionate feelings.

In reverse, there are anecdotes enough to demonstrate that, given the right circumstances, elephants can reciprocate such compassion, or at least some such caring. Anthony relates one such incident, when an aggressive ‘rogue’ elephant (it turned out just to have toothache) ceased stamping on his LandRover when he yelled at it: it recognised his voice and backed off. Even more convincingly, when Norman Travers, owner of Imire game reserve in Zimbabwe and ‘father’ to several orphaned elephants, died just a year ago, those elephants insisted time after time on visiting his grave, lingering and shuffling and turning over the clods of earth.

So I want now to move to examine briefly some extracts from several different kinds of writing, to probe just what the style and rhetoric of these pieces can illuminate for us: I choose pieces which themselves focus on the theme of elephantine communication, and what ethical stances are implicit, and being contested, in them.

Let us begin with the opening of a popular novel by a popular South African: Wilbur Smith’s *Elephant Song*.

It was a gentle rumbling in many different keys, and the sound was interspersed with tiny creaking gurgling squeaks barely audible to the human ear. It was a strangely contented chorus, in which even the youngest beasts joined. It was a sound that seemed to express joy of life and to confirm the deep bond that linked all the members of the herd.

It was the song of the elephant.

One of the old cows was the first to detect a threat to the herd. She transmitted her concern to them with a sound high above the register of the human ear and the entire herd froze into utter stillness. (14)

Here Smith rather clumsily enacts some of the philosophical problems inherent in imagining elephant worlds. Though no humans are yet present in the story, Smith fails to compassionately interiorise an elephant *umwelt*. He feels the need to note twice that these sounds are outside human hearing: the narrative remains locked into human interpretative systems. Smith evokes emotion (*gentle, contented, concern*) but inserts several qualifiers (*strangely,*

seemed); ‘transmitted’ is technological (rather than, say, ‘called out’ or ‘cried’). Smith reveals himself here as caught between the poles of imaginative empathy and a felt necessity to emotionally distance himself from the culling scene which then unfolds in the novel. Ultimately, the author seems to side with eco-managerial arguments for the culling. The rangers in the novel, a little further on in the story, express a similar dilemma; but the flashes of maudlin sentiment some of them express is undercut by graphic gore and clumsy melodrama. Moreover, the elephants themselves swiftly disappear from the narrative; they seem there more as a pretext for the usual helter-skelter thriller than as genuine subjects for compassion. The market demands of the genre are ultimately paramount, and it is these demands which govern the blood-soaked, over-dramatised rhetorics of the text itself.

(This is my reading; but the realm of interpretation and response is an uncertain, even unpredictable one. If I may indulge in an anecdote: I was presenting a paper at an American conference some years ago which included discussion of *Elephant Song*. I mentioned this to an interested local woman, not connected with the conference. I was grateful that I hadn’t revealed that I considered the novel badly-written, covertly racist, and exploitative, when she exclaimed, ‘Oh, I *loved* that book! I felt so sorry for those poor elephants, now I send money every year to the elephant sanctuary in Tennessee.’ There’s a very important point here: since very few people actually can experience corporal proximity to animals and environments, it seems axiomatic that *imaginative* compassion will be absolutely necessary to saving them, whether it is through such financial contributions, or just refraining from environmental damage.)

Nevertheless, actual rangers *do* suffer such dilemmas, and write about them, in a style very different from Smith’s. The style of the ranger memoir has settled into a distinct genre of its own: laconic, jokey, self-deprecating but pragmatically confident. They are often dismissive of the emotiveness of the animal-rights lobbyists, who are portrayed stereotypically as sentimental impractical ninnies who valorise the uniqueness and rights of the individual elephant over the ‘big picture’ of ecological or conservation-area management goals. Yet the emotional tensions are evident in every line they write. Here is an extract from the late Bruce Bryden’s depiction of his contact with elephants in Kruger National Park:

Culling, and especially elephant culling, was traumatic for any ranger, and the best way to limit the stress factor on both the shooters and the animals was to do it as clinically and rapidly as possible. That was one

reason why we used the self-loading R1 service rifle. Although its 7.62 mm cartridge (the equivalent of the well-known .308 Winchester sporting round) was theoretically a little light for large game, it was quite adequate for the purpose in the hands of a good marksman, and only the best shots were detailed for elephant culling. ... [T]he first time the R1 was used for culling it took just one minute and twenty-one seconds to kill 19 elephants, or just over four seconds for each kill.

