How to "rise above mere nationality": Coetzee's Novels *Youth* and *Slow Man* in the World Republic of Letters

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J. M. Coetzee's work presents critical reflections on literature that circulate beyond their culture of origin. Roughly coinciding with the publication of Coetzee's novel *Youth* in 2001, Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur,* introduced in 1827 (Eckermann 198), reentered the literary scene, demanding new approaches and definitions for the circulation of literature in a global sphere.[1] In this article, I read *Youth* and *Slow Man,* published in 2005, as works engaged in a dialogue with literary criticism of world literature. This dialogue highlights Coetzee's reflections on national identity within the novels. Moreover, it reflects back on literary theory, and contributes to our understanding of certain Eurocentric tendencies within these recent theoretical developments.

Of the many critics who have commented on the relationship between Coetzee's literature and his politics, one of the more intriguing is Sarah Brouillette. In her study *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*, she appropriates Pierre Bourdieu's insight that all authors produce literature that integrates and responds to their experiences of being authors in a market, in order specifically to explore the dynamics between the postcolonial author and the literary field. The author's life and "each moment in an author's marketing" (2) become key constraints and become part of what she—following Gerard Genette—calls "the paratext" for the subsequent reception of the author's works. She argues that, for the postcolonial author, the author's anxiety towards the market appears in the form of an uneasy relation with the diverse audiences of

her works, as well as in the multiple ways the politics of her country, pinned by her nationality or ethnicity, will be interpreted by her readers. Brouillette's conflation of "the postcolonial author" (8-9) with "the internationally distributed and widely read non-Western author" (112-43) is not unproblematic. But if we leave that aside and redefine her concept accordingly, her theorizations do pinpoint a variety of the anxiety towards the market, or the idea of the market, which she is right to associate with Coetzee.

Brouillette curiously leaves out *Boyhood, Youth* and *Slow Man* from her investigation of Coetzee's post-apartheid work. In the following I will present a reading of *Youth* that sheds light upon the strategies at work in the novel *Slow Man*, as there are relations between these novels that have so far largely been ignored. A probable reason for this is that the protagonists in each have been introduced in other, earlier, novels. *Youth* is the sequel to the memoir-novel *Boyhood* (1997), while the re-emergence of the character Elizabeth Costello in *Slow Man* activates a strong intertextual relationship first and foremost with *Elizabeth Costello*. But both *Youth* and *Slow Man* explore the themes of migration, transnationalism, and authorship and challenge the notion of the national as a fixed and valuable category. Acknowledging the connections between the works makes us aware of a development in Coetzee's fiction of the twenty-first century in which the author's work seems insistent on constructing a literary world peculiar to the name J. M. Coetzee. The many intertextual traces of Coetzee's earlier novels in his more recent ones, create, I suggest, a paratext for his readers to judge his work by, to rival the paratext of nationality—South Africanness—which has until this moment been the most influential way of reading and evaluating Coetzee's novels.

The epigraph of *Youth* marks it as a novel concerned with world literature. A quote of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe introduces the novel in one of Coetzee's rare epigraphs, emphasizing the importance of traveling to reading: "Wer den Dichter will verstehen / Muss in Dichters Lande gehen" (Who wants to understand the poet / must go to the poet's land). This quote is from Goethe's opening of *Noten und Abhandlungen zu Besseren Verstandnis zu West-Östlichen Divan*, 1819 (219). Ironically, in this cycle of poems, Goethe takes the Orient as his subject but relies upon second-hand experience from accounts in Parisian libraries (Said 19). The ironies of why a writer goes abroad, to know oneself or to know the other, and of what literature and foreign lands and libraries can teach

us about other places are all at play in *Youth*'s epigraph. As we are about to embark on a story of "youth" and a young man's journey from home, the quote also points us towards the genre of the bildungsroman, which is equally associated with Goethe. Yet we are soon to discover that *Youth* is not a conventional bildungsroman. The novel's somewhat awkward narrative motor is *a writer's block* or a budding writer's *reflections* on his writer's block, moving the plot by creating suspense. This writer's block is intimately connected with certain ideas of world literature, as we shall see.

The last decade has seen a renewed interest in "world literature." What the notion of world literature demands of us is first and foremost to evaluate *how we map* and how we conceptualize literature beyond national borders. A thinker to whom Brouillette is indebted is Pascale Casanova, and I think Casanova's work illuminates the exploration of world literature that takes place in *Youth* and *Slow Man*. I will soon present the main lines of her theory. I do not, however, concur with Brouillette in her unquestioning admiration of Casanova. In her ambitious work, *The World Republic of Letters*, published in French in 1999 and translated into English in 2004, Casanova approaches the subject of world literature from a Bourdieuan perspective to describe why equal access to world literature does not exist. While there are distinct problems in Casanova's account, it nonetheless coheres with such reflections of world literature as are inscribed in *Youth*, in the sense that it illuminates the significance of the metropole and European literature in John's mapping of literature.

