

# ABANDONED CREATURES: CREATURELY LIFE AND THE NOVEL FORM IN J. M. COETZEE'S *SLOW MAN*

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In an often-quoted interview from 1990, J. M. Coetzee describes the relation between his literary work and his life as “a person” in unexpectedly direct terms:

Let me add...that I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering. These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defenses against that being-overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so. (*Doubling* 248)

Such a plain statement was all the more surprising coming from a writer whose work was, at the time of the interview, routinely categorized as ‘metafiction.’ It is remarkable that this writer confesses that he is deeply affected by the very thing his fictional work, on an ungenerous but far from uncommon reading, seemed unable to confront directly: “the fact of suffering in the world.” Coetzee’s statement explicitly connects this affective experience to his writings, which are not to be taken as a failure to acknowledge the affect generated by the fact of worldly suffering, but rather as so many “defenses” against it; his fictions serve as a strategy to contain the “overwhelm[ing]” intensity of the affect. Yet if they manage to mitigate this intensity, they do not neutralize it completely: the defenses constructed by fiction are “paltry, ludicrous.”

Coetzee’s statement not only offers us a glimpse into the affective economy propelling his fiction, it also obliquely registers a limitation of his early work; in this way, it anticipates several of the trajectories that his work will explore after 1990. Coetzee describes his ambition to convey an affective response to suffering, yet he also subtly signals an awareness that his work has failed to do so effectively when he notes that the status of his fictions as

“paltry, ludicrous defenses” is a fact, and “to me [Coetzee], transparently so.” This phrasing indicates that this understanding of his fiction is less transparent to people other than the author, as the reception of his early work seems to confirm. There are at least two suggestions embedded in this dense passage, both of which are instructive for an understanding of Coetzee’s trajectory in the last two decades: first, it announces Coetzee’s exploration of different modes of writing that more successfully communicate the affect of suffering, and second, it indicates that two of the notions that will have to be renegotiated in such a writing practice are ‘authorship’ and ‘authority.’

Coetzee’s fiction in the last two decades has returned time and again to these two closely interlinked projects. The reconsideration of authorship and authority was already central in *The Master of Petersburg*, the first novel he published after the interview, and it directly implicated the person of Coetzee himself in his three peculiar autobiographical fictions (*Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*). And as David Attwell has noted, in *Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man*, and *Diary of a Bad Year*, “the practice of authorship itself” has become “[t]he overriding subject” (217); the same can be said about his Nobel lecture, “He and His Man.” As for the attempt to convey a more direct affective response to suffering, the publication of *Disgrace* in 1999 seemed to announce a shift to a markedly more topical and realist register in its merciless depiction of the life of a white man in a post-Apartheid South Africa that has totally erased the terms of the social contract that used to pertain. The outspoken reactions to its depiction of new race relationships, lingering xenophobia, and sexual abuse seemed to signal that Coetzee, without abandoning his signature self-reflexivity, had finally managed to convey and provoke an affective response to the reality of suffering to which his work is committed.

It is somewhat surprising, then, that Coetzee’s twenty-first-century novels have not continued in this more realist vein. Indeed, novels like *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year* are infused with a certain abstractness, and a definite disinterest in conveying the lived experience of Australia, Coetzee’s new home. Even if both of these novels are set in Australia, the setting is never made more specific than the perfunctory mention of a few geographical signifiers and, in the case of *Diary*, references to a recognizably Australian cultural and political context that, however, hardly informs the characters’ everyday lives. The novels’ “language of minimalist denotation” (Boehmer 9) references an Australian context, but they are apparently uninterested in using these references to play the literary game of bringing contemporary Australia to life through the lives of their characters.

Through a reading of *Slow Man*, and of Coetzee’s rewriting of Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *Chandos Letter* in the postscript to *Elizabeth Costello*, this article interrogates this weary abstractness of Coetzee’s late fiction—a periodizing term whose appropriateness will become clear along the way. It shows how this mode of writing contributes to what I take to be the key

theme of this late fiction (which is not to say that it was missing from his earlier work): its exploration of a particular mode of suffering that is produced by the revelation of the fragility and contingency of time-honored forms of life, and by an exposure to what I call, following Eric Santner, the twitchings and fluctuations of creaturely life—a form of life that is inextricably linked up with, while not reducible to, animal life. The late fiction stages this condition by presenting us with characters who can no longer depend on the conventions and certainties of the literary form that has historically sustained and implemented modern notions of subjectivity and community: the novel. Coetzee's protagonists are abandoned creatures: bereft of the social, moral, and political values that were reflected and inculcated by the modern novel, they inhabit a carefully constructed 'post-novelistic' space that calls for the tentative testing and elaboration of new forms of life. To return to the passage with which we began, his late novels convey a sense of creaturely suffering that is produced when the "paltry, ludicrous defenses" that literary and social fictions have constructed have become obsolete.

After he has been visited by the novelist Elizabeth Costello, Paul Rayment, the protagonist of *Slow Man*, muses that she, as a novelist, engages in what amounts to a "biologico-literary experiment" (114). I read *Slow Man* as a "biologico-literary experiment" that tests and explores the forms of life that are produced when the elements that traditionally make up the world of the novel have ceased to function, and now confront the characters with their contingency and obsolescence. As is familiar enough, over a century of theoretical reflection on the modern novel has understood the genre as a cultural form that has inaugurated and sustained modern forms of individuality and community; the novel has done so, moreover, by mobilizing two vital kinds of emotive engagement with the world: desire and empathy. Even if such a monolithic account of the novel is a critical fiction rather than a literary historical fact, as Coetzee knows (if only because two of his most overt influences, Kafka and Beckett, constitute drastic exceptions to it), he mobilizes it in his late fiction only to move beyond it. Coetzee's late fiction renders desire and readerly empathy inoperative,<sup>1</sup> in order to make room for the exploration of different forms of life.

