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A Companion to the Works of J. M. Coetzee

12: *Slow Man* (2005)

Tim Mehigan

TWO EVENTS OF SIGNIFICANCE preceded the appearance of Coetzee's novel *Slow Man* (2005). One was the awarding of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Coetzee at the end of 2003; the other Coetzee's move from South Africa to Australia in 2002. Both events resonate at different levels of a novel whose setting is Coetzee's adopted country of Australia. On the one hand, the novel can be read as a set of reflections on a problem that emerges in later life where one's main accomplishments now lie in the past. For a writer who holds the conviction that, in the final analysis, all writing is autobiography (*DP*, 391), the question of how to redirect one's striving, reorient the head and the heart under the insistent pressure of time's passing without reference to past accomplishments or projects is as urgent for the sixty-year-old protagonist Paul Rayment as it undoubtedly is for the sixty-five-year-old Coetzee, who has already reached the zenith of literary achievement.¹ This question becomes even more pointed for a writer who has chosen to leave his homeland late in life — a homeland whose society and landscape have been central to his literary concerns. Coetzee was reported to have said at the time that he did not consider he was moving *away* from the country of his birth so much as *toward* his new adopted country. Yet, despite this statement, Coetzee's thematic concerns in the first novel published after his relocation to Australia bear no South African imprint, nor even a faint afterimage of South Africa. Nor do they display an abiding concern with the new country. Coetzee's fictional protagonist instead seeks to make common cause with foreigners, with those who have left their home country and experience the manifold levels of displacement wrought by migration. Not even the Australian woman Elizabeth Costello, Rayment's sometime companion in the novel, offers significant points of alignment with the Australian experience in a way that might temper the focus on the concerns of the migrant: Costello is more alter ego than companion, more a dweller in the mind of the central character than an emissary from the new society of which Rayment is now a part. The character of Elizabeth Costello, in other words, does not deepen the sense of attachment to the new country. If anything, her interactions with the protagonist underscore the isolation that Paul Rayment still feels in a country decades after the migration of his family from Europe to Australia.²

Slow Man, for these reasons, offers both an extended reflection on the situation of the immigrant who inhabits the cultural terrain of the in-between — the peculiar métier of those who have migrated to a new place but not yet in all senses truly arrived — just as it also offers insight into the postmaturity of its author Coetzee who, now in a new cultural setting, begins to grapple with encroaching senescence and other end-of-life questions.

These questions emerge from the actual life experience of the novel's author, even as they cannot be equated with this same life experience. Coetzee heightens awareness of these questions in the novel in several ways. For one thing, a rupture between the past and the future can be assumed from the beginning. The protagonist Paul Rayment does not look back to the achievement of a successful career, but instead laments a “frivolous”³ life of squandered achievement, an unsuccessful marriage, and the absence of children. For another thing, Rayment is not described as having freely chosen the moment to relocate to a new country in the manner of the novel's author. This is rather revealed as the choice of Rayment's forebears, in particular of a father who is referred to with palpable distance in the novel as “the Dutchman.” Although this migration occurred long ago, Rayment in his own eyes remains a foreigner in the new country. Moreover, and most importantly, the protagonist's need to reorient his striving late in life does not result from an active choice, but is dictated by the intrusion of outward circumstance: the novel begins by recounting the experience of the main character as he is knocked from his bicycle by a motorist and thereby suffers an incapacitating injury (the young motorist who is responsible for the accident bears the name of the functional impairment, the “blight” he brings about⁴). Rayment's right leg is amputated above the knee as a result of the accident. By these means, then, Coetzee assembles the components that make up the dilemma of an unaccommodated man, of a man variously bereft of that which might sustain him in later life: the memory, perhaps, of past accomplishments, the palliating comforts of wife, family and a few good friends, even the functionality of an intact body where normal movement can still be taken for granted. Paul Rayment therefore faces later life at a moment of acute physical and existential dislocation. The novel is not given over to relating the circumstances occasioning this dislocation. Rather, the novel begins at the point where these circumstances come into view and engender the psychological problem situation of its protagonist.

