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# Anglistik

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JENS MARTIN GURR, Duisburg-Essen

**Functions of Intertextuality and Metafiction  
in J.M. Coetzee's *Slow Man***

Wird das Feld der Relationen zwischen Texten [...] systematisch erschlossen, so erweist sich, dass der 'Intertextualität' keinesfalls jene Kraft zukommt, um derentwillen J. Kristeva das Konzept eingeführt hatte: Die Kraft nämlich, die Identität der Werke zu dezentrieren. [...] Daß aber das Konzept der Intertextualität, wenn es von einer textideologischen zu einer deskriptiven, auf das je einzelne Verhältnis bezogenen Kategorie gemacht wird, für das Verständnis der Werke fruchtbar ist, steht dennoch außer Frage.

(Stierle 1996, 359<sup>1</sup>)

[I]n a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it.

(Coetzee 1990, 17)

**I. Introduction**

J.M. Coetzee's latest novel, *Slow Man*,<sup>2</sup> was published to mixed reviews in September 2005.<sup>3</sup> Some reviewers found words of high praise: In one of the most perceptive reviews of the novel, Andrew van der Vlies called *Slow Man* "further witness to J.M. Coetzee's achievement as one of the most intelligent and important writers writing today". On the other end of the spectrum, there are quite a few scathing hatchet-jobs speaking of a "frustratingly unpleasant new novel by J.M. Coetzee [which] has the distinction of being the worst novel I've read by a Nobel winner" (Zipp 2005).

Most reviewers agreed that Coetzee's reanimation of his long-standing *alter ego* and eponymous protagonist of his previous novel, Elizabeth Costello, who in a sense appears as the author of the present novel, was a rather pointless exercise in cerebral metafiction. This essay aims to show that such an assessment is most likely the result of having overlooked a number of complex and telling intertextual games, which virtually make this novel a key exponent of a genre I would like to term 'unobtrusive metafiction'. The novel, as I will try to show, virtually normalizes metafictional elements and makes them part and parcel of the repertoire of novelistic devices. Finally, it can be shown how such intertextual and metafictional ploys – not least in the form of implicit references to Coetzee's own earlier fiction – allow for a reading of this seemingly most Australian of novels as a continuation of Coetzee's long-standing

1 My understanding of intertextuality in this essay will be a functional one: what do specific intertextual references contribute to the reading of a given text? I am here indebted to Stierle 1996. Further pragmatic approaches to intertextuality are explored in Broich/Pfister 1985, Plett 1991, Hassler 1997, Klein/Fix 1997, Allen 2000.

2 Coetzee 2005. All further references with page numbers indicated parenthetically in the text will be to this edition.

3 For a list of links to over thirty reviews cf. <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/coetzeej/slowman.htm> (18.3.2006).

engagement with South Africa and with his own position as – inescapably – also a South African writer. *Slow Man*, I will argue, can be read as a subtly coded meditation on self-imposed exile.

This is the story of sixty-year-old Paul Rayment, retired photographer, born Frenchman, who has spent most of his life in Australia. As he is cycling through Adelaide one day, he is hit by a car and has to have one leg amputated above the knee. He refuses a prosthesis and withdraws into gloomy seclusion in his flat. Rayment falls in love with his Croatian nurse Marijana, married mother of three, and – for mixed motives – offers to pay for her son Drago's college fees. After some eighty pages of the novel, the 72-year-old Australian novelist Elizabeth Costello shows up on his doorstep, moves in with him and begins to interfere with his life. Several fictions of authorship begin to overlap, as we are never quite sure whether Costello merely wants to use him as a figure in a novel she may write or whether she has in fact created him and is thus in a sense the author even of the text we are reading.

The key themes of the novel – frailty and dependence, eros and agape, authenticity and originality in art, the relationship between literary creators and their creation, the human costs of writing, the status of fiction, the role of the writer and, finally, withdrawal from society and self-imposed exile – are all reinforced by more or less extensive intertextual references. Furthermore, the novel allows for three different readings of the ontological status of Paul Rayment in relation to Elizabeth Costello: did he die in the accident and is she a "shade assigned to welcome [him] to the afterlife" (233)? Is she going to use his story in a novel? Or is he in fact her creation? Each of these readings can be shown to be related to one of the key problems the novel explores, and all of these complex fields of exploration are in turn held together by a consistent meta-intertextual play on several Platonic dialogues, most consistently on *Phaedrus*. Further intertextual references abound, but there are a few which are more sustained and which support the major themes and concerns of the novel.<sup>4</sup>

## II. Of Charioteers and Souls, Eros and Agape, Care, Infirmity and Death: Plato and Tolstoy in *Slow Man*

At the most basic level, *Slow Man* is a novel about infirmity, getting old and dying, about existence itself, about care and love. At this basic level, it is the story of how Paul Rayment settles into a secluded life in his flat after his accident and how he falls in love with his nurse. The text here constantly meditates on care and dependence, on charity, love and lust, on the relationship between body and soul, on the fundamental question of how to lead one's life, and finally, on how to come to accept the life one has led when it is too late to change it.

<sup>4</sup> There are references to authors and texts as diverse as – among others – Homer (27, 160), Plato's *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Republic* and others (throughout), the Bible (St. Paul: 33, Job: 99), Augustine (186), the story of Sinbad (128), the *Malleus Maleficarum* (263), Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (228, 256), Shakespeare (*Tempest*: 100; *Cymbeline*: 141; *Hamlet*: 198), Racine, (227), Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (14), John Clare (229f.), Keats' "Chapman's Homer" (123), Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (260), Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (229), Tolstoy's "Death of Iván Il'ich" (214 *et passim*), Freud's book on jokes and their relation to the unconscious (259), Joyce's *Ulysses* (118f. *et passim*), Beckett (141), Bob Fisher's *Jeff and Mutt* cartoons (122, 150), as well as to Coetzee's own previous fiction (*passim*) [if no specific text is indicated, the reference is generic].