*Slow Man* radicalizes an investigation already begun in *Disgrace*. This novel begins in an urban setting as a rather conventional campus novel in which David Lurie, a middle-aged bachelor and intellectual, lives by the rules of desire, as a self-professed "servant of Eros" (52), who is used to scanning the female student population for potential sexual partners with what the novel calls his "desiring gaze" (12). The first few chapters tell the story of Lurie's disgrace, as his sexual contacts with one of his students prove incompatible with the ethic of post-Apartheid South Africa. The rest of the novel finds Lurie in partly self-imposed exile in the countryside, in an environment where his customary ratiocinations about his actions mean nothing. *Disgrace*, in other

words, demonstrates the clash between the rights of desire and the new South African reality (in its first few chapters), and explores the gradual and halting shift from desire to care (in the rest of the novel), as Lurie increasingly devotes his time to caring for the animals on his daughter's farm, and for the corpses of the dogs that the animal clinic, in one of the novel's key phrases, "takes care of."

Coetzee's "biologico-literary experiment" in *Slow Man* simply dispenses with the careful narration of this move from a world governed by action, reason, and desire to a world of dependence and care, and drops its protagonist in a position of dependence from the very beginning. Already in the first paragraph, Paul is caught by a "blow...sharp and surprising and painful, like a bolt of electricity, lifting him up off the bicycle" (1), which lands him in a hospital bed on the third page, and with(out) an amputated leg on page six. From the very start, Paul's "rights of desire" (which Lurie still invoked in *Disgrace*; 89) are forcefully denied, and he is abandoned to a world where there is "no cure, just care" (63); "just nursing, just care" (33).<sup>2</sup> *Slow Man* condenses the movement that takes up two hundred odd pages in *Disgrace* into the story's very premise. No longer organized by desire, and therefore also unable to solicit readerly empathy,<sup>3</sup> Coetzee's late fiction produces novels from which almost all novelistic elements have been subtracted. These books abandon their characters in a zone where the routines of desire and other novelistic ploys can no longer guide them.<sup>4</sup>

The frequent intertextual references to iconic moments in the history of the modern novel (Beckett, Defoe, Cervantes, Flaubert) signal that *Slow Man* very self-consciously negotiates its relation to the novel tradition and to the social forms that it used to sustain.<sup>5</sup> Coetzee's novel inhabits a space where that tradition fails to exercise its hold on the novel's characters, and this conveys a sense that these social and cultural forms have exhausted their usefulness in the early twenty-first century. Mark Sanders has remarked that, in Coetzee's recent work, we are dealing with fictions in which "aging characters weave, with increasing revulsion and repulsion, in and out of the social text of their, which is also our, time" (644). Even if revulsion of the body is a staple of Coetzee's writing, his recent work is marked by a particularly intense attention to bodily processes and unanswered emotional needs, even "a studied vulgarity" (644), or what Timothy Bewes has called "a level of personal and historical detail that is almost as scandalous as was the earlier reticence" (150). Crucially, this vulgarity and specificity do not aim to situate these characters in a densely imagined social world; instead, they are the result of the perceived fragility and instability of the social texts that used to make up such a stable world. They do not help the reader fill in ready-made emotional templates, but they go hand in hand with an eery sense of abstraction and affectlessness. Instead of inaugurating "a new order of directness," these fictions deliver, as Bewes writes, "a new opacity" (151)—a

form of resistance to the terms we tend to use to make sense of forms of life. Coetzee's late fiction addresses the tension between the "overwhelming" intensity of suffering and fiction's "paltry, ludicrous defenses" by making the flimsy status of social and literary fictions unmistakable.

Facing a world that is not organized by novelistic conventions, characters in Coetzee's late fiction are, if anything, *exposed*. An emblem of this excessive exposure is Paul's decision, at the beginning of *Slow Man*, to refuse a prosthesis for his amputated leg. Refusing the consolations of artificial completion and totality, Paul exposes himself to "the pitiless gaze of the young," to "the gaze of an outsider" (13, 38, 96)—to a gaze, in other words, that is no longer, as was still the case at the beginning of *Disgrace*, automatically linked to desire. This gaze squarely focuses on the abject reality of the "zone of humiliation" (13, 61) created in the imaginative space where novelistic devices have ceased to function. Through this logic of subtraction, the missing leg takes on an uncanny reality. As Zoë Wicomb has noted, what enters the narrative as "[t]he absence of a leg," becomes "the real presence of a stump that the reader encounters in all its raw physicality" (229). The stump is a fleshy, physical excess generated by the palpable inability of novelistic devices to cover it up.

So how are we to understand this form of suffering that emerges when novelistic conventions fail? It is interesting that Coetzee, in the quote with which we began, carefully qualified his concern with suffering "in the world" to include "not only human suffering." Obviously, Coetzee is here already announcing his increasingly intense occupation with the life of animals in his later work. Still, his late work makes clear that this passage might also indicate a suffering that gains visibility in the wake of the novelistic conventions that used to define what counted as full-fledged "human" (heroic, tragic, cathartic, redemptive) suffering. As noted, the plight of Paul is crucially tied to the fact that the time-honored social textures that used to organize modern life have become fragile and defunct. This does not mean that he somehow ceases being human and becomes animal; indeed, it is a crucial aspect of his condition that he remains tied to cultural forms that can no longer defend him against his constitutive vulnerability. This is less a form of biological or animal vulnerability than what Eric Santner has called a "creaturely" vulnerability—a vulnerability humans experience with a particular intensity when forms of life that used to support them have been revealed as fragile and merely contingent. Santner defines this creaturely dimension as follows:

It signifies a mode of *exposure* that distinguishes human beings from other kinds of life: not exposure simply to the elements or to the fragility and precariousness of our mortal, finite lives, but rather to an ultimate lack of foundation for the historical forms of life that distinguish human community.... We could say that the precariousness, the fragility—the "nudity"—of biological life becomes potentiated, amplified, by way of

exposure to the radical contingency of the forms of life that constitute the space of meaning within which human life unfolds, and that it is only through such “potentiation” that we take on the flesh of creaturely life. Creatureliness is thus a dimension not so much of biological as of *ontological vulnerability*, a vulnerability that permeates human being as that being whose essence it is to exist in forms of life that are, in turn, contingent, fragile, susceptible to breakdown. (*Royal Remains* 5-6)

The novel is one such “form of life” whose felt and perceived precariousness exposes human beings to the insistence of creaturely life and suffering. Coetzee’s late fictions are so many “biologico-literary experiments” that provoke a crisis in the novel form in order to explore the lives of creatures like Paul.