Neither graphic bloodthirstiness nor sentiment play any part in Bryden's account. Emotional qualms are acknowledged but immediately buried in the formally distancing phrase 'stress factor' and swift progression into the technicalities of weaponry, ending with undisguised manly boasting. Thus the ranger, especially in the 'culling mode', determinedly refrains from looking too far into the putative mind of the elephant.

Rangers therefore also habitually draw on scientific discourse and 'objectivity' in order to justify a decision to cull. Yet even here, the imaginative foray into elephant mind and experience makes a distinct and profound mark. It was precisely such an imagining of elephant suffering, based on concepts of 'psychological trauma' – elephants being recognised as possessing psyches akin to humans' – which prompted a shift in culling techniques from taking out isolated individuals within groups, to taking out entire families. Here is a related extract from a scientific article by Scott Slotow:

For reasons of safety to operators and the public, the culling of elephants in Kruger was initially conducted using the drug Scoline (succinylcholine chloride). This compound paralysed the animal, rendering it immobile and harmless once it was recumbent until it could be dispatched by means of a brain-shot. It was shown by Hattingh et al ... that the use of Scoline for culling elephants was inhumane. These authors showed that in elephants the locomotory muscles are immobilised initially, rendering the animal recumbent yet totally aware of its surroundings. A while thereafter the diaphragm is affected, stopping respiration. The heart muscle continues to function for several minutes thereafter and the animal eventually dies of asphyxiation if it is not brain-shot. The use of Scoline was therefore discontinued...

The distancing rhetoric is one interesting aspect (*the animal, conducted, rendering, recumbent, dispatched, affected, function*). More interesting for my

purpose is what lies behind the phrase ‘totally aware of its surroundings’. What does being ‘totally aware’ actually entail here? Why only of its surroundings, and not also of its own internal processes, sensations, even thoughts? Why is it not imagined, and *said*, that confusion and terror are part of that ‘total awareness’? Though scientists are on the whole deeply reluctant to admit such expressions in amongst their equations, an assumption that some such inner world exists nevertheless underpins their conception of what constitutes the ‘inhumane’ and therefore the pragmatic application of their compassion.

The allegedly two different worlds of science and the imagination, then, are not as distinct as the more popular expressions of it tend to assert. Indeed, they cannot be. And need not be.

Compare the diction of Slotow’s article to that of a text lying at the opposite end of the spectrum: Barbara Gowdy’s novel *The White Bone*. This story is set in East rather than South Africa, but I quote it as the most thorough-going attempt so far to inscribe an elephant’s inner world. The entire novel is narrated by an elephant, and proposes a world not merely of sensations and events, but of conversation, discussion, historical memory – in short, a culture. This is no mere kid’s story, but a comprehensive effort to extrapolate scientifically-observed behaviour and knowledge, including the work of Katy Payne on elephant communication. In this extract, an elephant named Date-Bed has been shot and wounded above her right eye.

She awakens at dawn, famished and parched. A terrible pain pulses through the right side of her skull. Out of her left eye she sees the blurred silhouettes of vultures eddying above her. She throws herself to her feet, and the pain in her head rolls like a boulder. The skin on her back and left flank is sunburned. Touching her wound, she now feels the hole as a hole, and she smells the gunpowder. She smells her blood, the sweet wet blood in the hole and the sour crust of blood on her face.

[...] She walks to the edge of her pan and lifts her forefeet onto a low stone table. Since the onset of the drought she has been conducting experiments into infrasonic rumbles and has come up with two theories. One is that standing on rock improves transmission quality. The other is that during severe droughts the ground dries out so thoroughly that the rumbles get blocked behind walls of impenetrable earth.

In either event she has no choice except to try to communicate. She calls out to Mud and to her mother.

You may well baulk at the notion of this elephantine reincarnation of Katy Payne ‘conducting experiments’ into ‘infrasonic’ communication: words and therefore concepts no elephant could possibly have, and that this is wholly illegitimate anthropomorphism. And yet... if a gecko I once met can somehow learn, know, or at least ‘theorise’ (test a hypothesis), that banging his chin rhythmically inside a drainpipe instead of as usual on the ground will sound more sexy to potential mates, or deter rivals, why not in an elephant? There seems no good reason to deny that something *like* that can happen in elephant-mind, even as we recognise that our representation of it is inevitably couched in, to some degree compromised by, our humanoid mode of communication.