In a perceptive brief note on *Slow Man*, Jonathan Lear was the only critic I know of who pointed out that Plato's *Phaedrus* is a key intertext<sup>5</sup>, but without exploring this idea any further: "The myth of the *Phaedrus* is everywhere – and the book is a hilariously profound meditation on the halted seekings of our erotic, embodied selves" (Lear 2005).

In *Phaedrus*, Socrates depicts the soul as consisting of three parts, figuratively portrayed in the image of the two winged horses and the charioteer.<sup>6</sup> One of the horses he describes as noble in breed and character and fully obedient to the charioteer, whereas the other is ill-bred, unruly and impulsive. This idea is clearly referred to when Rayment remembers "a book he used to own, a popular edition of Plato", and recalls the cover illustration of "a chariot drawn by two steeds, a black steed with flashing eyes and distended nostrils representing the baser appetites, and a white steed of calmer mien representing the less easily identifiable nobler passions" (53). He also very explicitly reflects on what the two steeds would look like and how they would relate to each other if one were to illustrate the cover of "his book, the book of him, the book of his life" (53).<sup>7</sup>

According to this charming image of the soul, the task of driving for the charioteer, having to harmonize and bring into line the two horses, of necessity becomes troublesome, "for the horse of evil nature weighs the chariot down, making it heavy and pulling toward the earth [...] There the utmost toil and struggle await the soul" (*Phaedrus* 247). Given this constant struggle, "there is the greatest confusion and sweat of rivalry, wherein many are lamed, and many wings are broken through the incompetence of the drivers" (*Phaedrus* 248).

In *Slow Man*, Coetzee hilariously literalizes the idea of a driver's incompetence and a chariot accident<sup>8</sup> in the collision which costs Rayment his leg. The entire passage on the soul in *Phaedrus* can serve as an ironic commentary on the human condition as it is portrayed in Paul Rayment:

[T]he imperfect soul, losing her wings and drooping in her flight at last settles on the solid ground – there, finding a home, she receives an earthly frame [...] and this composition of soul and body is called a living and mortal creature. (*Phaedrus* 246)

In a situation of erotic attraction to which this image of the tripartite soul is then applied in *Phaedrus*, the charioteer has to hold together the temperate, modest horse and the lustful, unruly one intent on "proposing the joys of love" (*Phaedrus* 254). Plato's understanding of a savage part of the soul intent on satisfying the cravings of the body as always conflicting with a reasonable, restrained authority capable of spiritual refinement and of partaking of more worthy forms of love will be seen ironically to underlie Paul Rayment's relationship with Marijana Jokić.

As a final concept from the charioteer allegory in *Phaedrus*, the notion of metempsychosis or the transmigration of souls is alluded to by Elizabeth Costello when she tells Rayment about the "souls [which] descend from their realm on high and submit to

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of key Platonic concepts and their resonance in *British* literature through the centuries cf. Gurr 2003, 21–26 *et passim*.

<sup>6</sup> Plato 1982, 246–254. All further references by section are to this edition.

<sup>7</sup> For further explicit references to Platonic dialogues cf. 26, 57 *et passim*.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. also Lear 2005, 7, who speaks of "a philosophical comedy based on a chariot-accident".

being born again: so that, as they grow up in our company, they can lead us along the hard road of loving" (182).

According to this doctrine, any soul passes through several classes of human beings depending on its conduct in life. The soul thus undergoes "states of probation", in which "whoever lives justly obtains a better lot, and whoever lives unjustly, a worse" (*Phaedrus* 248).

It is a telling irony in the context of the novel's exploration of the problematic nature of fiction and the status of the writer that Plato should assign to the writer a rather lowly position in the hierarchy of souls: of the nine categories of incarnations – the first being "a philosopher", the second a "lawful king", the third "a politician, or a man of business" etc. – "a poet or some other imitative artist" is assigned to the sixth rank, above only "a craftsman or a husbandman", "a sophist or a demagogue" and "a tyrant" in ranks seven to nine (*Phaedrus* 248).

A highly influential notion from the *Symposium*<sup>9</sup>, Plato's dialogue largely concerned with different forms of love, also features prominently in the novel. In his oration, Socrates argues for the spiritual refinement of "ever climbing aloft, as on the rungs of a ladder" (*Symposium* 211), from the physical love of one beautiful body via an acknowledgement of beauty in general, a love of spiritual rather than physical beauty, via a love of the beauty of the sciences and of philosophy, ultimately to the vision of essential beauty or divine beauty itself and to heavenly love (*Symposium* 212).

The novel, too, is consistently concerned with the conflicting forms of love, eros and agape, lust and care, desire and charity:

If his love for Marijana is indeed pure, why did it wait to take up residence in his heart until the instant she flashed him her legs [when stretching to dust books on his high shelves]? Why does love, even such love as he claims to practise, need the spectacle of beauty to bring it to life? What, in the abstract, do shapely legs have to do with love, or for that matter with desire? (149)<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, during the sexual encounter with the blind Marianna<sup>11</sup>, which Costello has arranged, Rayment muses:

Eros. Why does the sight of the beautiful call eros into life? Why does the spectacle of the hideous strangle-desire? Does intercourse with the beautiful elevate us, make better people of us, or is it by embracing the diseased, the mutilated, the repulsive that we improve ourselves? (108)

Finally, after he has had sex with Marianna, he wonders whether they might now "proceed to higher and better things" (112). All of this clearly alludes to the entire Platonic and Neo-Platonic discussion of the *gradatio amoris*, the ascension to higher and more worthy forms of love, and the ennobling qualities of 'true' love. Rayment later reconceptualizes the opposition between body and soul and between physical and spiritual love in Christian terms, specifically along Augustinian lines: "It all feels one to him, one movement: the swelling of the soul, the swelling of the heart, the swelling of de-

<sup>9</sup> Plato 1983. All further references by section to the *Symposium* will be to this edition.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. also 154 *et passim*.