As I noted, Paul does not immediately invite readerly empathy: he hardly acts or develops, and he consistently fails to meet the standards of a life worth telling. Yet his helpless exposure to the gaze of the world (and the reader) invites an affective response all the same, even if it is only one of disappointment, frustration, impatience, or bafflement (Dancygier 245, Walton 282-83). In the novel, Paul ultimately becomes the object of somewhat unrealistic minimal acts of care and generosity. Such a weaker, less grandiose affective attentiveness is one way of responding to creaturely suffering in the absence of more codified forms of empathy and identification. Santner refers to the mode of attentiveness that emerges after the breakdown of these time-worn protocols as “a new, yet still inarticulate, mode of *Einführung*, as a thinking responsive to the ‘twitchings’ of creaturely life, a thinking that attempts to inhabit the ‘neighbourhood’ of its always singular appearances” (*Royal Remains* 178). Interestingly, Santner makes this point in relation to the German writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s famous *Chandos Letter*, a key document in the modernist experience of the breakdown of a time-worn universe of meaning. Coetzee takes on the same text in the postscript to *Elizabeth Costello*.<sup>6</sup> A brief consideration of Coetzee’s rewriting of Hofmannsthal reveals that he is crucially concerned with probing the affective charge and the ethical challenge of the perceived tenuousness of seemingly self-evident social and cultural forms—something that my reading of *Slow Man* confirms. Just as Hofmannsthal is interested in grasping the advent of modernism, Coetzee probes the aftermath of models of subjectivity and community sustained by the novel form.

Like Hofmannsthal’s text, Coetzee’s short postscript takes the form of a fictional letter to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century philosopher Francis Bacon. But unlike Hofmannsthal’s original, Coetzee’s letter is not written by Lord Chandos as an apology for “his complete abandonment of literary activity” (Hofmannsthal 69), but rather by his wife, “Elizabeth, Lady Chandos.” That the imaginary Lady Chandos shares the name of the aging novelist at the center of *Elizabeth Costello* is an open invitation to read this postscript as a coded meditation on the fate of the novel form. Lady Chandos’s

letter deals with her husband's letter, which, she explains, has accidentally come under her sight, and about which she wants to reassure Bacon that it was not, as she suspects he might suspect, written "in a fit of madness" (227). The status of Lady Chandos's letter is significant: it comes to the help of a (seemingly) mad person, of the person who, in Hofmannsthal's original, had been overcome by the sudden intensity of creaturely life; it is an oblique response to a letter (her husband's) that was not even addressed to her. In this way, the letter *embodies* the mode of attentiveness and responsiveness to suffering that Santner and others have located in Hofmannsthal's letter. In the "many months" she has known of her husband's affliction, Lady Chandos writes, she has "suffered with him" (227).

The letter makes clear that this mode of responsiveness emerges after the forms of desire, communication, and identification commonly associated with the novel form were intensified to a breaking point:

There was a time, I remember, before this time of affliction, when he would gaze like one bewitched at paintings of sirens and dryads, craving to enter their naked, glistening bodies. But where in Wiltshire will we find a siren or a dryad for him to try? Perforce I became his dryad: it was I whom he entered when he sought to enter her, I who felt his tears on my shoulder when again he could not find her in me. (227)

The form of life in which such intense forms of desire and identification made sense has become obsolete; now Lord and Lady Chandos live in a zone "where words give way beneath your feet like rotting boards" (228). Instead of inhabiting familiar cultural forms that mediate their relation to the world, Lord and Lady Chandos, as well as the characters in Coetzee's late fiction, are exposed to their creaturely condition, in which they are no longer shielded from the intimate proximity of their fellow creatures (what Santner calls "the 'neighbourhood' of [creaturely life's] always singular appearances"), nor from the insistent attraction of transcendent powers. Now that the borders cordoning off the realm of human life from other forms of being have disappeared, Lady Chandos has to live "with rats and dogs and beetles crawling through me day and night, drowning and gasping"; at the same time, she is afflicted with the uncontrollable proliferation of intimations of higher meaning: "Each creature is key to all other creatures. A dog sitting in a patch of sun licking itself... is at one moment a dog and at the next a vessel of revelation" (229). When the established hierarchy between the divine, the human, and the animal realm has become tenuous, these different orders of being find themselves in creaturely proximity.<sup>7</sup>

Lady Chandos describes this oscillation between the divine and the bestial as a condition in which "[a]ll is allegory" (229). And while 'allegory' is a notoriously slippery term, Hofmannsthal's original text qualifies it as part of the crisis it is describing, and which the postscript to *Elizabeth Costello* transfers to

Coetzee's late fiction. For Hofmannsthal's Chandos, 'allegory' names the loss of the power to conceive of "the whole of existence as one great unit" in which "the spiritual and physical worlds seemed to form no contrast" (71-72). When he is reduced to creaturely suffering, "everything disintegrated into parts, those parts again into parts; no longer would anything let itself be encompassed by one idea" (74). Yet it is not only the real world, but also the spiritual realm that used to infuse this world with meaning that has become meaningless, and this establishes the link between creaturely life and allegory: "the mysteries of faith have been condensed into a lofty allegory which arches itself over the fields of my life like a radiant rainbow, ever remote, ever prepared to recede should it occur to me to rush toward it and wrap myself into the folds of its mantle" (72). "All is allegory," in other words, as the creature finds itself simultaneously in uncomfortable proximity to its fellow creatures and ruthlessly exposed to a transcendent source of meaning it cannot name. The spiritual and the physical no longer constitute a harmonious unity.