Although autobiographical concerns inform *Slow Man* — as they hold, Coetzee believes, for all creative writing, and certainly, we can assume, for Coetzee's own literary production — the novel nevertheless goes far beyond the confines of autobiography in detailing its account of a man, as the title reminds us, rendered “slow” by the incapacitating nature of a major injury, but a man dogged as well by a pronounced

temperamental reserve, a “tortoise character” (*SM*, 228),⁵ and a head that is slow to follow the promptings of a deeply sensitive heart. From an initial position where the attributes of the slow man — the compassionate heart on one side, the predilection for rumination and “second thoughts”⁶ on the other — are precisely those attributes that will bring least advantage in his new circumstances, the novel opens upon the rich interiority of a protagonist whose name speaks to the core of his predicament: Rayment rhymes with “vraiment” (really, truly), if the French pronunciation of the proper name is followed, and thus connotes a certain search for truth; yet, as Elizabeth Costello points out, it also rhymes with “payment” (as pronounced in English) and thus alludes to the mundane imperatives that increasingly govern Rayment’s situation — his need to secure the practical assistance from others that will make his reduced state of life bearable. Rayment’s predicament is that his new immobility provides the least prospect for the attainment of the truths about his own person that he now urgently seeks and that now seem to cloud upon him. These truths about self, as the novel richly conveys, can only be accessed in the name of a love that would speak their name: “Truth is spoken, if it ever comes to be spoken, in love” (*SM*, 161). Following this assumption about the importance of love, it is the main character’s uncompromising desire for truth that brings about the “unsuitable passion” (*SM*, 89) that in turn drives most of the novel forward, a passion that quickly comes to be centered on the Croatian nurse who is assigned to help him and whose ministrations in daily visits to Rayment’s home initially provide relief from pain, but increasingly also bring about the desire for love. This is no ordinary passion, no desire confined to the stirrings of a still-ardent body. The passion the novel tells about instead connects with Rayment’s need to drive into his inner self in order to release a feeling that lies close to the general lack of fulfillment he senses about his life. This passion, “unsuitable” though it may be, arises from Rayment’s need to disclose the truth of his inner being while there is still time to do so.

The witness to this project of profound self-disclosure is not the Croatian immigrant nurse Marijana; it is Elizabeth Costello, a character introduced by the author in the thirteenth chapter of the novel, immediately following Rayment’s confession of love for his nurse. Costello, as has been variously explained in Coetzee scholarship,⁷ is hardly to be considered a character at all: her interactions with other characters are heavily circumscribed and indeed entail no real consequences for these characters. Even the main character himself is affected by Costello only insofar as she is attuned to his hopes and longings, improbably commanding the ability to peer into his thoughts and feelings. For this same reason, despite her being a famous writer ostensibly gathering material for a new novel, she clearly lacks the ontological status of other characters in the novel. While this difference in status invites questions about Coetzee’s deployment of

postmodern conceits such as competing levels of metafictional narration as well as of pastiche and intertextuality⁸ — Elizabeth Costello is herself the protagonist of Coetzee's directly preceding novel — it is also the case that Coetzee's purpose is not to destabilize the narration so much as render a narrative intention more clearly — namely, to subject the interiority of the central character to ever greater scrutiny and thereby to acquaint the reader with ever more deeply embedded levels of that character's conscious and unconscious awareness. Coetzee's project might be likened to that of the vivisector, of the surgeon who, with scalpel in hand, probes ever more deeply through layers of tissue in search of the affliction that has brought about the subject's suffering — a suffering hinted at in the novel's title though not explained by it, and a suffering that acquires a visual correlate in the form of the missing leg.

In considering the way forward for this physically and emotionally unaccommodated central character, the novel discusses the nature and function of replacements, of how that which impairs a subject's functionality might be restored and a proper mobility thereby reintroduced. In the concrete case of Rayment's missing leg, this discussion initially takes the form of imagining a replacement leg — which is to say, a prosthetic limb molded onto the stump of the leg that is left after the operation and that, after a period of therapy and adjustment, might give him back some semblance of normal locomotion. That Coetzee means to elevate this discussion of replacements beyond a mundane level is revealed in a variety of ways. Coetzee first calls attention to the word "prosthesis" itself, to its singular pronunciation, and then, as object, to its singular appearance. For the main character Rayment, "prosthesis" is a "difficult word" (*SM*, 7), a word that brings to mind "a wooden shaft with a barb at its head like a harpoon and rubber suckers on its three little feet. It is out of Surrealism. It is out of Dali" (*SM*, 9). Later in the novel Marijana pronounces it "like a German word": "*Prosthese*. . . . Thesis, antithesis, then prosthesis" (*SM*, 62) — a word, considered in these terms, that lies outside the realm of everyday experience and calls to the mind the elevated transpositions of Hegelian logic according to which the prosthesis as synthesis sublates the first two positions (thesis, antithesis) and provides a new forward movement of the dialectic; a device, in short, that would provide Paul Rayment, metaphysically and practically, with a thoroughly artificial transition to a new state of existence and, by implication, perhaps also of consciousness.⁹