<sup>11</sup> The similarity of the names "Marijana" and "Marianna" is hardly accidental. It appears to reinforce the impression of uncanny manipulation on the part of Elizabeth Costello

sire. He cannot imagine loving God more than he loves Marijana at this moment" (186).

A related key Platonic notion relevant to *Slow Man* is that of the natural opposition between body and soul. It is in *Phaedo*<sup>12</sup> that Socrates, in conversation with Simmias, argues that the soul fares best when it "takes leave of the body [...] avoiding, so far as it can, all association or contact with the body" (*Phaedo* 65). This idea is further highlighted in the following passage about the body as being an obstacle and nuisance to the soul:

[S]o long as we have the body, and the soul is contaminated by such an evil, we shall never attain completely what we desire, that is, the truth. For the body keeps us constantly busy by reason of its need of sustenance. [...] And the body fills us with passions and desires and fears [...] It really and truly makes it impossible for us to think at all. (*Phaedo* 66)

The image of the body as a hindrance, even a prison or grave to the soul, recurs throughout Plato's dialogues.<sup>13</sup>

This notion is echoed in *Slow Man* when we read of Rayment: "He still has a sense of being a soul with an undiminished soul-life; as for the rest of him, it is just a sack of blood and bones that he is forced to carry around" (32). Finally, the name Rayment itself may be taken as a hint at another related Platonic concept, that of the body as the outer shell, clothing – or raiment – of the soul.

In each case, the references and allusions to the Platonic concepts are fairly unmistakable and can be shown to be highly relevant to the key 'existential' themes of the novel: the awkwardness of the body, the precarious relationship of body and soul, or different concepts of love.

This 'existential' level of the novel gains further resonance through the numerous intertextual parallels with Tolstoy's 1886 novella "The Death of Iván Ilích",<sup>14</sup> another key text on care and suffering, in which a sick man has to realize he has not used his life well and must die an agonizing death, abandoned and betrayed by most of his family and friends. Without developing the idea any further, Markovits comments on *Slow Man's* relation to Tolstoy's novella: "[Paul Rayment's] story is a kind of photographic negative of Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Il'yich*. In Paul's case, a man who has not used his life well wonders why he must continue to live" (Markovits 2005). In Coetzee's novel, it is Rayment himself who pushes away his friends from his former life. In addition to such general parallels and inversions, there are a number of specific, emblematic episodes in *Slow Man* which are unmistakably reminiscent of Tolstoy's novella.

In one episode, when Rayment cannot fully get up out of bed, he urinates on the floor and finds himself stuck, with trousers halfway down, on the edge of the bed:

Miserably he surrenders and urinates on the floor. That is the posture in which Drago [...] finds him [...]: half in bed, half out, his leg caught in the twisted bedclothes, stalled, frozen. ... Now here he is, a helpless old man in urinous pyjamas trailing an obscene pink stump behind him from which the sodden bandages are slipping. (214)

<sup>12</sup> Plato 1982. All further references to *Phaedo* by section are to this edition.

<sup>13</sup> For similar views cf. also *Phaedo*, 62; as well as *Gorgias* 493, where the body is seen as a tomb of the soul; "body" and "tomb" are here further connected by the similarity of the Greek "σῶμα" and "σημα"

<sup>14</sup> For Coetzee's longstanding interest in Tolstoy, cf. for instance his 1985 essay on Tolstoy, Rousseau and Dostoevsky (Coetzee 1985).

This alludes to the passage in which Iván Ilích is unable to pull up his trousers after having used the close-stool:

Special appliances, too, were used for his evacuations, and every time this was a torture to him, – a torture on account of the impurity, the indecency, and the smell, and from the consciousness that another person had to take part in it. [...] One time, upon getting up from the vessel, and being unable to lift up his trousers, he dropped down into a soft chair and looked in terror at his bared, impotent thighs with their sharply defined muscles. (VII, 52f.)

While Iván Ilích is helped in his plight by the young, sympathetic Gerásim, Paul Rayment is supported by young Drago, Marijana's son, whose function in the novel generally echoes that of Gerásim for Iván Ilích: they are the young, uncomplicated, friendly and pragmatic young men who serve as the frail men's links to life.

This 'existential level' of the novel, this exploration of suffering, dependence, the relationship between charity and desire, love and lust etc. remains fully valid and is not undermined by the metafictional explorations of authenticity, originality and the relationship between literary creator and creation that are going on throughout the book.

But *Slow Man* is also a novel about existential questions of death and existence in yet another sense, because on one level, the novel leads us to believe that Rayment is dead already and that the encounter with Costello is an afterlife experience. Referring to the road in which he had his accident, Costello asks him: "Magill Road, the very portal to the abode of the dead: how did you feel as you tumbled through the air? Did the whole of your life flash before you?" (83). Although this sounds more like a facetious reference to the fact that he could have died, it also at least suggests that Costello's disturbingly knowledgeable interference in his life may have something to do with the fact that he no longer fully dwells among the living. Elsewhere, he reflects:

Or is it worse than that, incomparably worse, so much worse that the mind threatens to buckle? Is this what it is like to be translated to what at present he can only call *the other side*? Is that what has happened to him ...? (122)

In a further passage, this thought is underlined by a *Tempest* reference: "Indeed, for all he knows he could already be lost overboard, tugged to and fro by the currents of the deep. The slap of water that will in time strip his bones of the last sliver of flesh. Pearls of his eyes; coral of his bones" (100). According to this view of their relationship, Costello appears to play the role of some "shade assigned to welcome [him] to the afterlife" (233).