Yet what does this oscillation between the twitching of creature life and the intimation of higher things have to do with Coetzee's attempt to explore the waning of the novel form? Coetzee's turn to allegory becomes particularly salient when we look at one influential account of the cultural role of the novel that Coetzee has explicitly endorsed (Hayes 121): Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (1957). Watt explicitly qualifies the novel as an anti-allegorical form. He supports his decision to position Defoe and Richardson as the originators of the novel genre by noting that they "are the first great writers in our literature who did not take their plots from mythology, history, legend or previous literature" (14). In the novel, the plot is acted out "by particular people in particular circumstances," rather than "by general types against a background primarily determined by the appropriate literary convention" (15). The defining innovation of the novel, in other words, is that ordinary life can be treated with proper seriousness. "The novel's serious concern with the daily lives of ordinary people" (60) is, according to Watt, unprecedented in Western literary history. It was simply not available to classical literature, where genre theory prescribed a strict *Stiltrennung* (separation of styles): "tragedy described the heroic vicissitudes of people better than ourselves in appropriately elevated language, whereas the domain of everyday reality belonged to comedy which was supposed to portray people 'inferior to ourselves' in an appropriately 'low' style" (79). The emergence of the novel neutralizes this distinction and makes it possible to treat every individual with the seriousness that was earlier only accorded to the heroes of myth and tragedy. The opposition between comedy and tragedy is, in other words, overcome by the novel's invention of what Watt famously calls "formal realism." The inherent seriousness accorded to earthly life also means that the latter does not require transcendent sanction. This is why Defoe rather than Bunyan is considered the very first novelist: in works like *Pilgrim's Progress*, "the significance of the characters and their



actions largely depends upon a transcendental scheme of things: to say that the persons are allegorical is to say that their earthly reality is not the main object of the writer" (80). Thanks to its unprecedented power to wed the tragic and the comic, the novel, for Watt, is an inherently anti-allegorical mode.

Paul's plight in *Slow Man* can be understood in terms of the overwhelming return of allegory and of the rift between the comic and the tragic. The "blow" that "catches" him and lifts him "up off the bicycle" in the first lines of the novel, and that will lead to a complete turnaround in his life, is a banal accident caused by an inattentive young driver, while it at the same time resonates with a much more momentous incident in the history of the West: the famous Bible passage, narrated in Acts 9, in which the later St Paul, then still called Saul, is blasted from his horse on the road from Tarsus to Damascus as part of a divine plan in which he features as Jesus' "chosen vessel" who must bear His name "before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel" (Acts 9: 15). The blow that hits Saul not only brings about a radical conversion in his life (he used to persecute Christians), but also in the history of the universalization of Christianity. While the accident that opens *Slow Man* inevitably recalls this moment, the radical diminishment of Paul's life and his failure to extend his love into the world underline his inevitable remove from such a higher meaning. This is precisely the allegorical situation that Coetzee and Hofmannsthal are describing.

Paul captures his own uncertainty about the bearing of the accident in the theoretical terms that Watt imported into the definition of the novel. In conversation with a friend, Paul explains that he does not intend to sue the young man who drove into him, as that leaves "[t]oo many openings for comedy" (15). Later on, he explains to Elizabeth Costello that his life story is not fit for fiction: "Losing a leg does not qualify one for a dramatic role. Losing a leg is neither tragic nor comic, just unfortunate" (117). The option of converting his life story into a novel—which, after all, could potentially neutralize the distinction between tragedy and comedy—is no longer available to Paul. The literary genre that could accord "the unfortunate" the seriousness due to earthly events is no longer operative: "...as regards his condition in general, considering what can and does happen to the human body when it is hit by a car going at speed, he can congratulate himself that it is *not serious*. In fact, it is so much the reverse of serious that he can count himself lucky, fortunate, blessed" (6). Lacking a cultural form that can treat his misfortune with all due seriousness, Paul is led to conclude that what happened to him is "the reverse of serious"—that, in fact, he has even been fortunate. Such are the oscillations besetting creaturely life when there is no novel form to house it.

*Slow Man's* intent to map the reciprocal imbrication of creaturely life and the unraveling of the novel form is especially apparent in its revision of the traditional relations between author and character, or between creator and

creature. In the book's thirteenth chapter, Paul's indolence is interrupted by a visit from the novelist Elizabeth Costello, a character who is familiar from Coetzee's eponymous 2003 novel, and as Coetzee's *porte-parole* in several of the public lectures he has delivered since the mid-1990s. Her introduction immediately upsets the novel's discursive situation when she begins to recite the opening lines of the novel and turns out to know all about Paul's life (81). Paul's suspicion that he is merely a character in one of Elizabeth's novels is only strengthened when he discovers notes about his life in Elizabeth's notebook. The result is an overwhelming sense of betrayal, because what he had assumed to be his private life turns out to have been part of a "biologico-literary experiment," and to have been meticulously recorded by a hidden agent: "All the time he thought he was his own master he has been in a cage like a rat, darting this way and that, yammering to himself, with the infernal woman standing over him, observing; listening, taking notes, recording his progress" (122).

It is important to be aware what this passage describing the relation between author and character is *not* saying. For one thing, it does not present the spectacle of a manipulative master and a passive victim, as "the infernal woman" (the author), in this passage, is not interfering, only observing and recording. Whatever omniscience she has is in any case no omnipotence, and is the result of careful observation and meticulous recording, not of the sovereign operation of the imagination. If there is any spontaneous action in this image, it is on the side of the rat (the character). This confirms a suspicion that Elizabeth's visit almost automatically raises, and that the rest of the novel supports: traditional authors do not visit their characters, and Costello's doing so reveals that she depends as much on Paul as the other way round. It demonstrates that the relation between author and character, far from being a matter of unidirectional domination, is in fact a relation of *reciprocal dependence*.