In her global literary study, Casanova defines the workings of world literature from the 1550s until today. Her two goals are, first, to present a historical account of the global developments of literature, and second, to describe the general laws that rule world literature. Building on Paul Valéry and Pierre Bourdieu, she speaks of the world republic of literature as an autonomous field; she also refers to Ezra Pound's ideas of literary credit (16-17). Describing the field involves a blend of military and economic jargon; world literature constitutes a battlefield where writers and literature strive for recognition and gain or lose credit. Importantly, Casanova's system of world literature relies on a spatial and temporal center-versus-periphery template. Literary "wealth" depends on the national literature's age and on a literary milieu (14-15). The literary center of Casanova's system is made up of those literary societies that are simultaneously the oldest (classic) and the most up-to-date (modern), which are measured according to her eloquently named index, the "Greenwich

Meridian of literature" (87-91). From these measurements, the center of the literary world emerges as Europe, specifically Paris and, to a lesser degree, London.

Although Casanova attempts to describe how Eurocentrism came to operate in the world of letters, taking the development of European (or French) literature as her template, her system nevertheless *performs* the trend she seeks to describe. As Paris is the critic's hometown and French literature her main horizon, the center-periphery model she develops maintains a strong self/other bias.[2] It follows from Casanova's theory of the autonomous field that the more central a literary place is, the more autonomous this place will be, and it will attract writers from "provincial" countries in the "periphery" (109-110). The number of visitors confirms a place's centrality, just as the number of people speaking a language indicates the language's centrality. The process by which provincial literatures are "consecrated" takes place in the center, with its "autonomous critics" (127). In the process of "literarization" (136) the consecrated literature loses its national signs and becomes universal. "Literarization" is defined as "any operation . . . by means of which a text from a literarily deprived country comes to be regarded as literary by the legitimate authorities" operating in the center.

Casanova's task is huge and her work is impressive. It must be noted that her heroes are not Parisians, but the peripheral authors who manage to change the center's conception of literature. But even though the model is assumed to be dynamic and to allow for shifts, the center-periphery emphasis makes the center extremely small and unitary and the system surprisingly static; Paris unquestionably takes center stage for all world literary relations and activities from the 1550s up to the 1960s. The nation theme, moreover, occupies a difficult position in the model: the importance of the national theme is a measure of a literature's provinciality or centrality, as the more national a literary theme is, the less universal it is.[3] Furthermore, languages are always national and come with different values, which in turn determine the value of literature.[4] But the national theme seems impossible for provincial literature to escape, since such literature is per definition not autonomous, a quality that again hinges on literature being old and modern only in France; there is circularity in Casanova's reasoning, which reserves literary wealth and universal value for Europeans.[5] Male authors are played up, and while certain "peripheral" relations are highlighted, others go unnoticed. It follows that Casanova's

theory leaves room for both feminist and postcolonial interrogations of her criteria and for suggestions of alternative centers and relations.

The semi-autobiographical *Youth* is a novel that reflects upon the issues of world literature with reference to the cultivations of artistic sensitivities in a young, white and English-speaking South African man in the early 1960s. Book historian Andrew van der Vlies asserts that "more than almost any other 'South African'—or South African by birth—writer, Coetzee has repeatedly and self-consciously put under erasure the category of national literature" (135). When Coetzee first describes John's attempts to enter the world of literature as a writer, he depicts a writer who has internalized the kind of worldview that Casanova's description implies. John places national literatures in a hierarchy, where "of all nations the Dutch are the dullest, the most antipoetic" (77) and "civilization since the eighteenth century has been an Anglo-French affair" (25). In Cape Town, John senses his distance from the Greenwich Meridian of literature and will therefore read all there is to read before going overseas "so that he will not arrive in Europe a provincial bumpkin."

Coetzee shows how language is a question of class, not only of a certain centrality. The central position of the French in John's mental literary map means he would have preferred going to Paris, not London, but there are certain limitations for this choice, since to live in Paris one must have gone to the kind of upper-class school that teaches French. As for Vienna, Vienna is for Jews coming back to reclaim birthright: logical positivism, twelve-tone music, psychoanalysis. That leaves London, where South Africans do not need to carry papers and where people speak English (41). Coetzee introduces class, colonialism, and international and national politics (in the reference to carrying papers), causing migration to the imperial centers. In *Youth,* the dissemination of the English language through British imperialism and colonial traveling might be seen as reasons for the decreased value of Paris as a literary center that Casanova notes as taking place from the 1960s onwards.