In contemplating the question of artificial prosthetic replacements, the novel thus considers whether a technical contrivance from the realm of human calculation and ingenuity can provide a way forward that might reconcile the main character to his reduced state and perhaps enhance it. At a further remove from this concrete question, a more general question is put as to whether the technical contrivances of modernity have

traction on the emotional plane of human consciousness, whether they can enhance our emotional lives as well as our physical lives, whether our investment in a technical modernity can provide us with an emotional-spiritual return alongside the undoubted material return. From the reverse perspective — the perspective Rayment encounters when he attends a rehabilitation class — a related question is raised in regard to the progress of this technical modernity, whether, referring again to Hegel, humanity is indeed traversing ever higher movements of a historical dialectic and whether, as individuals in a wider historical process, we are obliged to move with it. Madeleine Martin, the class teacher, touches on this question in reference to the memory systems that are bound to our old limbs but that appear to become obsolete when these limbs are removed: “we must not hold on to them [these memory systems] when they hinder our progress” (*SM*, 60), she tells the class. From this perspective, our locomotion and our progress, with all the allusiveness that the latter word brings with it, demands that we leave behind a part of ourselves, that we reprogram our memory systems, even reconfigure the aesthetic standards that have conditioned us over time to past standards of beauty and proportion that we have come to regard as “natural.”

In this debate about the way forward — a debate made urgent by the progress of technical modernity and its capacity not only to redirect life but, of late, also to clone and thereby to engender new life — Rayment, at least initially, takes up (in Madeleine Martin’s terms) a critically “obsolete” position: he rejects the suggestion of a prosthetic limb, he removes himself quickly from Martin’s classes, he commits himself to the path of nature: “‘I do not want to look natural,’ he says,” spurning the possible advantages conferred by a prosthetic limb, “‘I prefer to feel natural’” (*SM*, 59). This preference for nature over contrivance and artifice returns at the end of the novel when Rayment, who has established an avuncular relationship with Marijana’s son Drago, suspects Drago of having tampered with one of the images in Rayment’s prized collection of old Fauchery¹⁰ photographs — a collection he intends to bequeath to the state of South Australia. While certainly irritated by a youth’s supposed breach of trust and apparent petty theft, Rayment is actually disturbed by a far greater kind of loss: the threat to notions of art after the advent of the technological reproducibility of the artwork, as lamented also by Walter Benjamin — which is to say, the undermining of the particular authority of the artist to articulate timeless truth in view of technical advances that have corrupted the concept of the original:

That was why, later on, he began to lose interest in photography: first when colour took over, then when it became plain that the old magic of light-sensitive emulsions was waning, that to the rising generation the enchantment lay in a techne of images without

substance, images that could flash through the ether without residing anywhere, that could be sucked into a machine and emerge from it doctored, untrue. (*SM*, 65)

Two concerns come together here, both of which borrow heavily from Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction." One is that images lose contact with their initiators, that techniques of mechanical reproduction are applied to the original artwork in such a way that a circulation of "images without substance" is introduced. New images emerge from "a machine," i.e., from the process of mechanical reproduction, which are not any more aspects of the original but become in essence "doctored" images, images that are "untrue" with respect to the original and lack palpable contact with that original. The other concern, also alluded to in Benjamin's essay, turns on a view of how the artwork communicates its "aura," its peculiar claim to articulate truth. Benjamin's view is that the aura of the artwork is communicated through an act of bearing witness to the original work of art. The artwork, in this view, possesses an "auratic" power precisely on the grounds that it is an original that is directly witnessed and received. It is this quality as an original that brings about the special, "live," and embodied effects in those who witness it, and that are then disseminated through a process of critical reception among living communities. Moreover, the aura of the artwork would depend on its original integrity, on the fact that its originality is not compromised or tampered with in any way. Rayment's critically "obsolete" view, which accords with Benjamin's culturally pessimistic standpoint, is that the loss of the original entails ipso facto a loss of the truth-quality of the artwork. (Benjamin's further point is that the susceptibility of the artwork to technical reproduction in the new age of mechanical reproduction also makes it usable for purposes of the manipulation and control of large numbers of people — purposes seemingly quite opposed to the original design of the artwork's creators.)

Paul Rayment's unwillingness to consider a prosthetic replacement for his amputated leg is thus linked to a culturally skeptical view about all technical enhancements. Rayment, the photograph collector, is as resistant to the idea of a new self-image ("I do not want to look natural") that would tamper with his original sense of self ("I want to feel natural"), as he is to the replacement of one of his original photographs with a doctored, and therefore untrue, new image. The sixty-year-old Rayment, who has already foresworn the technical reproduction of images of the "rising generation" as soon as the "old magic of light-sensitive emulsions" began to wane, fears the loss of originality as a loss of quality, a loss of substance. And yet, in this same view, he must face that loss as a real possibility for himself since he now, in one sense, patently lacks his own originality. Does this lack essentially and finally reduce him? Or is the aura of his person

located elsewhere — not in the obvious circumstances of an intact body moving in harmony with an intact mind, nor in the carefully maintained habits of mind of a previously intact “integrity,” but in the special quality of his feelings, his striving, and his longing that do not inhere in his physicality? If so, how does such a person signal this special quality, this nonmaterial essence of himself to an outsider, someone whose job is to observe and treat this reduced outside of himself, to provide only superficial ministrations? How, in other words, is such a man to communicate his love?