### III. The Problems of Authorship: *Slow Man* and the Normalization of Metafiction

In his review of the novel in the *South African Mail & Guardian*, Derek Hook hints at the motif of original versus fake, of natural versus artificial, as a consistent theme of the novel:

The notion of the prosthetic is explored in another and less successful way also, not only as a relation of dependence, but also as a relation of substitution, that is, as copy,

as artificial replacement. Another female character is employed to this end – Elizabeth Costello [...], who arrives at Rayment's house as the author in the process of telling his story. (Hook 2005)<sup>15</sup>

Over a period of some ten years now, Coetzee has repeatedly used Elizabeth Costello as an *alter ego* figure, delivering lectures as fictions in which she delivers lectures on 'his' topics,<sup>16</sup> culminating in *Elizabeth Costello* in 2003. Although Coetzee's texts carefully undermine any attempt to take one of the figures as a mouthpiece, *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man* so consistently play with fictions of authorship that they will inescapably be read in this light – this, *nota bene*, has nothing to do with biographism but becomes a further level of significance in the texts themselves. This and the multiple echoes and parallels between Coetzee's and Costello's work make the metafictional exercises in *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man* meditations on the role of the writer, the status of fiction and the problems of authorship, in which Coetzee clearly implicates his own role as a writer.

Just as Coetzee has repeatedly used "canonic intertextuality"<sup>17</sup> as a device in his fiction – most importantly Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in *Foe*<sup>18</sup> – so Costello is an author who became famous for rewriting a canonical classic: Her early book *The House on Eccles Street* is a rewriting of *Ulysses* from Molly Bloom's perspective.<sup>19</sup> In an interview in *Elizabeth Costello* she says: "[W]e can't go on parasitizing the classics for ever. I am not excluding myself from the charge. We've got to start doing some inventing of our own" (14f.).

In *Elizabeth Costello*, the metafictional ploys<sup>20</sup> were rather blatant, beginning with the very opening of the novel. The first chapter, entitled "Realism", begins as follows: "There is first of all the problem of the opening [...]" By means of such far-from-original metafictional games, *Elizabeth Costello* problematized the role of the writer and the form of the novel – not always very optimistically, it seems.

In *Slow Man*, too, from the very opening of the novel, there is a curious sense of verbal consciousness at work, of constant reflection on and reflexivity of language:

The blow catches him from the right, sharp and surprising and painful, like a bolt of electricity, lifting him up off the bicycle. *Relax!* He tells himself as he flies through the air (*Flies through the air with the greatest of ease!*), and indeed he can feel his limbs go obediently slack. *Like a cat* he tells himself: *roll, then spring to your feet, ready for what comes next.* The unusual word *limber* or *limbre* is on the horizon too. (1, italics original)

15 Cf. also Lear 2005, who remarks: "But this is a comedy of incarnation in another sense. What if the Author of one's existence – out of love, or perhaps frustration – decided to make Herself flesh and come ring one's doorbell? And how would the Author tolerate a creation that had, by the very act of creation, acquired independence? A transcendent being made flesh and her creation must learn to put up with each other."

16 Cf. especially his 1997 Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, published in 1999 as *The Lives of Animals*.

17 On "canonic intertextuality" in Coetzee's novels cf. Attridge 2004, 69 *et passim*.

18 For another key South African perspective on Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* – interestingly, also one of exile – cf. Lewis Nkosi's "Robinson Crusoe: Call Me Master". (Nkosi 1983). Cf. Gallagher 1991 for a reading of Nkosi's version of *Robinson Crusoe* in connection with Coetzee's *Foe*.

19 Cf. Coetzee 2003, 1, 12 *et passim*, as well as Coetzee 2005, 118ff.

20 For a classic discussion and classification of metafictional strategies cf. for instance Waugh 1984.



Given what we later learn about Elizabeth Costello's role as on some level the writer of his story, there is also a sense in which he himself is being typed. As he is being transported to hospital after the accident, he wonders:

What is going on? If he were to open his eyes, he would know. But he cannot do that just yet. Something is coming to him. A letter at a time, *clack clack clack*, a message is being typed on a rose-pink screen that trembles like water each time he blinks and is therefore quite likely his own inner eyelid. E-R-T-Y, say the letters, then F-R-I-V-O-L, then a trembling E, then Q-W-E-R-T-Y, on and on. (3)<sup>21</sup>

Some eighty pages later, he is reflecting about his thoughts and feelings on the day of the accident: "I felt sad," he says. "My life seemed *frivolous*. What a waste, I thought" (83, my italics). In this context, he is wondering how Costello can know so much about him: "Is this woman privy to something that he is not?" (83). Such meta-fictional glimpses occur frequently throughout the novel, as in the thought that an idea just formulated might "constitute a book in its own right" (113) or the reflexivity of a formulation such as the following: "From the opening of the chapter, from the incident in Magill Road to the present, he has not behaved well [...]" (14f.).<sup>22</sup>

The most striking metafictional characteristic of this novel, however, are the different fictions of authorship it explores, the different ways in which the ontological relationship between Paul Rayment and Elizabeth Costello can be conceptualized.

The first possible way of understanding the relationship between Rayment and Elizabeth Costello is the one discussed above: he died during the accident and theirs is some sort of afterlife encounter. This suggestion, however, is hardly dominant in the novel and does not play a role for the understanding of the intertextual and metafictional strategies of *Slow Man*.

More centrally, two varieties of possible relations between Costello and Rayment coexist side by side virtually throughout the text: either she is a writer who plans to use his story for a book, which would make them characters existing on the same level of fictitiousness; or she is an author who has invented him as a character, which would make their encounter in the novel a classic metafictional example of a blurring of ontological planes.