As for South Africa, its literature is virtually non-existent on John's mental map; it is not mentioned as an entity or by reference to a single South African author until John reads British writing *on* South Africa in the British Museum's Reading Room (136). John readily acknowledges South Africa's relation to literature as "different" compared to the metropole: "This country, this city, are by now wrapped in centuries of words. . . .South Africa is different. Were it not for this handful of books,

he could not be sure he had not dreamed up the Karoo yesterday" (137). John's ignorance of South African literature mirrors the imperial relations surrounding South African literature in English in the 1950s. Van der Vlies depicts the relationship between South African and British textual productions as one in which the book "has been central to processes by which South Africa has always defined itself in relation to an elsewhere" (2). South African literature was often also received as a branch of English literature.[6] South African writers were denationalized and counted as British. The Romantic *volk*-language-literature trinity was hence rejected not by stressing the local nature of the South African English language, but by appropriating South African writing into the English fold. It is thus in accordance with the prevailing sentiments of his time when John balks at writing South African literature. As he has access to the (inter)national language of English, the problem of translation facing other budding authors from the "periphery" is seemingly reduced to curbing the influence of his Afrikaans language. But the question is if John is able to assert himself in London as a writer on the premises of his literary map. John ponders:

> He would prefer to leave his South African self behind as he has left South Africa itself behind. South Africa was a bad start, a handicap. An undistinguished, rural family, bad schooling, the Afrikaans language: from each of these component handicaps he has, more or less, escaped. (62)

The problem is related to that of choosing the right settings; John finds to his dismay that South Africa imposes itself on him when he is writing, as he is unable to write prose that is set elsewhere than South Africa. Assuming that English readers will not understand his stories, John searches for authors who, like Henry James, can teach him how to "rise above mere nationality" (64).[7] He does not follow James in relying only on the characters' "supersubtle conversations and words whose effect is to bring about tiny shifts of power" so when "enough shifts have taken place, the balance of power between the personages of a story is (Voilà!) revealed and the story can end," but still attempts to assimilate into the English literature by composing Jamesian prose. This attempt fails, however.

John's reasons for wanting to shed the burden of South Africanness are manifold. Among them is the pariah status he discovers white South Africans have in London where speaking Afrikaans "is like speaking Nazi, if there were such a language" (127). The literary center might be more

autonomous than the periphery, yet it is certainly not apolitical in the experience of its immigrants. The effect of cutting himself loose from South Africa is painful:

> South Africa is a wound within him. How much longer before the wound stops bleeding? How much longer will he have to grit his teeth and endure before he is able to say, "Once upon a time I used to live in South Africa but now I live in England?" (116)

Through John's fear of writing, and through these images of blood and exile, Coetzee presents John's South Africanness as a constant source of melancholy, and something he must endure.

Youth contains very few truly happy moments. The ones that do occur, therefore, stand out. There is one such moment in London that is marked out as a "signal event" (117). This moment follows John's reflections on South Africa as a "wound within him." John's writer's block has itself begun to feel like a great shame, as his initial plan of becoming a successful metropolitan writer is not working, and the social and individual progress of his bildung is not bearing fruit. Going to Hampstead Heath on Sundays is a relief. There "the air is gently warm," John finds "peace and contentment," and he is led to reflect on his reading of English literature: "He used to be impatient of poems about budding flowers and zephyrous breezes. Now, in the land where those poems were written, he begins to understand how deep gladness can run at the return of the sun." Then, on a particular Sunday, lying in the grass, John experiences a moment when the whole universe comes together:

> It is a state he has not known before: in his very blood he seems to feel the steady wheeling of the earth. . . . His heart swells. At last! he thinks. At last it has come, the moment of ecstatic unity with the All!. . . . It lasts no more than seconds in clock time, this signal event. But when he gets up and dusts off his jacket, he is refreshed, renewed. He journeyed to the great dark city to be tested and transformed, and here, on this patch of green under the mild spring sun, word of his progress has, surprisingly, come. If he has not utterly been transfigured, then at least he has been blessed with a hint that he belongs on this earth. (117)

Since Coetzee places the "signal event" after John's reflection on English literature, I suggest we read this notion of oneness "with the All" in con-

junction with the thematic structure of *Youth,* and its emphasis on South Africanness, Englishness and literature. We see how in London, English poetry acquires new meaning for John. The contrasting climates and flora of Cape Town evoke different meanings of poetry in the sense that whatever can be taken for granted varies. Implicit in the scene is the value of *experience* to reading, and John's insights echo the omitted part of Goethe's poem in the epigraph: understanding poetry on and from England necessitates going to England. But moreover, *Youth* presents a critique of Eurocentric world literature from the position of the colonized subject, as Coetzee subverts Casanova's claim that the more "autonomous" the literary field is from politics, the less "national" and the more "universal" its themes will be. Even the qualities of canonized literature from the center are in fact quite local; read in the periphery, the "universal" literature's local nature becomes clear, the poetry itself seems flawed, and its exoticism surfaces. While Casanova's theory acknowledges the ethnocentric forces operating in the literary tastes of France and England (154–55), she never takes into account how the reverse process might also be true, as readers in the periphery center on their own experiences when reading.