Elizabeth and Paul are condemned to each other, and his failure to live an active, desiring life, a life that "may be *worth* putting in a book" (229), is also a problem for her, as her life is also tied up with the continued existence of books, that is, of the zones in which creatures are exposed to the demise of the forms that used to sustain them. As long as Paul does not "choose to act" (136) and to initiate a veritable plot, Elizabeth "ha[s] to put up with" him and his immobile, indolent life, and she cannot "go back to [her] own life, which is a great deal more comfortable" (136). Paul's descent from subject to creature also drags the author away from her site of sovereignty to "the zone of humiliation" that is Paul's "new home" (61). The option of a return to sovereign comfort and self-sufficiency has become obsolete, as Elizabeth realizes: "When I am with you I am at home; when I am not with you I am homeless. That is how the dice have fallen" (159). Elizabeth reminds Paul that their reciprocal dependence also means that his refusal to accept her as part of

his life entails a diminishment for himself: "Bringing me to life may not be important to you, but it has the drawback of not bringing you to life either" (159). After Elizabeth has arranged an awkward sexual encounter between Paul and the blind woman he spotted earlier in the novel, he wonders whether "the Costello woman [might] be writing two stories at once, stories about characters who suffer a loss...which they must learn to live with" (118). *Slow Man* tells the story of two people who must learn to cope with the loss of the social and cultural forms on which they used to depend for making sense of loss, and in the absence of which they have to construct a new form of life in and through their relation to each other.

The result is a work without credible psychological development, a significant setting, or a compelling plot; instead, we get seemingly unchoreographed changes in the characters' proximity to and repulsion from each other and in the degree of vitality of the two aging characters, which intermittently sinks to a depressing low. The only thing that seems to keep Paul from suicide is that "he does not *want* death because he does not *want* anything" (26). Unable to act, his days are "cast over with a grey monotone" (139) and become "repetitive and circumscribed and duller by the day" (229). At one point, Elizabeth confesses: "I can't begin to tell you how tired I am.... The tiredness I refer to has become part of my being. It is like a dye that has begun to seep into everything I do, everything I say" (160). This waning of vitality is explicitly linked to the crisis of the genre that used to sustain their notions of a life worth living when Paul searches out one of Elizabeth's novels only to stop reading because "[h]e is not going to expose himself to any more of the colourless, odourless, inert, and depressive gas given off by its pages" (120). Not much difference, then, between the remains of the novel and the creaturely remainder of life.

If the time when the novel genre could authoritatively reflect and shape human life is over, the expectations of what constitutes a life worth describing (or novelizing) have not ceased making themselves felt. Elizabeth's and Paul's dejection is tied to the fact that these expectations continue to address them even when the conditions of their realization are no longer in place. Paul's self-beratement when he realizes that he is "not a hero" (117), when he cannot muster the "gross desires" that he yet knows are "expected of him" (14), when he fails to exercise the "passion that makes the world go round" (228), is the result of expectations that continue to haunt him at a time when their actualization has become impossible. This is why his is a creaturely, and not an animal, form of suffering: not just the physical pains of biological life, but also a sense of vulnerability and precariousness that comes from the tenuousness of the forms that used to provide human life with meaning.

In order to recast the relation between author and character as a form of reciprocal creaturely exposure, *Slow Man* needs to dismantle the logic of sovereignty, which Santner identifies as a historical strategy used "to organize,

manage, and administer” the creaturely fluctuations to which human life is exposed (*Royal Remains* xx). The logic of sovereignty has of course also informed traditional notions of authorship, and the novel’s revision of such notions is not only apparent in Elizabeth’s development, but also in that of Paul. The first pages of the novel subtly link his demotion from independence to disability to a gradual erasure of the power of authorial intention. In the very first paragraph, Paul reacts to the blow that hits him by a double act of (self-) narration: “*Relax* he tells himself as he flies through the air...and indeed he can feel his limbs go obediently slack. *Like a cat* he tells himself” (1). These acts of telling are credited with the power to contain the impact of the accident, and with an undiminished effectiveness (“and indeed”). Only a few lines later, this linguistic power is beginning to abandon him, and the first chapter ends thus: “He wants to ask what has become of his bicycle, whether it is being taken care of, since, as is well known, a bicycle can disappear in a flash: but before those words will come he is gone again” (2). The intention to speak cannot be actualized; it is first overtaken (and de-individualized) by the *idée reçue* that “a bicycle can disappear in a flash,” and the unwelcome silence that follows the intention to speak finds the vanishing speaker at the mercy of words that won’t come—a situation that cancels his selfhood: “he is gone again.” The rest of the novel explores new forms of life in the gap left by the vanishing of sovereign selfhood; as Paul writes in a letter to Marijana following another incident later in the story: “I am just using the opening created by this unpleasant incident to let my pen run and my heart speak” (225).

The second chapter, in which Paul finds himself tied to a hospital bed, not only chronicles his physical decay, but also his loss of control over his speech. Even if he intends to speak, he faces the problem that “if he utters the words he will lose control, he will start shouting” (8), and he unsuccessfully “tries to create an interrogative” “[o]ut of the muddle in his head” (4). The self-evident effectiveness from the first paragraph, signaled by the “and indeed,” has migrated to the institution of the hospital: somebody says that the doctor will come, “[a]nd indeed before a minute has passed” he comes (4). Paul has not only lost the power of articulation—he feels as if in “a cocoon of dead air,” “as if he were encased in concrete” (3)—the accident has also afflicted his relation to his own body: the pain in his leg does not register directly, but instead “[h]e hears his own gasp, and then the thudding of blood in his ears” (5). The noise he does manage to make is not intentionally produced, but “wells up and bursts from his throat,” coming “from the cavern within” (3).

