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# *Slow Man* and the Real: A Lesson in Reading and Writing

**Zoë Wicomb**

## Summary

This article addresses the problems of reading *Slow Man* (Coetzee 2005) through tracking its engagement with various levels of the real as well as its representation of the complex relationship between author, narrator and character. The real difficulty that besets the writer trying to produce a story from an inchoate idea is explored through the concept of substitution, one of the hermeneutic keys that structure the novel. Thus I examine the continuous slippage between the “real” and representation. The novel’s turning of itself inside out is read, like Rachel Whiteread’s sculpture, “House”, as an absence-as-presence that also points to its overt engagement with photography.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel spreek die probleme aan wat *Slow Man* (Coetzee 2005) die leser bied deur sy verbintenis met verskillende vlakke van die werklike en deur die voorstelling van die ingewikkelde verband tussen outeur, verteller en karakter na te spoor. Die eintlike probleem waarmee die skrywer te doen kry wat ’n storie uit ’n onontwikkelde idee wil skep, word ondersoek deur middel van die begrip van plaasvervanging, een van die hermeneutiese sleutels wat die roman struktureer. Dus ondersoek ek die voortdurende glyding tussen die “werklike” en voorstelling. Die binnestebuite draaiing van die roman word soos die beeldhouer Rachel Whiteread se “House” gelees as ’n afwesigheid-as-aanwesigheid wat ook sy openlike engagement met fotografie aandui.

In Coetzee’s “As a Woman Grows Older” (2004) Elizabeth Costello questions the point of her life’s work as a writer. Her daughter, Helen, argues that it is of value “not because what you write contains lessons but because it *is* a lesson” (Coetzee 2004: 6) – a pronouncement that I take to assert the heuristic value of reading. *Slow Man*, a novel that makes extraordinary demands on the reader, would seem to offer such a lesson. The text abounds with references to lessons, in which lessons are

ostentatiously delivered by characters, present themselves in the unfolding of events, or are disparaged as in Paul Rayment's dismissal: "[O]ne can torture a lesson out of the most haphazard sequence of events" (Coetzee 2005: 198).<sup>1</sup> This essay, in its attempt to engage with the problem of reading *Slow Man*, suggests that the novel's insistent cross-mixing of reference and phenomenality is a heuristic device for alerting the reader to the complex relations between author, narrator, and character. It is as a lesson in reading, which is to say rereading, that *Slow Man* demands the reader's active tracking of the relationship between representation and the real, or rather, levels of the real, and offers insights into the business of writing.

I start with a moment in the text where the character, Paul Rayment, reads the author-character Costello's notebook and finds in it references to his own thoughts. Thus it would seem that he is not an autonomous subject but rather the product of her imagination. For Paul

the mind threatens to buckle .... Is this what it is like to be translated to what at present he can only call *the other side*? .... There is a second world that exists side by side with the first, unsuspected. One chugs along in the first for a certain length of time; then the angel of death arrives ... one tumbles down a dark hole. Then, hey presto, one emerges into a second world *identical with the first*, where time resumes and the action proceeds – flying through the air like a cat ....

(p. 122)

Paul's experience mirrors that of reading the novel. If the story of a man, who comes through an accident with an amputated leg chugs along according to our expectations of verisimilitude, the entry of Costello would disrupt mimesis, and in its intimations of other levels of reality disorientate the reader. The italics of "identical with the first" not only alert us to the typography, the material aspect of writing, but also to Paul's sensation of "flying through the air like a cat" as a repetition, a representation from the opening paragraph of the novel which we earlier read as a real event of an accident, or rather, the representation of a real event. Thus the reader, like Paul, is cut loose, as another level of reality is established within the fictional work itself. If the first were presented as a world which we as readers enter, then Paul's "reality" would turn out to be that of another world, another level into which he enters through writing.