This first epiphany signals John's acknowledgment of himself as a South African in England, for the first time seeing that he is in this world on the same level as anyone else. This recognition marks a departure from the center-periphery model of John's mapping of world literature, and constitutes a moment where John is able to join his Africanness with a sense of literary and cosmopolitan belonging. John has journeyed "to the great city to be tested and transformed," and this moment reveals his success in passing the test. The test was not to blend in as an Englishman, after all, but perhaps, to acknowledge the "provinciality" of England and accept the authority of his own experiences. The scene promises that there is a potential for development in John's relation to his origins. The next scene of epiphany deepens this theme, when the earlier colonial writing of South Africa functions as a motivation for John's own writing.

Casanova pinpoints the process of "consecration" (126-33) in the center as presenting the writer with a dilemma: to be valued, the provincial literature must be either viewed as more universal than local, risking loss of its genuine character, or as more exotic than the national, thus risking loss of its individuality. The second turning point in *Youth*

points towards the same problem, but here the marginal position also suggests some positive possibilities for the author in question. John's initial struggle to become an author was by way of assimilation, which led to his writer's block. When he finally seems truly inspired, Coetzee pictures this happening in "the library that defines all libraries" (139) the British Museum's Reading Room, where John reads William Burchell's *Travels to the Interior of Southern Africa,* published in two volumes in 1822 and 1824. Although the setting may suggest that true literary inspiration takes place in the center of metropolitan literary cultures, John's epiphany is that his notion of South Africa as literarily deprived does not count as a handicap, but provides him with the unique vision he has been searching for and a motivation for writing. While he has followed Goethe's call to go to the country of his idols as a reader and as a writer, literature comes from his own environment.

Furthermore, reading the travelogues is presented as a "luxury" (136) and an acknowledgment of the value of rare publications, as they are "to be found only in great libraries, memoirs of visitors to the Cape like Dapper and Kolbe and Sparrman and Barrow and Burchell, published in Holland or Germany or England two centuries ago" (137). Only libraries in the center, that is, hold these volumes. The South African textual culture found in the library is different from the European one in that its product has been published, written and collected by foreigners. But the small number of texts produced on the Cape does not suggest a lack of culture in South Africa, but rather its colonial relation to England, and how both countries' literature is still *mutually embedded* in these structures. Going through the scarce number of foreign works in British libraries in the nineteenth century, Franco Moretti explains how "narrative England becomes an island," singling out the late 1820s as a crucial phase for the disappearance of foreign literature in the British market (151–58). The rare texts are not evidence of a lack of culture in the "peripheral" spaces, or rather, not only there, but also in the "central" spaces.

John's second epiphany reveals that viewing and writing South Africa from Europe confirms only European worldviews; hence these texts are *lacking* in authority. His strategy will be to rewrite the imperial vision that sees the Karoo "write a book as convincingly as Burchell's and lodge it in this library that defines all libraries. . . . The difficult part will be to give to the whole the aura that will get it onto the shelves and thus into the history of the world: the aura of truth" (138). John will make his texts *pass*

as historical or classical to gain recognition. In this crucial scene of *Youth*, Coetzee describes how John, by a fictional travelogue set in Goethe's time, wants to achieve several goals at once: to enlighten the Library, update the archive of South African texts from the periphery, and change the existing stories of history. Through his vision of placing his books on the shelves of the British Museum, John claims his part of the world republic of literature by asserting his right to be read in the center *on his own terms*, signaling a new time for world literature.

Moreover, John in London, like John in Cape Town, disregards the foreigner's vision of South Africa, and the foreigner's ability to tell and receive South African stories:

> The challenge he faces is a purely literary one: to write a book whose horizon of knowledge will be that of Burchell's time, the 1820s, yet whose response to the world around it will be alive in a way that Burchell, despite his energy and intelligence and curiosity and sang-froid, could not be because he was an Englishman in a foreign country, his mind half occupied with Pembrokeshire and the sisters he had left behind. (138)

Here, finally, John's split South Africanness, his roots in Englishness—if not in British ancestors—and his rootedness in the landscape Burchell describes, with its stories, work to his advantage. His background might help to give life to his work so it responds to "the world around it" whether that means South Africans *and/or* readers in the British Library. Moving back in history to the obscure genre of the travelogue for his theme seems to liberate John's ideas of writing from the fear of emotion otherwise attached to writing poetry.