These questions lie at the core of the novel. They open up a deep meditation on the nature of love, of how love becomes utterable between two people, of how, as already mentioned, love and truth are intertwined such that our truth discourses are bound up with our capacity to speak about love. For Paul Rayment they bring about a passion that is only “unsuitable” because it initially appears fundamentally self-motivated. Since Rayment requires the assistance of an efficient nurse, it is only natural, perhaps, that he should fall in love with her. Passion would thus be a willing agent of self-interest and follow it. Moreover, the nurse Marijana herself has a husband, and an arduous life that consists, apart from duties to her large family, of the long working hours of the migrant to make ends meet. Marijana clearly has no time for the all-too-predictable passion of a physically impaired sexagenarian patient.

Elizabeth Costello enters the novel partly in order to make this skepticism about the motivation of Rayment’s passion plain to Rayment: “Do you seriously mean to seduce your employee into abandoning her family and coming to live with you?” (*SM*, 82), she asks him. Costello, to this extent, is an echo of Rayment’s conscience, a client-figure in the novel whose function is to prick her host’s conscience and help him assemble a picture of reality. Yet in doing so, Costello is no crusader in the cause of morality and good behavior. Instead, she has a Mephistophelean quality, the quality of an “evil” spirit whose role is to question, negate, and oppose: “I am rather a doubting Thomas” (*SM*, 81) she says, immediately after her first appearance in the novel.¹¹ And just as Mephistophiles moves in and out of Goethe’s drama *Faust*, not only jabbing Faust with thought-barbs but also delivering him Gretchen, a woman on whom Faust’s lustful passion can be brought to bear, so Elizabeth Costello seeks to intercede in her host’s rising passion for Marijana in order to redirect him not toward love, but to the possibly more suitable, and certainly more mundane and predictable, pleasures of the blind invalid Marianna. Although Rayment goes through with the transaction arranged by Costello in order to secure relief for his sexual urges, he finds that it transacts nothing of consequence for his spirit and the true cause of love. Profane Marianna-Gretchen is not his longed-for, sacred Marijana-Gretchen. Moreover, he has been obliged to pay Marianna for her services and,

through a charade orchestrated by Mephistopheles-Costello that obliged him to wear an elaborate blindfold made of lemon leaves pasted with flour and water and a stocking pulled over his head, perhaps also made himself the butt of a joke. As Rayment tells himself later in the absence of Costello, the purportedly blind woman Marianna was perhaps no more than an all-too-knowing prostitute paid to provide sex to an eccentric customer. For one thing, the label on her underwear was worn on the outside. For another, the tremblings that Rayment took as the stirrings of passion of the equally sexually frustrated Marianna during the encounter might have been nothing more than the barely suppressed convulsions of laughter of the prostitute.

Elizabeth Costello, who appears in the novel as a well-known author, thus also has a palpable function in the novel: namely, to provide an outlet for the clamor of doubting voices in Rayment's head and to direct him toward action, on occasion quite unsuitably. Although Costello is fully acquainted with Rayment and his motivations — how she has acquired such knowledge is never disclosed in the novel, unless we take her, metatextually, to be the author of the reflections published under the title *Slow Man* — her role is not to support his ethical projects, nor to direct him toward true feeling in his search for a deeper fulfilment of being. Costello was notably absent from Rayment's bedside immediately after his bicycle accident, just as she was absent during his early convalescence. She enters Rayment's life at the moment when his feelings reach out toward the nurse Marijana; her goal, at the very least, is to temper such feelings. From this moment on in the novel, she moves in and out of Rayment's life, holding skeptical positions where Rayment searches for idealism, prompting action where Rayment would appear to prefer reflection. Her only clear motivation comes into view at the end of the novel when she attempts to interest her host in a life of cohabitation in her home in the Melbourne suburb of Carlton — an offer Rayment is at pains to refuse, even if his refusal, on purely functional grounds, would have no lasting capacity to end her intrusions on his mind.