Throughout the novel, it is frequently suggested that she is a writer who wants to use him for a book. In this vein, Costello frequently encourages Rayment to become a more interesting character for her: "Become major, Paul. Live like a hero. That is what the classics teach us. Become a main character" (229).<sup>23</sup> The way they interact in the course of the story thus constantly upholds the suggestion that both of them are 'real' people and that, if there is a relationship of author and character at work here, then he is clearly a 'real' person she aims to use for a novel.

21 This fiction of the "celestial typewriter" in a sense writing him is continued on page 123.

22 Cf. also 197 *et passim*. As far as intertextual metafictional references are concerned, a character in a novel by J.M. Coetzee who says "I have all the friends I could wish for [...] I am not Robinson Crusoe" (14) surely says more than merely that he does not feel lonely and does not want to see his friends. For the role of *Robinson Crusoe* in Coetzee's work cf. below.

23 Cf. also 82, 136f., 158, 159, 203f., 221f., 227f., 229 *et passim*. Cf. also 117, where it is suggested that he 'really' exists and that she simply takes him as a character and aims to put him into a book; or 99, where it becomes apparent that she did not invent Marijana Jokić; or 139, where Costello tells him: "I would prefer a more interesting subject but am saddled with you, the one-legged man who cannot make up his mind". Throughout the text, there are clear indications that her powers are limited, that she cannot make him do anything she likes or can arrange everything at will (136, 138 *et passim*).

On the other hand, side by side with this fiction of a coexistence of the two, the text constantly blurs ontological levels and uncannily suggests that Rayment is a character she has invented and that she is in fact even the author of *Slow Man*. Some eighty pages into the text, Elizabeth Costello rings his doorbell, enters his flat and recites to him the beginning of the novel we are reading, the story of his accident:

[She] begins to recite: *'The blow catches him from the right, sharp and surprising and painful, like a bolt of electricity, lifting him up off the bicycle. Relax! He tells himself as he tumbles through the air, and so forth.'* She pauses and inspects his face, as if to measure the effect she is having. (81, italics original)<sup>24</sup>

Of course, we know this is the beginning of the novel we are reading in which she and Rayment are characters; he does not know this is the beginning of the novel; he may only recognize the situation as having been his during the accident. When she then says, "I asked myself, *Why do I need this man?* Why not let him be, coasting along peacefully on his bicycle [...]"?, it appears again as though he is a character she has invented. It is even more strongly suggested that she writes him and that he is a figment of her imagination when she then tells him: "'You came to me,' she says. 'In certain respects I am not in command of what comes to me'" (81).<sup>25</sup> She then makes herself at home in his apartment and constantly interferes in his life (87).

In several instances, Rayment himself seems to be aware that he is Costello's puppet. Once, when she has fallen asleep over her notebook, Rayment reads her notes about him playing a game of cards with the Jokić family – the game does not occur in the novel – and wonders:

Are they to be a family together after all [...]? What else is Costello plotting in that busy head of hers? The scribbler sleeps, the character prowls around looking for things to occupy himself with. (238)

The overall impression, however, is that these fictions are blurred and become indistinct. Does she write the story of his life in the sense that she follows him and turns the 'real' Rayment into the character of a novel? Or is this an instance of a conflation of ontological levels and he is indeed merely a figment of her imagination? We never really know. As Rayment tells Costello about his life as a photographer, he suddenly interrupts himself and asks her: "But don't you know all this? I thought you knew everything about me". Her response contains one of the clearest statements of what Costello knows and does not know about Rayment: "You came to me with no history attached. A man with one leg and an unfortunate passion for his nurse, that was all. Your prior life was virgin territory" (195).<sup>26</sup> In the following passage, which needs to be quoted at some length, all three fictions are alluded to:

24 There are further instances of her reciting to him from this novel in which they both occur; cf. 159, where she quotes to him a sentence about the two of them which earlier occurred on page 151: "*He finds her by the riverside, sitting on a bench, clustered around by ducks that she seems to be feeding*" (italics original).

25 For further suggestions that he is a character she has invented and that she can largely control what happens to him or for references to things she uncannily knows cf. 82f., 85-89 *passim*, 97f., 101, 106, 114, 118, 122, 129, 135, 217f., 243.

26 Cf. also 85, where Costello tells him: "You occurred to me – a man with a bad leg and no future and an unsuitable passion. That was where it started. Where we go from there I have no idea."

"What made you choose me? What gave you the idea you could make anything of me? Why do you stay with me? *Speak!*" [...] "You were made for me Paul, as I was made for you. [...] For me alone Paul Rayment was born and I for him. His is the power of leading, mine of following; his of acting, mine of writing. More?" [...] "Now let me ask you straight out, Mrs. Costello: Are you real?" "Am I real? I eat, I sleep, I suffer, I go to the bathroom. I catch cold. Of course I am real. As real as you." "Please be serious for once. Please answer me: Am I alive or am I dead? Did something happen to me on Magill Road that I have failed to grasp?" "And am I the shade assigned to welcome you to the afterlife – is that what you are asking? No, rest assured, a poor forked creature, that is all I am, no different from yourself." (233)

What this blurring of different author fictions brings about in any case is a rather disillusioned and disillusioning understanding of the autonomy and discretionary power of an author over his or her creation.<sup>27</sup> This increasing dissociation of a literary character from its author in *Slow Man* continues a central concern of Coetzee's intriguing 2003 Nobel speech "He and his Man" (Coetzee 2003), in which he similarly explored and blurred the dependencies between a writer and his created figure.<sup>28</sup> But the wilfulness and artificiality of narrative is here not only staged as an epistemological and ontological problem, but at least as much as an ethical issue: what about the human costs of writing fiction, what about the *ethical* status of the writer?<sup>29</sup>