Emphasis is placed on this moment as one of consequence for the reading of South Africa's textual culture. In it, Eliot and Pound's guidance gives way to something new: "Burchell may not be a master like Flaubert or James, but what Burchell writes really happened" (137). Struck by the reality effect of William Burchell, the sense that something "really" happens also seems anchored in the genre and the names that exist on the page and in being the sole witness to the non-fictional status of the object:

> It gives him an eerie feeling to sit in London reading about streets—Walstraat, Buitengracht, Buitencingel—along which he alone, of all the people around him with their heads buried

> in their books, has walked . . . Zwartberg, Leeuwrivier, Dwyka: it is his country, the country of his heart, that he is reading about. (137)

Again, revaluing his own experiences is the crux; while the people around him are mere readers, John is deeply connected to the places the names refer to.

Although Burchell's stories cannot be taken as "truth," they do contribute to a discourse that John, in his exile, *recognizes*. As a form of literary art that is neither classic nor high literature, the travelogues are nevertheless a source of inspiration, and hence mark a shift away from the rigid classification of poetry as the master art. The ironies of Goethe's poem in the epigraph are subtly mirrored in this scene. The colonial structures, however, shift this mirror image. While Goethe used the metropolitan library to write about the Orient, John Coetzee needs the mother country's library to discover writing about his homeland. John's eureka moment is, therefore, a *reclaiming* of his national past in discourse, taking it back from the imperial eye and replacing this vision with his native look. If treated correctly, his text might come "alive" with the ability to communicate in the present. John will also need to forget his initial mapping of the world of literature to be able to assert himself as a South African author writing in English. This act of claiming substitutes for what was earlier sought as passing. Overall, then, *Youth* anticipates a moment that is still to come within the story, the coming of *postcolonialism*, and a time when the Empire writes back.

Youth is a novel where Coetzee challenges the Eurocentrism of world literature, a novel of a man who nearly vanishes in his attempts to assimilate into Englishness and English literature, and a novel that rejects the exotic nature of African literature. What is exotic is always an outsider's judgment, a judgment that has a historical legacy. According to literary critic Derek Attridge, South Africa is not only a peripheral place, but one with "a notorious centrality in the contemporary political and ethical imagination" (71) as is also experienced by John in London. Coetzee has regularly objected to being placed in a category of the "South African author," a category that presupposes a certain kind of writing and literary and ethical standards (Morphet 450).

Two years before Coetzee published *Slow Man,* he received what Casanova calls "the greatest proof of literary consecration, bordering on the definition of the literary art itself" (147). In the Nobel Academy's speech,

Per Wästberg underlined Coetzee's then current emigration, and stated, rather bombastically, "In your own life, you have recently moved along the very latitude that unites Cape Town and Adelaide. You may have left South Africa; it will hardly leave you." He then underlined that this was not conceived as a handicap for the Swedish Academy: "For the Swedish Academy, national roots are irrelevant and we do not recognize what in Europe is often called the literary periphery," and hence paradoxically (and clearly, unintentionally) came to stress Coetzee's position in a South African category, as well as the South African as a peripheral position. In *Slow Man,* we shall see how Coetzee reargues these relations so that these kinds of inversions also fail.

After Coetzee's emigration to Australia, he favored Australian settings with the recent exception of *Summertime,* published in 2009. When looking for national themes in *Slow Man*, what emerges is the rather vague point of Casanova's measure; what will a national theme look like? There are no references to Africa in *Slow Man,* except for the mentioning of a giraffe and an allusion to Mandela, while Australian history is a main subject. Is Coetzee, as John, choosing the strategy of assimilation to "leave his South African self behind, as he has left South Africa itself, behind"? In the following, I will propose that we read John's reflections on world literature, nationality and literature in *Youth* as a backdrop to Coetzee's strategies as an author in exile in Australia, as we witness them in *Slow Man*.

During the first chapters of *Slow Man,* the protagonist, while cycling, is hit by a car, and his leg is amputated without his consent. He becomes utterly physically helpless, a situation worsened by his having no family. The lonely immigrant presents us with a similar motif of exile and isolation as in *Youth,* but the aging immigrant is a contrast to John's youth, and Adelaide a contrast to London. John wants to put his literature into the central libraries abroad, rewriting the story of South Africa in Britain. Paul's project is also to update the national records by placing his collection of photographs of immigrants coming to Australia around the time of Goethe and Burchell in the State Library of Adelaide. If John struggles to adapt to London, with its literary iconography fixed centuries ago, Paul recognises the history of his new homeland as in-process, but not as a country with no history. *Slow Man* pictures Australian history as telling of continuous flows of new immigrants who bring with them their national history, cultures and, of course, languages to a multicultural, transnational