Despite such intrusions, Costello, like her literary counterpart Mephistopheles, is unable to direct her host completely away from countervailing endeavors. Although she introduces the seductions of Marianna, Rayment does not give up his passion for Marijana, even as it appears increasingly unlikely that Marijana will ever return his affection. As the prospect of unrequited passion looms larger, Rayment does not seek another rendezvous with Marianna, but strives to align his feelings with the opposite of self-interest, viewing his passion for Marijana as the attempt to love her as a god would do so: selflessly, for her own sake, or for the sake of love itself. Again we recall Faust, who is a willing agent in the seduction of Gretchen, but feels profound remorse that he has loved her on account of profane desire. Marijana, of course, is no

virginal Gretchen, but a mature woman well acquainted with the erotic effect her ministrations have on her male clients. She tolerates Rayment's confession of love, even as it begins to constitute a burden for her and leads her to reduce the frequency of her visits. She equally does not stand in the way of Rayment's affection for her son Drago, even though this can only have the effect of increasing the likelihood of further contact with Rayment — a contact that might ultimately prove unwelcome. For her own part, she comes to see Rayment ultimately as a good man with an honest, though certainly misplaced, desire, a desire she assumes is linked with the emotional privation arising from Rayment's impaired physical circumstances.

Although Rayment can be pleased about this view of the soundness of his character, he finds no joy in Marijana's pity, and certainly seeks no advantage from it. In a dilemma that coats every act of affection for Marijana with the appearance of self-interest, Rayment chooses to communicate his love through an action that speaks to the prosaic associations of his name — that is, he undertakes to make a payment. This is to be a payment not directed at Marijana, but her son Drago, in the form of an interest-free loan that would enable Drago to attend a feeder school for an elite military academy. By paying Drago's school fees for two years, Drago would be given a chance to qualify for entry to the academy and later embark on a successful career. Rayment, the propertied immigrant without a family, thus seeks to restore to an immigrant family without property, at least in part, the loss of status that has resulted from migration to the new country — a status it could otherwise not hope to attain by unassisted means as migrants of the first generation. In doing so, Rayment seeks to involve himself in a business of restoration and thereby to become an ally of Marijana — Marijana the physical restorer of amputees, but also Marijana the graduate in restoration (*SM*, 148) who held a position before her emigration at the Art Institute in Dubrovnik (*SM*, 86). Rayment's restorative payment, then, is to be considered as an act of *cari-tas*, of care for another human being or beings: it aims at a restoration that does not seek to exact a return favor, sexual or otherwise. It depends only on Drago's future capacity to make good the potential that Rayment finds in him. Rayment asks only that he be allowed to maintain contact with Marijana's family and occasionally to visit.

By means of such a proposal Rayment finally takes up a position on the question of the way forward. Characteristically for Coetzee, whose fiction is steeped in European traditions and who makes liberal reference to these traditions throughout his writings, this is to be a way forward that speaks to the more noble aspects of a European sensibility that holds artistic traditions in high regard — traditions that have not been translated with the migrating Europeans to the new country as a matter of course (note that Marijana is described as smoking in “an unreconstructed

old-European way” [*SM*, 31].) Evidence for Rayment’s cleaving toward a peculiarly European instinct to elevate the spirit through acts of (cultural and spiritual) restoration — an instinct perhaps shared by the former art restorer Marijana — can be found in Rayment’s intention to bequeath his collection of antique photographs to the archives of South Australia. The images Rayment has collected — images he avowedly trusts more than words (*SM*, 64) — are described as being “last survivors,” a “unique” testimony to a now-lapsed age of early modernity, survivors, too, of a process of reproduction where an image was “immutable” as soon as it left the darkroom (*SM*, 64–5). The age that Rayment is acutely aware he now inhabits upholds no insight into the unique quality of such images. Rather, in this age, all images are placed on the same metaphysical footing; all can be tampered with, nothing is privileged, there is no longer any strict criterion separating the original from its descendants.

In positioning his protagonist as an advocate of a world that is spiritually and geographically removed from the present, of a world, moreover, that in many ways remains frozen in time for the European migrants who have left it, Coetzee invites comparison with the concerns of a literary tradition that never seems far from his writing. These are the concerns of Pound, Beckett, Faulkner, and Ford Madox Ford in the English-speaking tradition, of Rilke and Robert Musil in the German tradition.¹² By and large, they are the concerns of authors writing at a moment where the transition to a new cultural world of technical modernity was already beckoning, where the loss of the cultural traditions of the thought-world predating this modernity was already obvious — where, in short, literary discussions were shaped by the need to confront “the shock of the new”¹³ and to explore its potential repercussions for human awareness. Notwithstanding the usual view about Coetzee’s use of postmodern conceits in his fiction, Coetzee’s literary forebears to my mind are not to be found among the postmodernists so much as the (predominantly European) modernists — those literary fictionalizers who saw the way forward in terms of the problem of the new, of how to connect the new with past traditions, or, failing this, how to reinvigorate the human being and, as Nietzsche, one of the philosophical guides for the modernists, advocated, organize nothing less than the invention of “die freien Geister,”¹⁴ those “free spirits” of the new generation of human beings who, on the most optimistic view about the way forward, would realize the spiritual benefits that a dawning new age would bring with it.