The issue of prosthetic replacement, of original and copy, of authenticity and fake, however, is even explored in a triple sense: on the most existential level, this is the loss of Rayment's leg and his refusal to have a prosthesis fitted; on the level of metafiction, this is the question of who is author, who is 'real', who is the replacement or fiction of whom? On a third level, a further subplot of the novel varies the ethical and aesthetic theme of the authenticity and originality in art and links it to the theme of identity and belonging. This subplot concerns Paul Rayment's valuable collection of 19th-century photographs of Australian mining towns and miners: Drago at one point replaces an authentic Fauchery photograph of a group of miners with a fake into which he has digitally inserted his own grandfather (218-221). This act of forgery tellingly represents the search of an uprooted young Australian of Croatian descent for his origins and for an identity. But since this subplot clearly echoes the key issues and the language of Walter Benjamin's essay "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit",<sup>30</sup> it also nicely ties in with the novel's central theme of truth, authenticity and originality in art. When Rayment goes to see Drago and his family to reclaim the original of the Fauchery photograph, he enters into a discussion about the authenticity of photographs with Marijana, who was originally trained in art restoration:

"A photograph, from my collection. A Fauchery. A copy has been substituted for the original, a copy which has been doctored." [...] "Original?" she says. "What is this thing, original photograph? You point camera, click, you make copy. That is how cam-

27 For a rather more optimistic reading cf. Lanchester 2005: "Rayment's nonparticipation in *Slow Man* is a testament to the mysterious independent reality of fictional beings. We might conclude, therefore, that Rayment's 'no' in this particular story is Coetzee's 'yes' to the larger possibility of fiction."

28 Here – after *Foe* (1986) – he engaged once more with Defoe and *Robinson Crusoe*.

29 For a brief discussion of the ethical implications of metafiction in *Slow Man* cf. also Lanchester 2005.

30 The themes and issues of this subplot are clearly more reminiscent of Benjamin than of, say, Baudrillard's or Eco's thoughts on simulation and simulacrum, reality and hyperreality.

era works. Camera is like photocopier. So what is original? Original is copy already. Is not like painting." "That is nonsense, Marijana. Sophistry. A photograph is not the thing itself. Nor is a painting. But that does not make either of them a copy. Each becomes a new thing, a new real, new in the world, a new original." [...] "I talk nonsense? You make photograph, or this man, how you say, Fauchery, make photograph, then you make prints, one two three four five, and these prints all original, five times original, no copies? What is nonsense now?" (245f).<sup>31</sup>

The questions concerning the authenticity of photographs and the falsification, rewriting and (re-)construction of history alluded to here clearly tie in with the concerns explored in the various fictions of authorship in the relationship between Rayment and Costello discussed above. In the context of a novel so consistently interspersed with meditations on key Platonic notions, the question of reality, authenticity and replacement as well as that of parallel worlds existing side by side<sup>32</sup> is of course reminiscent of Plato's "allegory of the cave" in Book VII of the *Republic*.<sup>33</sup> The "allegory of the cave" with its notions of a world of ideas that is in many ways regarded as the 'real' world and our own world, which is conceived of as a secondary reflection, obliquely mirrors the key concerns of the novel: authenticity and reflection, original and copy, the ontological status of our 'reality' as opposed to 'fiction'.

Reviewing *Slow Man* in *The New Statesman*, Benjamin Markovits critically comments on the novel's metafictional elements: "It's hard to justify such heavy-handedness, especially since such devices have long since lost the power to shock and their power to amuse is following hard behind" (Markovits 2005).<sup>34</sup> This, I believe, is precisely the point: Why *should* such devices "shock" or "amuse"? Who, reading a novel with a more or less conventional first-person narrator, for instance, would accuse the author of using one, arguing that a first-person narrator fails to shock or amuse? Is it not time to accept such metafictional blurrings of levels of fictitiousness as just one more perfectly acceptable device in fiction? Metafiction is simply a device that allows for a staging and enactment of some of the central questions at the heart of writing – the nature of fiction, the status of the writer, the ethics of fiction, the problems of writing in general – no more, no less. No previous literary device has ever been replaced or made redundant by another; it may have been supplemented; it may

31 The entire meditation on the status of the "original" work of art in the age of mechanical – or digital – reproduction works with a further twist, because the "original" here is a photograph already. For the authenticity – or lack thereof – of photographs cf. also 65, 249 *et passim*.

32 Cf. the suggestion discussed above of whether Rayment may not be dead already and may now be experiencing life in some kind of parallel world of uncertain ontological status.

33 Plato 1970, sections 514-517.

34 Cf. also Mishra 2005, who writes that "such metafictional devices are by now a commonplace form of artistic narcissism" but somewhat vaguely states that "Coetzee seems unlikely to endorse" it. Reviewers have frequently voiced similar criticism in recent years whenever a novelist prominently used such metafictional devices. The reception of Paul Auster's 2003 novel *Oracle Night* may serve as one of innumerable further potential examples. This novel also plays with multiple levels of fictitiousness and with different fictions of authorship: one of the characters, for instance, is a writer named "Trause", an anagram of Auster. Though frequently praised as a brilliantly inventive novel, several reviewers critically commented on Auster's metafictional ploys. John Freeman's somewhat simplistic comment is nonetheless representative: Arguing that one reads "books expecting illusions, not a behind-the-scenes look into how they are pulled off" (Freeman 2003), he qualifies metafiction as a pointless exercise that goes against the grain of what the telling of stories in a novel is all about.

have lost its markedness and may have come to be regarded as 'normal'. Why, then, should we assume that self-consciousness in fiction should either disappear or should forever remain a marked feature of a text eagerly to be commented on?<sup>35</sup> Surely, this opposition between 'normal fiction' and 'metafiction' is obsolete by now. Should we not speak of the normalization of self-reflexivity in fiction here?