In Paul’s development in the novel, the radical demise of sovereignty makes room for a halting recognition of his exposure to his fellow creatures, a relentless exposure produced by the fragility of the social textures from which his accident has torn him away. One of the novel’s key terms for capturing this exposure is ‘flesh.’ In a conversation with Elizabeth, Paul describes himself as an immaterial node adequately suspended in a network of signifiers: he is “a

kind of ventriloquist's dummy"; it is not he "who speak[s] the language, it is the language that is spoken through me" (198). He considers himself "*hollow at the core*," yet Elizabeth promptly reminds him that his accident has put paid to such fantasies of "ethereal being": having come "crashing down to earth," he is "nothing but a lump of all too solid flesh" (198). The demise of the social textures that used to sustain him has transformed Paul into a material "residue," a "sediment" of the social order (63, 51). No longer able to "perform what man is brought into the world to perform," he is now "[a] man not wholly a man... a half-man, an after-man, like an after-image" (33-34). The instantaneous "flash" of the accident has produced the "flesh" that Paul must learn to inhabit: "Flash. A flash of lightning. Flesh is what we are made of, flesh and bone" (54).<sup>8</sup>

The notion of "flesh" plays a key role in Santner's analysis of creaturely life. The flesh is the excess of life that cannot be organized in a body; it names, more precisely, a dimension of somatic life that is animated by our exposure to fellow creatures when that exposure is no longer contained within a (social) body. According to Santner, the body is transformed into "a bundle of excitable flesh" when we are faced with the "inability to inhabit and to feel *libidinally implicated* in the space of representations" (*Royal Remains* xiv)—the very space that the novel genre used to organize by its choreographing of desire, and which Paul finds himself expelled from at the beginning of the novel. The flesh is "the virtual yet unnervingly visceral substance of the fantasies that both constrain and amplify the lives of modern subjects" (xxii), which Paul must learn to assume as part of his life, as mere substance. Paul's stump serves no particular function in his biological life, and his insistent refusal of a prosthesis makes sure that it will not be enlisted for the smooth functioning of his body in the future. In this way, it crystallizes the "fleshy" dimension of his life that stands out and remains exposed to the gaze of others.

A crucial step in Paul's gradual acceptance of the reality of the flesh and the disarticulation of the body is the encounter, orchestrated by Elizabeth, with the blind woman he spotted in the hospital. The woman's blindness ensures that Paul does not feel her gaze, yet the requirement that he also cover his own eyes denies him the comfort of confronting her as an integral body: "groping his way," he feels "heavy breasts and spreading, unnaturally soft buttocks," yet "he cannot make the parts cohere"; indeed, "[h]ow can he even be sure they belong to the same woman?" (108). While the flesh is here confronted while the gaze is suspended, the scene is tinged with the suspicion that they are being watched by Elizabeth Costello, the person who initiated the encounter, and, of course, by the reader, to whose gaze Paul's helpless groping is mercilessly exposed. In this way, the scene is also a step toward Paul's acceptance of his own exposure to the gaze and the care of others. As he notes, "[w]e are on stage, in a certain sense, even if we are not being watched" (103).

Paul's reluctant acceptance of the flesh and the gaze, and thus of the creaturely dimension of his life, in the last sections of the novel is postponed by several setbacks. At first, Paul simply denies his creaturely condition: not only does he refuse his prosthesis, he also resists professional help; his aim remains to "recover himself," to remain "his old self," and to "take care of [him]self," as if the forms that sustained his former self could simply be reactivated (4, 6, 10). Only later does he realize that his particular plight consists in having to live with the disintegration of these forms, without the possibility of realigning them: "[n]ever is he going to be his old self again" (53), yet for all that "[h]e is trapped with the same old self as before, only greyer and drearier" (53, 54). Paul is condemned to live the afterlife of a life worth living or novelizing; his loss can no longer be integrated in a narrative of desire and recovery—he will from now on merely be "the one who aches" (26). Yet the claims of desire prove hard to shake off: evacuated from the realm where his sexual desire can be actualized, and entirely reliant on professional care, Paul transforms care, and the provider of this care—his nurse Marijana—into objects of desire. Not only does he fall in love with Marijana, he also wants to support her family financially so that their son Drago can afford to attend an expensive college. His desire for care has all the intensity of sexual passion: "...he will give anything to be father to these excellent, beautiful children and husband to Marijana.... He wants to take care of them, all of them, protect them and save them" (72).

Marijana and her family have come to Australia from Croatia by way of Germany. *Slow Man* weaves this itinerary into the novel's affective geography in a way that again underscores its intent to explore life in the wake of a social space supported by the novel form. Paul, who was himself born in France, quite unproblematically perpetuates the cliché of the Balkan as Europe's interior exotic other. Hearing the name of Marijana's son, he muses "Drago Jokić: a name from folk-epic. *The Ballad of Drago Jokić*" (69). In a letter to Marijana, he writes that she "come[s] from an older and in some respects better world" (225). Croatia appears as a more harmonious and less complicated place—as either a "worker's paradise" or "an immemorial world of donkeys and goats and chickens and water-buckets sheeted in ice in the morning" (64).

The association between simpler and more harmonious life forms and the genre of the epic is not fortuitous. It is one of the organizing conceits of Georg Lukács's classic work *The Theory of the Novel* (written in 1914–15). For Lukács, what defines the novel as a quintessentially modern genre is its endemic nostalgic desire for an epic world. In Timothy Bewes's gloss on Lukács, the novel "is a genre defined by its failure: by the yearning for a world of completeness, a completeness that [Lukács] ascribes to the world of the epic, and that the novel is constitutively removed from" (44). The novel "emerges in a world in which the 'natural unity of the metaphysical spheres,' a unity expressed in the pure, sensuous immediacy of the epic, has disappeared forever" (Bewes 86). Whereas the ethos of a complete world for

which the novel impotently yearns was adequately captured by the epic, the modern world in which the spiritual and the material no longer add up to a well-rounded whole can no longer be adequately rendered by literary form. The novel is unable to restore the unity of life and form, even if it is defined by the persistent desire to do so: for Lukács, “[t]he novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality” (Lukács 56).

Paul’s impossible desire for a Marijana who is linked to the Balkan and to epic form is, in other words, essentially a novelistic desire. It is also, as the Balkan’s status as Europe’s internal exotic other makes clear, an essentially European desire—a desire for an “extensive totality of life” that is impossible to satisfy in Paul’s Australian exile. Marijana and her husband learn this with a vengeance. She holds a degree in restoration, and while there was still a living to be made by restoring the masterworks of the past in Dubrovnik, she is reduced to doing nursing jobs in Australia, where such a desire for the grandeur and completeness of the past has made way for more pedestrian requirements (86). Miroslav, her husband, even more dramatically embodies the obsolescence of the novelistic illusion of a restored fullness of life: educated as a specialist “in antique technology” (86), he won his fifteen minutes of fame back home by reassembling “a mechanical duck that had lain in parts in the basement...for two hundred years,” and which he managed to make quack and waddle again (86). In Australia, this feat of rearticulating disparate mechanical parts into the semblance of a functioning and living body has no use, and he ends up working in a car plant.