Among these benefits, the prospect of a radically new psychological understanding of the human being was perhaps the most significant. At the turn of the twentieth century, Freud had already published *Die Traumdeutung* (The Interpretation of Dreams), the first in a series of major forays into human psychology that posited the existence of a common psychology of the human being below the level of conscious

awareness. In a programmatic statement about the implications of this new psychology for literature, Hugo von Hofmannsthal in his *Brief des Lord Chandos* (Letter of Lord Chandos, 1902)¹⁵ announced the bankruptcy of old views of the human being even as the advantages of new approaches to understanding human concerns that ushered in a scientific perspective on humanity could not yet be specified (note that Hofmannsthal's "letter" is addressed to the early seventeenth-century philosopher of science Francis Bacon). While the movement of literary modernism that reached its high point in the first decades of the twentieth century reached no consensus about the way forward, about whether the gains for human awareness might outweigh the losses, much of the important literature of this period did not portray the question of the new as a choice at all so much as the new reality. However the new age of modern sensibility came about, what is dramatized in much of modernist literature is the question of how the scientifically dispassionate, technologically progressive new age of the human being would be reconciled with the spiritual and emotional disposition of ordinary humanity. In this literature, new experience and old emotionality meet on common ground, but this is a ground where the old certainty that a successful project of education and spiritual formation, such as was encountered a century before in the *Bildungsroman* (novel of education), a popular literary genre of early modernity, has been lost.

Typical of this literature are the three stories Robert Musil published in 1923 under the title of *Drei Frauen* (Three Women). As Coetzee himself has pointed out, Musil's fiction, particularly the earlier fiction predating the major novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (The Man without Qualities), has served him as an important stimulus and point of literary orientation (EI).¹⁶ In each of these stories, a bourgeois male protagonist, typically a dominant male with a rational outlook on the world and a predilection for new challenges, encounters a woman who unsettles, even unhinges him. These protagonists pursue love as they pursue truth: in order to become acquainted with the true nature of themselves. In each of the three stories of *Drei Frauen*, different outcomes for the main character are envisaged that are linked to both the difficulty of the inner struggle each character faces and the general uncertainty entailed in all such struggles. In only one of the stories does the attainment of love conclude the project to renew the self successfully, and, by implication, result in a higher level of self-awareness. In this story, *Die Portugiesin* (The Portuguese Woman), the second in order of its occurrence in the collection, the main character, a proud and successful aristocrat and warrior, overcomes a debilitating illness and the wavering affections of his new wife through an act of death-defying daring that drives the mortal illness from his body and renews his love and his life. An answer of sorts is thus provided for the modernist's question about the new. The question of

whether the challenge of the new might lead to greater disclosure of self, and, in turn, open onto a more profound experience of life in the living of it, is tentatively affirmed. Moreover, Musil's warrior does not fall back on any prosthetic means in order to overcome his condition; rather, what overcomes the paralyzing malaise he suffers from takes root in his inner being: it is the path of unaided nature back (and forward) to its own inner nature. This same path of nature back to nature is the way forward that Rayment also instinctively advocates. The path that Rayment abjures is Dali's way (see *SM*, 9), if Salvador Dali's images of propped-up body parts, of prosthesis, are taken to endorse discussion of the advantages of a new technological modernity (it may be noted in passing that the appearance of surrealism in the history of art, in certain views, brings the era of modernism to a close).

The way forward for Paul Rayment, therefore, is not countenanced in Coetzee's novel merely in mundane terms as the question of whether or not to acquire a prosthetic replacement in order to repair the movement of a body part. The prosthesis itself¹⁷ is also part of a broad discussion about the way forward that is also conceived as a discussion about art, about the moment when modern art faced a crisis about the way forward in view of the advent of technological modernity, and about the scenarios that the artists of modernism entertained to ask deeper questions about spiritual renewal in the face of the challenge of technological modernity. A favored vehicle for the modernists, though not the surrealists, in promoting this discussion about the way forward was love, a love arising from the urgent need for profound self-disclosure. In Coetzee's novel *Slow Man*, where a similar discussion is brought into view, love equally becomes the key factor motivating the self-disclosure of the protagonist, even if this love appears under the unusual sign of the love of the cripple for the nurse, the reticent "slow" man for the Croatian immigrant herself rendered slow by a foreign language she imperfectly commands.¹⁸ And just as language has turned into the functional hybrid it must perhaps become for the immigrant, with few subtleties in its dynamic range, so the modernist's dream of a richly textured language of the soul, where, as for Proust, every subtlety in the flavor of the madeleine might be expressible, is now abandoned, at least in its most idealistic form. In place of the dream of a language of the soul there is the occupational therapist Madeleine Martin's injunction to cast aside old (body) memory as obsolete and just get on with things. This, the new pragmatism arising from an affirmative view of technological modernity, is of course a path Paul Rayment, the cultural skeptic, consistently refuses to tread.