country. In both these works of Coetzee, then, the romantic notions of the national is rejected in favor of a view of history of these spaces—South Africa, England and Australia—as *transnational*. In contrast to John, who is never able to move across the "admirable British reserve" (41) and cross the borders established by nationality, or to become friends with the multiple immigrants he encounters (although relations with these are the most friendly relations he has), Paul has found a relation with the *people* of his territory through the shared identity as immigrants. Home is, after all, a "very English concept" (192), he says, while among the French, "to be home is to be among ourselves, among our kind." There is no universal concept that fosters belonging. Paul further unsettles the fixity of group identity markers as nationality and citizenship, by claiming to be "a foreigner by nature" (231).

Into this story of emigration, Coetzee's character Elizabeth Costello ventures as an immigrant of an utterly different kind. Migrating from Coetzee's previous novel *Elizabeth Costello*, 2003, she crosses the borders of this novel and into the next. From then on in the story, the realistic plot is amputated in favor of a meta-perspective, and Coetzee's self-references become one of the main characteristics of *Slow Man*. Her character conjoins the two themes of *Youth*: the theme of emigration and the theme of writing. Again, as in *Youth*, writer's block is a central theme, but this time Elizabeth Costello is the one who suffers from it. She complains that Paul is a passive character, much like John was in *Youth*. We follow an author struggling with his subjects to make a story unfold, a story that resists unfolding. In this new twist of the plot, curiously, Coetzee's self-references become one of the main characteristics. The initial story comes to a halt and by way of the figure of the author, we are invited to imagine the aging author, J. M. Coetzee, grapple with his subject.

Our reading of *Youth* may shed light on what is at stake in *Slow Man*. We recall how John considered the setting a hindrance for his writing, and as he did not want to be associated with South Africanness, his writing stopped. Coetzee in Australia sets out to write an Australian novel—or a novel set in Australia—and seemingly is not so restrained by his former national belonging as John was. Yet, it cannot be ignored that the way in which Coetzee constructs *Slow Man* is in the fashion that young John tried to adapt in London; what John conceptualized as the Jamesian mode. With the intrusion of Costello henceforth, the novel is played out through "supersubtle conversations" between Elizabeth and Paul, as well as various

conversations between John and the various members of the Jokic family. *Slow Man*'s structure thereafter relies on "on conversations and words to reveal and shift the balance of characters until power has changed and the story can end" (64). The question presents itself: has Coetzee chosen this form in order to "rise above mere nationality"?

A prominent feature of Coetzee's work is the metonymic displacements of words and concepts within one novel. But also between the novels, some words tend to be repeated, creating new associations. Paul's cycling accident, his amputated leg and his exile place him in metonymical proximity to the South African John of *Boyhood* and *Youth*: cycling is the favored activity of John, and legs were his redundant fetishism. When living in London, South Africanness felt "like a handicap" (62) and South Africa as "a bleeding wound within him" (116). Exile is hence pictured as akin to an amputation, and perhaps we can link the amputation in *Slow Man* back to the similar motives describing John's experiences in *Youth*. On the other hand, exile and immigration are significant *Australian* national themes; the transnational is a precondition for the national, one could say. Literary scholar Stefan Helgesson sees transnationalism in Southern Africa, but we could also add in many places, including Australia, as "a condition, a predicament of literature . . . not a programme or an ideology. It is a predicament brought about by the cultural economic and political impact of late colonialism and by the migratory potential of the print medium" (1). For literature, this implies, as seen in *Youth*, a wavering between various national languages; literature that is published abroad and hence a break-up of the Hegelian triangle of nation, language, and literature. Furthermore, the transnational structures in the aftermath of colonialism create bonds between former English territories. The axis between South Africa and Australia that is inscribed in Coetzee's work is non-existent in Casanova's center-periphery model, where the center still holds. Coetzee's migration and the text's unsettledness give evidence to alternative routes than the North-South highway, routes all the more evident when the world is viewed from the Southern Hemisphere as opposed to the Northern.

Rather than the Casanovian conception where Paris is the only world center of letters, Coetzee's novel *Slow Man* brings us closer to visions of the national as in the Australian critic Rob Carter's work. The migrant, Carter argues, is not a peripheral figure, but a central personage in the flows of history. Carter presses for a framework that "stresses the

contingency of all definitions of self and other" (48) and proposes that the migrant perspective renders the opposition between here and there in flux. The feeling of disorientation that is prominent for the reader of *Slow Man* hence mirrors a migrant perspective: the reader is transported into a story where the writer and the character, self and other, are unclear, and so is here and there, as the setting is realistically portrayed, yet borders the overtly metafictional. Also, the borders between Coetzee's novels become porous, with characters wandering between them. Coetzee's references to his own work become the means that allow him to loop the reader back to his own writing whenever she wanders astray trying to measure its importance with reference to literary "centrality" in the world of letters, its "national themes," the author's South Africanness or anything beyond the worlds of the novels. By these disorientating strategies, *Slow Man* attempts to move beyond the hindrances and frameworks of national literature.