In his encounter with his creaturely and fleshy being, Paul must abandon the novelistic nostalgia for wholeness. He codes his refusal of a prosthesis as a refusal of the reanimation work in which Miroslav engages: “If I had screws I would be a mechanical man. Which I am not” (56). This refusal replaces the dream of wholeness with an acceptance of physical exposure and the concomitant imperative to live on even in the absence of consoling fictions: countering Elizabeth’s accusation that he feels aversion to the physical, Paul remarks that “[i]t is a testament to my faith in the physical that I have not done away with myself, that I am still here” (235). Paul refuses what Lukács refers to as the novel’s reluctant replacement of sensation with reflection by returning from the realm of reflection to the raw persistence of creaturely life, even if there is no hope of infusing this life with spiritual meaning. While Elizabeth affirms that “the whole of writing [is] a matter of second thoughts,” “second thoughts to the power of n,” Paul breaks with this hypertrophy of reflection by making it a matter of revulsion: “I used to have lots of second thoughts, I had second thoughts all the time, but now I abhor them” (225). His acknowledgement of an affect of abhorrence introduces a dimension of physicality that cannot simply be reduced to the sensuality and immediacy

that the novel, on Lukács' account, desires; this affect is much closer to the twitchings of creaturely life.

In its last few scenes, *Slow Man* offers us a glimpse of a mode of attentiveness that is adequate to creaturely life. In a somewhat dream-like scene, Paul and Elizabeth find themselves as guests in Marijana's family's house. The family surprises Paul with a recumbent bicycle—a bike that Paul “dislikes...instinctively, as he dislikes prostheses, as he dislikes all fakes” (255). Yet this dislike does not seem to matter anymore, as he is now willing to simply go through the motions. Paul has fully accepted his exposure to the gaze of his fellow creatures: “He can feel a blush creeping over him, a blush of shame, starting at his ears and creeping forward over his face. He has no wish to stop it” (254). The image of a “blush creeping” underlines that this response is not the result of a private decision, but rather of his exposure to an external gaze. Gone, also, is the nostalgia for the novelistic capacity to neutralize the tension between the tragic and the comic: “he should give up his solemn air and become what he rightly is, a figure of fun...” (256).

In the conversation with Elizabeth that concludes the novel, Paul seems to finally have accepted a distinction of which Elizabeth has time and again reminded him: the difference between ‘care’ and ‘love.’ For Elizabeth, “[c]are is not love. Care is a service that any nurse worth her salt can provide, as long as we don't ask her for more” (154). Paul's relation to Marijana is troubled by his insistent demand “for more,” and by the difficulty he has to accept that “caring should not be assumed to have anything to do with the heart” (165). In his relation to Marijana, Paul confuses the novelistic realm of desire with the post-novelistic domain of care; he consistently makes a categorical mistake, sending her “words of love from an object of mere nursing, mere care” (172). At the end of the novel, Elizabeth surprisingly abandons the firm distinction on which she has insisted throughout when she all at once desires “[I]oving care” (261). Paul's response to her question whether they have “found love at last” is answered by an acknowledgement of loss and located in a situation of relentless fleshy exposure:

Half an hour ago he was with Marijana. But Marijana is behind them now, and he is left with Elizabeth Costello. He puts on his glasses again, turns, takes a good look at her. In the clear late-afternoon light he can see every detail, every hair, every vein. He examines her, then he examines his heart. “No,” he says at last, “this is not love. This is something else. Something less.” (263)

The confrontation with Elizabeth's flesh makes Paul acknowledge that love will henceforth be a thing of the past, that it is “behind them now,” and accept a diminished mode of attentiveness (“something less”) as the proper attitude toward fellow creatures. This diminished mode of attention is also a form of care: the novel ends with Paul, no longer hiding the reality of the flesh behind



the contraptions of novelistic convention or physical integrity, giving Elizabeth three formal kisses (263).

In the reconciliation scene with Marijana's family that immediately precedes this scene, Paul also confesses that he has "misjudged and wronged" her son, Drago (257). Having earlier allowed Drago to stay in his office, Paul has discovered that Drago has stolen one of the valuable nineteenth-century photographs that he collects. *Slow Man* presents photography as a medium whose claims to authenticity have become somewhat antiquated in the age of digital reproduction; in this way, these reflections on photography are also a thinly veiled exploration of the fate of the novel form in a post-novelistic age. Paul has a hard time convincing Marijana of the seriousness of the offense: Drago has duly replaced the 'original' picture with a copy, and the difference between an original copy and a fake copy seems insubstantial when dealing with an art form to which reproduction is endemic, and in which the notion of 'the original' is specious at best; for Paul, it is only "the added thickness that first gives the forgery away" (218). Paul has to accept that the medium of photography is no longer what it once was, and that questions of "being first" are now "of no account" (212)—in the same way that the completeness of epic life is exposed as a mere illusion once the novelistic desire to return to it has been abandoned. Seeing the results of Drago's digital tinkering with the picture, Paul wryly notes that "[h]e could never have achieved so convincing a montage in an old-fashioned darkroom" (218).