The novel, for all this, does not immediately endorse Rayment's skepticism. This is suggested in the novel's final sequences. After much self-questioning aided and abetted by his advisor Elizabeth Costello, Rayment seeks out the family in order to call Drago to account for tampering with

his photograph and to demand back the original. The visit goes badly. Rayment is not able to prove anything against Drago directly, and the question of who might have perpetrated the digital doctoring of the photograph remains unanswered. Instead of an answer, Rayment is forced to undergo tuition from Marijana in the protocols of image reception in the new age of digital reproduction: “‘No: images is free,’ she tells him, ‘— your image, my image. Is not secret what Drago is doing. These photographs —’ she waves towards the three photographs on the wall — ‘all on his website. Anyone can see. You want to see the website?’” (*SM*, 249).

This is not merely a straightforward rebuke (although it is that as well); it also constitutes a critical milestone in Rayment’s education. Rayment, who hordes timeless images just as he defends the ground of high art against those who would tamper with them, is urged by Marijana to welcome the free circulation of images as a kind of democratic good, as part of the openness that includes callow youths in the enterprise of art, just as it provides for the role of great artists. In the new society of which Rayment has become a part, art, like the artist, is no longer privileged and unique. Art has truly become available to all, even if this reduces the special truth-claims of art overall. Nor is this lesson in artistic reception the only lesson Rayment learns from youth and the immigrant family. Drago, as Rayment now learns for the first time, has painstakingly constructed a recumbent bicycle for Rayment from the remains of Rayment’s damaged bicycle in order to express his appreciation of the offer to sponsor his education. Rayment, therefore, has not only misjudged Drago, he has also underestimated him. And while the recumbent bicycle does not delight him on all levels, it represents the most concrete attempt in the novel to provide a truly satisfactory way forward for Rayment — no prosthetic limb, perhaps, but a second-order prosthetic device molded to fit him as he is now, as well as to reconnect him with a form of conveyance he had preferred in a previously unblighted state.

The slow man Rayment, in the end, does not attain any fulfilment in love; no physical expression of his unsuitable passion is countenanced in the novel. Nevertheless, the course of love does acquaint him with a good family, and it does bring about a certain return: a return not from the mother but the son that, in the form of the recumbent bicycle, is both a gift and a technical enhancement. Rayment is thereby shifted, however reluctantly, into a new position with respect to the age of technological modernity, while undoubtedly still remaining attached to the habits of locomotion of the far slower, and certainly less mechanically enhanced, age that has preceded it. Moreover, Rayment has been moved in another sense outside himself. While his anger at Drago was precipitate and misplaced, it brought him to the house of the woman for whom he had earlier declared his love. And this is a love he holds onto, even though the object of his love remains aloof and cannot return his affections on the

same grounds. However much these circumstances fall short of what his longing as a man had been directed at, they come ahead of anything that the Mephistophelean Elizabeth Costello herself can promise. As Rayment observes at the end of the novel, the prospect of the cerebral companionship Costello offers should Rayment agree to accompany her back to Carlton is “not love. This is something else. Something less” (*SM*, 263).

Whether the rejection of Costello’s offer of companionship might end Coetzee’s deployment of her in future novels remains to be seen. What this rejection nevertheless conveys is that the path of truth through love that Rayment treads in sympathy with other heroes of modernist fiction is clearly affirmed. That such a path should not necessarily entail satisfaction for the passionate stirrings of our physical selves is one of Coetzee’s points. Instead, the pleasures this path confers appear ultimately to reside in an ethical disposition of renunciation, a disposition brought about through a free act of love for another human being.¹⁹

Notes

¹ Coetzee (1940–) was sixty-five years of age when the novel was published.

² As Rayment explains to Elizabeth Costello: “I had three doses of the immigrant experience, not just one, so it imprinted itself quite deeply. First when I was uprooted as a child and brought to Australia; then when I declared my independence and returned to France; then when I gave up on France and came back to Australia. *Is this where I belong?* I asked with each move. *Is this my true home?*” (*SM*, 192; emphasis in original).

³ “frivolous is not a bad word to sum him up” (*SM*, 19).