Coetzee's all-pervading intertextual self-references in *Slow Man* vary from the subtle to the plain. Of particular interest for our investigation of Coetzee's world literature is the rephrasing of ideas of nationality and language. In *Boyhood,* Coetzee writes about John: "though he speaks Afrikaans without an accent, he could not pass for a moment as an Afrikaner" (124). In *Doubling the Point,* the author speaks of himself: "No Afrikaner would consider me an Afrikaner. That, it seems to me, is the acid test for group membership" (341). In *Slow Man,* Paul picks up the tone: "I can pass among Australians, I cannot pass among French. That is, as far as I am concerned, all there is to it, to the national-identity business: where one passes and where one does not" (197). Nationality is performance; it is not a fixed identity secured by a passport, birthplace or a language, but is related to a kind of common knowledge, a *doxa*. National identity may shift, it may be interpreted and misunderstood, and it relies on an "aura of truth" that is close to fiction. If we were looking for signs of how South Africa is inscribed in *Slow Man*, this passage on "passing" seems to relate to the South African historical obsession with racial classification, and in *Slow Man* nationality is often a cause of misunderstandings.[1]

Coetzee's exploration of national belonging in *Slow Man*, and in national literature, centers on the national language. Does Paul's language come from the heart or are his words selected, as Costello claims, "one by one, from the word-box you carry with you, and slotted into place" (230–31). Does language constitute one's home, or does the speaker or writer "use" language to create a home and literature? In *Youth,* John

has "lists of words and phrases he has stored up, mundane or recondite, waiting to find a home for them" (61); his words are homeless, so the work of art will provide them with one. But in *Slow Man,* Paul takes the opposite stance when he says, "Privately I have always felt myself to be a kind of ventriloquist's dummy. It is not I who speak the language, it is the language that is spoken through me" (198). Interestingly, and emphasizing the image of the "ventriloquist's dummy," Paul's voice here doubles back to Coetzee's essay "How I learned of America—and Africa—in Texas" from 1984. Here Coetzee tells the story of how, in a Texan library, he found "himself suspecting that languages spoke people or at the very least spoke through them." This essay actually narrates a very similar story to the epiphany moment of *Youth*: in this Texas library, Coetzee read travel writing of the Karoo of the 1820s and in so doing found inspiration for his debut work. These self-referential intertexts further complicate the game in *Slow Man* of who is speaking for whom. It is no longer going on solely between Elizabeth and Paul, but is also a game played between Coetzee's novel *Slow Man* and Coetzee's earlier texts, revealing close connections between them. Paul's voice continues: "'It does not come from my core, *mon coeur.*' He hesitates, checks himself. *I am hollow at the core* he was about to say—*as I am sure you can hear*" (198). But who is hollow? Paul or Coetzee? Has Coetzee, in his transnational, post-emigration works, created his own universe? Does *Slow Man* prove that "each man is an island," as John set out to prove, and does the author, when rising above nationality, become as lonely and isolated as a piece of work where sentences have words "slotted into place"?

If we turn from this maze of Coetzee references to theories of world literature, David Damrosch's essay "World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonnical Age" (2006) may be instructive. Damrosch has pointed out that when non-Western works are being included in the canon, these works do not replace the existent high canon. On the contrary, the centrality of the high canon is rather confirmed, creating a "hyper-canon" of the classics. If we look at Coetzee's work as reflecting upon world literature, we see that his works have often worked to confirm the high canon. *Foe*, 1986, confirms Daniel Defoe's central position, and *Master of Petersburg*, 1995, Fyodor Dostoevsky's. In *Slow Man*, however, at the site where these references are normally found, we now uncover references to the writing of J. M. Coetzee. Through this literary strategy, Coetzee performs the call of his own author-character Elizabeth Costello, saying,

"Live like a hero. That is what the classics teach us. Be a main character. Otherwise what is life for?"(229) Coetzee teaches us "what the classics teach us" and places himself as the "classic" main reference embedded in his works.

The hero of the bildungsroman often comes from the bourgeoisie of culture, but instead of stepping towards the bourgeoisie of property, he heads towards an aristocratic universe with which he feels a far deeper kinship (Moretti ix). The bildung the character John Coetzee sets out to get in *Youth* is not obtained within the novel but it has been obtained by the authoring figure writing *Slow Man*. At the time of writing this novel, Coetzee has completed the project John set out to prove in *Youth*. He is a world-famous author, he has been consecrated in the center, and he is writing himself into the position as a classical author. His books are found in libraries all over the world, and with his first novel after the Nobel Prize, it seems Coetzee takes the opportunity to place his texts firmly at the center of his world of literature. Perhaps Coetzee's kinship is with his own writing, as a true aristocrat of world literature rising above nationality?