This, to be sure, has always been a tendency in Coetzee's fiction and a concern in his criticism and in interviews. With the possible exception of *Foe*, where the metafictional devices clearly overwhelm the interest in the 'story', metafictional elements have tended towards normalization in much of Coetzee's fiction. A similar tendency is apparent in his critical pronouncements. In an essay first published in 1976, Coetzee himself remarked that metafictional devices can never obliterate the narrative impetus: "[T]ranscendence of the illusionism of Realism is an illusionary hope [and] to get behind (*aufheben*) fiction by incorporating into fiction a critical consciousness of the procedures of fiction is only to climb another spiral of illusionistic Realism [...] (Coetzee 1976, 92; parenthesis original).<sup>36</sup> Almost 15 years later, in 1990, Coetzee commented in an interview:

Anti-illusionism – displaying the tricks you are using instead of hiding them – is a common ploy of postmodernism. But in the end there is only so much mileage to be got out of the ploy. Anti-illusionism is, I suspect, only a marking of time, a phase of recuperation, in the history of the novel. The question is, what next? (Coetzee 1990, 27).<sup>37</sup>

Another 15 years later, it seems that *Slow Man* implicitly answers the question "what next?". The blatant self-reflexivity of *Elizabeth Costello* is not reduced in *Slow Man*; it is further heightened, if anything – but it is 'normalized'. The trick Coetzee manages to pull off is to show that you *can* have your cake and eat it. Although we are constantly made aware that all this is fiction at a double remove – we are never allowed to forget we are reading a novel, a novel, at that, in which Costello is introduced as the author writing the novel we are reading – we never lose interest in the story itself, its characters and their problems. To an unusual extent, the metafictional devices are integral to the thematic concerns of the novel. *Slow Man* can be seen as a successful example of what one might call 'unobtrusive metafiction'.

#### IV. Intertextuality, Metafiction and the Author as Obsolete Dissident: *Slow Man* as a Meditation on Self-Imposed Exile

Thus, a focus on Costello as Coetzee's *alter ego* fiction leads to a reading of the novel as being concerned with the problematics of writing, of originality and truth in fiction and on the status of the author in his own work. As an author who so consistently

35 In a recent essay on metafictional tendencies in *British* fiction, Tönnies remarks that the widespread use of metafictional literary devices by writers such as A.S. Byatt, David Lodge, Julian Barnes and Ian McEwan in novels published in the early 21st century might well be taken to represent "a second 'postmodernist turn' at least in British fiction (Tönnies 2005, 58).

36 For the inescapability of narrative behind even the most obtrusive metafictional devices cf. Lehmann 1986.

37 One of the most sustained and most enlightening discussions of Coetzee's literary strategies and their place in modernist, late-modernist or postmodernist traditions is to be found in Attridge 2004, 1-31 *et passim*.

plays with fictions of authorship, Coetzee thus in one sense implicates himself and toys with the knowledge that *Slow Man* will be read as a 'personal' novel. Costello's concerns are his: he has not only written an entire previous novel in which he plays on his identity with Costello; he has also delivered lectures in her name. He has been criticized both for these fictions of authorship and for his engagement for animal rights, which has seemed a lesser concern compared with his disturbingly powerful political meditations in earlier texts such as *Dusklands*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Foe* or *Disgrace*. This criticism is alluded to in *Slow Man*:

Elizabeth Costello: it is coming back to him who she is. He tried once to read a book by her, a novel, but gave up on it, it did not hold his attention. Now and then he has come across articles by her in the press, about ecology or animal rights, which he passes over because the subjects do not interest him. Once upon a time [...] she was notorious for something or other, but that seems to have gone away, or perhaps it was just another media storm. Grey-haired; grey-faced, too [...] (82)

The fact that Rayment has read her articles about animal rights but finds them tedious, stages the disapproval Coetzee's metafictional hiding behind Costello in *The Lives of Animals* as well as his concern with animal rights have frequently met with. The novel thus once again mounts the metafictional game of implicating the author himself into the novel by suggesting an analogy between Costello and Coetzee.

In another sense, however, it is Rayment as much as Costello who is set up as Coetzee's *alter ego*.<sup>38</sup> The novel is set in 2000, and Rayment – like Coetzee in 2000 – is 60 years old.<sup>39</sup> This association is further strengthened by the intertextual relationship with Denton Welch's 1950 cult novel *A Voice through a Cloud*.<sup>40</sup> Published posthumously in 1950, this is a thinly veiled memoir of Welch's youth and his attempts to come to terms with the crippling consequences of a cycling accident.<sup>41</sup> The analogy with an openly autobiographical novel invites speculations on authorial roles and involvement, something Coetzee has repeatedly done in earlier texts, attributing to Elizabeth Costello his own lectures on animal rights, or playing with the role of translator of Jacobus Coetzee's narrative in *Dusklands*. All of these strategies clearly invite speculations on the author's involvement – and this has nothing to do with naïve biographical readings. On the contrary, with an author who *within his own texts* so explicitly and insistently meditates on what it means to be a writer, on the human costs involved in creating fiction, on the role of fiction in a politicized society, such parallels add levels of resonance.

38 At least one reviewer has remarked upon this double *alter ego* fiction; cf. Strong 2005.

39 Cf. 120, where we learn that Costello was born in 1928 and is now 72, as well as 137f. *et passim*, where we learn that Rayment is 60 years old.

40 In one of the most negative reviews, Francine Prose unfavourably compares *Slow Man* with Welch's *A Voice through a Cloud* and finds little positive to say about Coetzee's novel. However, she merely takes it as a text against which to measure *Slow Man* rather than recognizing it as another key intertext. Cf. Prose 2005.