What is at stake is less the extent to which this is an *accurate* representation of elephant mind – it is a given that it is not, and that such is not its purpose – than that it *proposes* new commonalities on which ethical considerations can legitimately be founded. Such foundation is inevitably tentative, provisional, speculative – but it is no less groundless than the foundations on which we make ethical decisions about how to treat one another; and no less groundless than a treatment of animals founded on the often extremely selective foci of scientific studies – which as we know all too well has at times resulted in some of humanity’s most horrendous cruelties. While we have to face the fact that we never entirely *know* what is in the mind of another being, no ethics can rest content with not making the effort to know. But effort there must be, and knowledge, and humility. The alternative is groundless, disembodied invention, which is to say lies, myths, sentimentalised stereotypes, romanticisations, unfounded distinctions, oppressive denigrations, ultimately murderous extinctions. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum, in a recent defence of the value of the humanities, has this to say:

Responsible citizenship ... requires ... the ability to assess historical evidence, to use and think critically about economic principles, to compare differing views of social justice, to speak a foreign language, to appreciate the complexities of the major world religions. A catalogue of facts without the ability to assess them, or to understand how a narrative is assembled from evidence, is almost as bad as ignorance. The ability to think well about a wide range of cultures, groups and nations and the history of their interactions is crucial in enabling democracies to deal responsibly with the problems we currently face. And the ability to imagine the experience and needs of another – a capacity almost all humans possess in some form – has to be greatly enhanced and refined if

we are to have any hope of sustaining decent institutions across the many divisions that any modern society contains.

There seems to me good reason – indeed, there seems to me a necessity – that we extend this notion of democracy to include all other species, or at least as far as possible given the predatory, life-is-edible, Darwinian situation we find ourselves in; that the notion of cultures include so-called animal cultures, that one of the primary divisions in world society (or ecosystem) is the division between ‘human’ and ‘animal’, and that this must in fruitful ways be crossed. Literature is one of our most powerful vehicles for formulating and enabling such cross-overs, such com-passions, and we need to continue to enhance and refine the fundamental generosity, the largesse, of that imaginative gesture, if we are to have any hope at all of surviving ourselves.

These thoughts are given new urgency by the growing realisation that the ecological climacteric is happening partly because of the unravelling of functional ecosystems, dependent on chains and networks of relationships not only between non-human creatures ranging from whales to plankton, from elephants to ants, from redwoods to fungi, but including humans, and humans’ ideas. The loss of a species is not just a sentimental tragedy, but potentially an ecological disaster for all. Whether this is true of humans, time will tell – but we would perforce not be around to judge. Perhaps elephants would, and though I demurred earlier from the misanthropic stance in ecocentric thinking, I doubt many elephants would mourn the loss of humans much, let alone raise a monument, or even a simple gravestone, to mark our passing. So if I may indulge in ending with a poem of my own, a poem narrated from an elephant’s point of view.

Where in the waste is the wisdom?

What do you see in my amber eye, as I watch you
across the aeons, the water between us contemplative?
The plovers pipe; the warthog trots warily away.
I shake my continental ears: a sigh goes up, *Ahh, Power!*
I trumpet mud across my back: *Wisdom!* is the sigh.
Have I become no more than a projection of sorrows,
a landscape of wrinkles, a cipher of largesse?
The burnt hills beckon. Need it all be said again?

Let me approach. Let me tell you what I see in the eyes
of you who gape and shoot, or shoot and then gape, or just gape,
you without carapace or claws, without strength or speed.
Behind the laughter I see the weak self-loathing,
behind the whispered awe, your terrible rootlessness.
I see history driven to the brink of extinction;
I see gathered in those irises of strange penetration
all the brief centuries of your communal idiocies,
your tedious decrees and fiefdoms of tin,
your mad rapacities, sad parodies of marriage.

Your systematic destruction of elephants.

Some say all this is redeemed
by your invention of the stylus or the wheel,
by your sanctifying songs, your remorseful poems.
Alone now, dust shuddering round my knees,
I think not. I despise; I accuse.
I see nothing to detain me here.