⁴ This “speaking” name is Wayne Blight.

⁵ These are Elizabeth Costello’s words.

⁶ This is a motif also linked to the activity of writing, thus providing an indirect link between Rayment and the writer. As Costello assures Rayment, writing is “second thoughts raised to the power of n” (*SM*, 228).

⁷ David Attwell, for example, considers Elizabeth Costello’s function in the novel in the context of “the relationship between authorship and its creations,” such that that the mystery around the roles of “the authorial self and the self written into being” are presented in ordinary ways. See David Attwell: “Coetzee’s Estrangements,” *Novel* 41, nos. 2–3 (2008): 229–43; here, 235.

⁸ Kenneth Pellow has also noted Coetzee’s use of intertextual and intratextual reference in *Slow Man*. See his essay “Intertextuality and Other Analogues in J. M. Coetzee’s *Slow Man*,” *Contemporary Literature* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 528–52.

⁹ The German word for prosthesis is *Prothese*, a word meaning both *prothesis* (the addition of a letter or syllable at the beginning of a word) and *prosthesis* (the surgical replacement of deficiencies, as with artificial limbs or teeth). The German term does not carry the additional dimensions of the English word “prosthesis,” i.e., a credence table on which elements are placed for use in the Eucharistic office. An

interesting discussion that hints at this further meaning is nevertheless put forward by Zoë Wicomb, who maintains that the “linguistic shift from prosthesis to prothesis references transformation, instantiated in the first place in the figure and name of Paul Rayment, the boy from Lourdes where miracles of healing are available to believers”: “Slow Man and the Real: A Lesson in Reading and Writing,” *Journal of Literary Studies* 25, no. 4 (Dec. 2009): 7–24; here, 17.

¹⁰ Antoine Julien Fauchery (1823–61) was commissioned in 1857 by the French Government to travel to Australia and record his impressions of that country. Separate collections of Fauchery’s photographs depicting early colonial life in and around the city of Melbourne are preserved in the State Library of Victoria and the State Library of Queensland.

¹¹ That Costello is a parasite and a predator, but “still insists on Rayment’s taking charge,” would be entirely consistent with her role in the novel and resolve the implicit contradiction that David Attwell has pointed to. See his “Coetzee’s Estrangements,” 235. The idea that Costello assumes the function of an evil spirit gains further support at the end of the novel when Costello claims the motto “*malleus maleficorum*” for herself (*SM*, 263).

¹² See David Attwell’s interview with Coetzee in the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, in which Coetzee responds to Attwell’s questions about writers who might have influenced him and how they might have influenced him: Attwell, “An Exclusive Interview with J. M. Coetzee,” *Dagens Nyheter*, 8 December 2003, 1–4; www.dn.se/kultur-noje/an-exclusive-interview-with-j-m-coetzee-1.227254 (accessed 31 March 2008). Subsequent references appear as EI.

¹³ This is a phrase popularized by Robert Hughes in a work of art criticism under the same name: *The Shock of the New* (New York: Knopf 1981).

¹⁴ Discussion of “die freien Geister” can be found, among other works, in book 5 of Nietzsche’s *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (The Gay Science), which is subtitled “Die Furchtlosen” (the fearless ones). This book was added to the second edition of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* in 1887.

¹⁵ See also James Meffan’s discussion of Hofmannsthal’s *Letter of Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon* in his discussion of *Elizabeth Costello* in chapter 11.

¹⁶ See also Coetzee’s discussion of Musil’s *Drei Frauen* and the two early stories of *Vereinigungen* (Unions) in *DP*, 233–39. In a passage that seems to cast forward to his own literary intentions in *Slow Man*, Coetzee refers in this discussion to Musil’s “constant theme” in these stories, “the unbridgeability of the gap between the rational and the irrational, between the moral, based always on the example of the past and therefore on calculation, and the ethical, calling for a leap into the future” (*DP*, 234).

¹⁷ Rebecca L. Walkowitz has linked the discussion about prosthetic replacements in *Slow Man* to questions relating to the translation of artworks (“a spare leg or a translated edition”). See “Comparison Literature,” *Literary History* 40, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 567–82; here, 577.

¹⁸ As Attwell points out, Rayment, too, “speaks English like a foreigner, phlegmatically, with deliberation” (“Coetzee’s Estrangements,” 234).

¹⁹ Already in the early 1990s, Attwell saw Coetzee's writing as evolving toward a "reconstructed ethics" based on traditional values such as "the need for reciprocity, the integrity of childhood, the possibility of community, and the status of compassion or charity." *Slow Man* certainly continues this defense of values reminiscent "of a kind of historical deprivation suffered by the people as a whole": David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993), 119.