41 Denton Welch (1915-1948) was born in Shanghai but spent most of his life in England. He was severely injured in a cycling accident in 1935, from which he never fully recovered. During his lifetime, he published two novels and a volume of short stories. *A Voice Through a Cloud*, his *Journals* and other texts were published posthumously.

Coetzee's longstanding ethical concern – explicitly or implicitly, however obliquely – has been the role of whites under apartheid.<sup>42</sup> Since the demise of apartheid, this concern has partly shifted to the exploration of the role whites are to play in the new South Africa – most notoriously in his 1999 novel *Disgrace*. In a highly balanced, perceptive and careful reading of *Disgrace*, Attridge warns against simplistically reading it as a realist account of the new South Africa from the perspective of whites now feeling marginalized, but he does show how the novel constantly refers to the new situation: It cannot help *also* being read as a picture of the new South Africa.<sup>43</sup> In the light of the heated debate, even outrage about *Disgrace* and its image of post-apartheid South Africa, Coetzee's resignation from the University of Cape Town in 2001 and his subsequent move to Australia cannot fail to be perceived as being resonant as a statement in the discourse on the role and identity of whites in the new South Africa.<sup>44</sup>

It is precisely this resonance that is continued in *Slow Man*. Given the constant staging of fictions of authorial involvement readers have come to associate with Coetzee, his latest novel inescapably also becomes a political statement of self-imposed exile from a society one seeks to avoid. In his review of the novel, Benjamin Strong hints at such a reading: "In *Slow Man*, Coetzee confronts by analogy his own predicament, that of the obsolete dissident" (Strong 2005).

As a protagonist who finds himself at a distance from society – by choice, accident or misfortune – Rayment continues a central constellation in much of Coetzee's fiction. He was born in France, came to Australia as a child, returned to France for a while as an adult, did not feel at home there and returned, but does not feel at home in Australia either: "[H]ome is the place where the fire burns in the hearth, where you come to warm yourself. [...] No, I am not warm here. [...] I seem to be cold wherever I go. [...] I am not the we of anyone" (192f.). Elsewhere, he tells Costello: "I am a foreigner by nature and have been a foreigner all my life" (231).<sup>45</sup> He is a foreigner not only in having been born in France; he is a foreigner in choosing not to fit it, in being a self-appointed exile from the life around him.

Coetzee, too, is not quite yet an 'Australian novelist' and cannot fail still to be seen as at least *also* a South African writer. He has lived in Britain and the United States and since 2002 in Australia, and after the end of apartheid and the controversy about

42 Writing about *The Master of Petersburg*, Attridge points out that "all the earlier novels [directly or indirectly] evinced a clear concern with contemporary South Africa". He then goes on to show how even *The Master of Petersburg* can be read as obliquely relevant to South Africa (Attridge 2004, 133). One of the most sustained discussions of Coetzee's engagement with South African politics in his fiction until the early 1990s is to be found in Attwell 1993; cf. also Head 1997.

43 Given the controversial discussion about the portrayal of black violence against whites in *Disgrace*, it is interesting to note that in a 1999 review essay on Breyten Breytenbach's memoir *Dog Heart*, Coetzee takes Breytenbach to task for reporting stories of brutal assaults on whites in rural areas of South Africa (cf. Coetzee 1999); for this cf. also Attridge 2004, 170.

44 For the controversy about *Disgrace* and Coetzee's status in South Africa cf. Attridge 2004, 169ff. For the discourse on white identity in the New South Africa cf. Venter 1998, Wicomb 1998, Wasserman 2000, Steyn 2001, Wasserman 2001, Zegeye 2001, Petzold 2002, Wasserman & Jacobs 2003, Distiller & Steyn 2004.

45 *Elizabeth Costello* already was full of musings and questions on belonging, national identity, the writer's place in fiction etc.: "Could you say something about Australia? What does it mean to be an Australian writer?" (15).

*Disgrace* now seems something like the 'obsolete dissident', the exile without a place where he fully belongs. This is all the more true since the role of aloof outsider is one that he has cultivated both in his fiction and in his self-fashioning as a writer.

It is in this sense that *Slow Man* picks up the thread from *Disgrace* and does return to South Africa and the role of the writer in a politicized society. Though superficially one of the least 'political' of Coetzee's novels, it can – seen in this light – be regarded as an eminently political meditation on self-imposed exile.<sup>46</sup> And it is precisely the metafictional blurring of the *alter ego* fictions – both Costello and Rayment function as Coetzee's doubles – and the necessary intertextual awareness of Coetzee's previous fiction which allow for this reading.

As we have seen, Coetzee's novel connects existential meditations on frailty, aging, care and love with a staging of questions concerning the nature and ethics of writing. These strands are held together by various intertextual bridges, with Plato as a remarkably consistent meta-intertext uniting most of the key concerns of the text. The novel thus neatly dovetails intertextual reflections on key notions from Plato with metafictional explorations of the status of fiction and the role of the writer. In this context, the radical critique and marginalization of fiction in several Platonic dialogues<sup>47</sup> (where poets are virtually banned from the state because of the problematic nature of fiction) cannot fail to be resonant and adds a rather gloomy note to the metafictional and intertextual ensemble of *Slow Man*.

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- 46 This is true despite Attridge's cautious remarks about the danger of allegorizing Coetzee's fictions rather than reading them first of all as fictions. Cf. Attridge 2004, especially chapter 2, "Against Allegory: *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K*."
- 47 For the deceitfulness and potentially corruptive influence of fiction and for the restrictions to be placed upon writers of, particularly *Ion* and *Sophistes* as well as *Republic* II, III, X and *Laws* II.

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