Paradoxically, Coetzee's self-references also complicate such a reading. The "country of his heart" might by a phrase hollow at the core, yet it is also the geographical place Karoo, which Coetzee regularly returns to in his novels. In *Youth*, John constantly links his writing, reading, and being in the world to the theme of South Africanness, and if *Slow Man* contains supersubtle conversations and references to J. M. Coetzee, the subject of these is the value of national origins and of migration. In the works through which the author John Coetzee develops his career, there will remain an ambiguous attitude towards the South African setting. The landscapes of Coetzee's novels are as often to be identified with the world of literature as with the country of his heart. His words (homeless?) are as often as not traveling to settings found in literary works, and to places distant from his homeland. Coetzee's writing in this sense presents a "migrant perspective that renders here and there in flux," as Carter would say, a perspective that blurs any line between the value of the classic and national, as well as the central and the peripheral. Rather, Coetzee's writing produces a place that is at the same time infused by the national and local, and truly belongs to its own realm of the literary.

This returns us to the quote from Goethe that makes up *Youth*'s epigraph, "the one who will understand the poet, needs to go to the poet's

land." Omitted from the epigraph are the two verses before Coetzee's quotation. The verse starts, thus: "Wer das Dichten will verstehen / Muss ins lands der Dichtung gehen." To understand the poet you must go to his land, but to understand *the text* you need to go to the land of poetry. Read together, *Youth* and *Slow Man* invite the reader to a land of overlaps between literary and national origins for Coetzee's writing. Whether Coetzee's nationality may be regarded as a handicap (as proposed by John and Casanova) or not (as proposed by the Swedish Academy), contestations about the nationality or centrality of his works become irrelevant, as the totality of his oeuvre becomes the yardstick and measure for his novels. The anxiety of nationhood that I introduced as detectable in Coetzee's work has become a main theme of an unflinching author who readily explores the significance of nationhood, diaspora, and writing. In so doing, the "national identity business," where nationality enters an economy of credit and value, is severely challenged. Hence, Coetzee does *and* does not "rise above mere nationality." What he accomplishes is to carve out a space for writing that is national, transnational, literary—and uniquely Coetzeean.

Notes

1. See the monographs adressing world literature published by Moretti, Casanova, Damrosch, and Thomsen, and Christopher Prendergast's anthology *Debating World Literature*.

2. Casanova recognizes this danger: "My reason for noting so many expressions of admiration for Paris has nothing to do with ethnocentrism, much less some form of nationalist pride; to the contrary, I was obliged to acknowledge their force—much to my surprise, and against my will in fact—in trying to account for the effects of the prestige attaching to Paris" (33–34).

3. "Within deprived spaces, writers are condemned, in effect, to develop a national and popular theme: they must defend and illustrate national history and controversies, if only by criticizing them." Still, the "importance of the national and popular theme in a nation's literary production is surely the best measure of the degree of political dependence of a literary space" (Casanova 191).

4. The "literary capital is inherently national. Through its essential link with langue—itself always national, since invariably appropriated by national authorities as a symbol of identity—literary heritage is a matter of foremost national interest" (Casanova 34).

5. Barbara Herrnstein Smith's warning seems apt here: the imperial self's "system of self-securing," she says, is not necessarily "'corrected' by cosmopolitanism. Rather, in enlarging its view . . . it may become all the more imperialistic, seeing in every horizon of difference new peripheries of its own centrality, new pathologies through which its own normality may be defined and must be asserted" (55).

6. John Lehmann, editor of *London Magazine,* wrote in 1957 that one should judge South African literature "more as if South Africa was part of Britain as the South States of America are part of the USA, than a separate country of colonists from Europe who have grown from nationhood" (van der Vlies 3).

7. Henry James writes as if the mundane—paying the rent, holding down jobs—were not a part of his characters' lives, says Coetzee in *Youth*. *Youth,* in contrast, is largely occupied with such mundane realities, ironically rejecting the Jamesian poetics and adding value to the marginal colonial's experiences of daily life.

8. Upon a return to France during his youth, the French called Paul "*l'Anglais*": "It came as a shock, the first time I heard it, as I had no ties to England, had never even been there. But Australia was beyond their ken. In their eyes Australians were simply Englishmen, mackintoshes and boiled cabbages and all, transplanted to the end of the earth, scratching a living among the *kangaroos*" (196).

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