Earlier in the novel, we have learned that Paul's "first real job was as a darkroom technician"; he then marveled at the camera's "power of taking in light and turning it into substance," at the moment when "the ghostly image emerged beneath the surface of the liquid, as veins of darkness on the paper began to knit together and grow visible" (65). Whereas this "metaphysical" work of transformation then seemed like the very "day of creation," photography has now entered an age in which only the "added thickness" of the paper vows for the difference between different copies. This imagery suggests that, while photography used to have the power to produce a genuinely novel substance, it nowadays merely produces a "thickness," a fleshy mass that is not shaped by the social and cultural forms that used to guide its operation. If we read this as an oblique comment on the residual powers of fiction, this diminished mode adequately captures the central concern of Coetzee's late fiction: the exploration of creaturely life, and of the kind of attentiveness that is adequate to it, after the unraveling of the cultural form that used to give that life a human shape.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In support of the *idée reçue* that the traditional novel affords a significant emotional experience, we need look no further than the critical literature on *Slow Man*. Indeed, it is remarkable to what extent the criticism on the novel has combined the observation that Coetzee's late fiction fails to generate a meaningful emotional experience with the notion that these works are somehow not full-fledged novels (Bewes 150). Paul Rayment has been called "obdurately unnovelistic or unnovelizable" (McDonald 493), and this is often felt to motivate the unceremonious introduction of Elizabeth Costello in *Slow Man*'s thirteenth chapter: Gareth Cornwell writes that Costello intervenes because Paul "has simply not turned out to be as interesting or promising a subject for novelistic treatment as his creator would have liked" (100); according to Zoë Wicomb, Costello is introduced to "move on a story that threatens either to go in an unsuitable direction or to grind to a halt" (219). Barbara Dancygier, for her part, links her observation that Costello is introduced in order to "prompt Paul into a narratologically useful direction" (244) to the novel's seeming lack of emotional effect: "*Slow Man* is not as complex as other works by Coetzee, and the impact on the reader seems less daring. . . [Paul] leaves the rest of the story wanting in the power to reach our deepest selves" (245). Kenneth C. Pellow echoes this assessment when he notes that *Slow Man* is "a novel notably short on anything like pathos, and Rayment, often stoic, sometimes bathetic, evokes but little emotion in us—or in himself" (550). The novel form seems to be intricately connected to a significant emotional experience, and as *Slow Man* fails to deliver such an experience, it proves hard to even consider it as a novel.

<sup>2</sup> See the chapter on *Slow Man* in De Boever for a reading of the novel as a novel of care.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Brooks has influentially theorized 'desire' as a device that both propels narrative forward and engages the reader: "Narratives both tell of desire—typically present some story of desire—and arouse and make use of desire as dynamic of signification" (37).

<sup>4</sup> See Danta, "Janus Face" xix for a congenial reading of this scene as a moment of exposure where the conventions of fiction are turned inside out, and where the reader finds herself "pinioned between reality and its metamorphic shadow" (xix). While Danta's main concern is Coetzee's intervention in the ontology of literature, the shift from *Disgrace* to *Slow Man* makes clear that Coetzee is specifically concerned with the unraveling of the novel form. In this space, Paul's desire is no longer wedded to familiar narrative templates that prescribe an empathic response, but is rather exposed in a way that demands a less codified readerly involvement.

<sup>5</sup> This observation that it is vital to understand Coetzee's relation to this tradition for a proper understanding of his work has been a commonplace in Coetzee studies at the latest since the publication of *Foe*. In recent Coetzee criticism, his relation to the novel tradition has become a key topic. For this emerging critical tendency, see especially De Boever, Hayes, Ogden, McDonald, and Mukherjee.

<sup>6</sup> Alyda Faber has already noted the affinities between Coetzee's ethical sensibility and Santner's work, especially the "poetics of exposure" Santner develops in his book on Benjamin, Rilke, and Sebald. For a concise statement of these affinities, see Faber 303-04. A recent volume of essays on Coetzee locates "a form of controlled exposure" at the heart of Coetzee's practice. The editors note that Coetzee engages in an "explicit deconstruction of the traditional limits of human life." This essay emphasizes the extent to which these traditional limits were historically constructed by the novel genre, and how Coetzee's exposure of these limits operates by directly confronting the novel form. The introduction to the volume notes that Coetzee's "scrupulous eschewal of authority" is especially acute when he mercilessly "pillor[ies] his characters" (Danta, "Janus Face" xii, xvi)—when he, on my terms, exposes them as abandoned creatures. See Klopfer and Nethersole for extensive discussions of the postscript to *Elizabeth Costello*.

<sup>7</sup> The emphasis on creaturely life makes it possible to understand the close connection between the remarkable attention to the divine in Coetzee's late fiction, on the one hand, and the increasingly explicit exploration of the affinities between human and animal life on the other. The challenge of mapping the relations between humans, animals, and gods in Coetzee was formulated by Moses Valdez; see also Danta, "Melancholy Ape" 128-29.

<sup>8</sup> The pun on 'flesh' and 'flash' returns later in the novel: "That is how it happens. In a flash, in a flesh. If there were any clouds, they have fled" (174). The connection between the "flash" and "the clouds" recalls the crossing of the Alps in the sixth book of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. In this

canonical scene, the imagination transcends nature and rises up “Like an unfathered vapour,” “in such strength / Of usurpation, when the light of sense / Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed / The invisible world” (VI 594-601). This is not a random reference: it is the very passage that David Lurie teaches near the beginning of *Disgrace*, where he mobilizes it as a covered defense for his affair with one of his students in the name of desire. The word “flash” recurs at important moments in *Disgrace*, and, as in the Wordsworth passage, it is generally connected to a weightless moment of (wishful) transcendence over material resistance (see, for instance, 13, 21). That *Slow Man* fills in the afterlife of this idea of the “flash” by linking it to the “flesh” supports the thesis I developed earlier about the relation between *Disgrace* and Coetzee’s later “biologico-literary experiment[s].”

<sup>9</sup> It is significant that Lukács’s book and Hofmannsthal’s *Letter* were written little over a decade apart in the same cultural realm. Their attempts to cope with the inaccessibility of a blissful state in which “the spiritual and physical worlds seemed to form no contrast” (Hofmannsthal 71-72) respond to the particular intensity with which the question of modernity asserted itself in German-speaking Europe around the time of World War I. Coetzee’s explicit engagement with Hofmannsthal in *Elizabeth Costello* makes Lukács’s work a relevant reference point for his meditation on the historical fate of the novel.

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