We should not have been so surprised. Immediately after the accident Paul's emerging consciousness is described in terms of an attempt at writing "[a] letter at a time, *clack clack clack*, a message is being typed on a rose-pink screen that trembles like water each time he blinks ... E-R-T-Y, say the letters, then F-R-I-V-O-L, then a trembling, then E, then Q-W-E-R-T-Y, on

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1. Subsequent references to *Slow Man* will be indicated by page number(s) only.

and on” (p. 3). We witness the physical aspect of writing, the letters arranged on a keyboard from which the writer taps out words. The letters, “E-R-T-Y”, are meaningful, but whilst sounding like a suffix, it is not the correct one, and the word FRIVOL remains incomplete, or followed by an E (*FRIVOLE*), which hints at Paul’s French origins. The letters, “Q-W-E-R-T-Y”, constitute a shift back to the very beginning of the first line and the first consecutive letters of the keyboard, a pronounceable sequence, although arbitrary in terms of meaning. It speaks thus of beginnings, of the raw material of writing, the real thing in the world from which meaning is made, and from Paul’s point of view of the difficulty of coming into being as a character through writing.

The question of whose writing only arises once Costello arrives, and that is when the text demands a rereading, one that points to an ambiguity: the character appears both to be writing himself as well as to be being written. If Paul thinks that the screen is his own inner eyelid, the word “screen” is also an early reference to photography where a screen in the process of picture-making is the surrogate surface for framing and focusing a previewed image. It is that which interposes between the phenomenological subject and its representation, here still trembling in the process of being formed. Rereading also highlights an early comment, easily overlooked, on the text being focalised through a character who is in fact a character in a novel that is necessarily structured by temporality: “From the opening of the chapter, from the incident on Magill Road to the present, he has not behaved well, has not risen to the occasion: that much is clear to him” (pp. 14-15). Much later, when Costello quizzes Paul on how it felt at the time of the accident, she supplies the cliché of death as an apprehension of the whole of your life flashing before you. Paul confirms the experience as a death of sorts: “My life seemed frivolous” (p. 83), he replies. But can we trust the duplicitous author’s declared ignorance of how it felt? Does her question not confirm Paul’s identity as an already-written character?

We are, of course, not unfamiliar with such self-reflexivity. Every schoolgirl understands the mimetic doubling in Ted Hughes’s “The Thought Fox” where the efficacy of the imagination is illustrated in terms of an unambiguous author who is at one with his creation, so that the fox “enters the dark hole of the head” and “the page is printed” (Hughes [1957]1983). There the act of writing is shown to be so complete, the imagination so replete, that the text proclaims a merging of the real and the represented. Paul, however, fails to act and thus to embody characteriness; his story cannot be written, and Coetzee’s wary representation references a subject in the real world that is not yet fully transformed or animated into a character whose actions should drive the story; in other words, the imagination and the writing process are shown to be agonistic. The Paul who rises out of unconsciousness experiences the world as a death – “dead air”; “transported”; “encased in concrete”; “whiteness unrelieved” (p. 3) – and only authorial labour can bring him to life. Elizabeth Costello appears at

both the beginning and end as midwife: “Push!” (pp. 83, 204) she says in this droll representation of the birth of a text that exists at yet another level of reality. Thus she asserts the ambiguities and the lack of clear distinction between their roles. She chides Paul: “Think how well you started. What could be better calculated to engage one’s attention than the incident on Magill Road .... What a sad decline ever since! Slower and slower, till by now you are almost at a halt” (p. 100). Costello, the author, is also both character and midwife who assists in the birth of the text, and Paul, the character, appears at various levels of reality to be pre-authored, expected at some level to be co-author of the text, or to be self-authored, a representation of the way in which a writer finds her character taking on a life of his own, departing from the idea from which he originated.

Italo Calvino’s discussion in “Levels of Reality in Literature” is helpful in making sense of the head-spinning conundrum. He speaks of the “layers of subjectivity and feigning that we can discern underneath the author’s name, and the various ‘I’s that go to make up the ‘I’ who is writing .... The author-cum-character is both something less and something more than the ‘I’ of the individual as an empirical subject” (Calvino 1986: 111). Such unpacking and refraction of authorship is of course already referenced in the hybrid genre of Coetzee’s own *Boyhood* and *Youth* where “confessing in the third person” (Attridge 2004: 138-161) also asserts the author’s fictionality and alludes to the fluid relationship between author and character, which is to say also between author and the empirical world.

In my attempt to reconnect *Slow Man* with things-in-the-world, including texts (for what else can a reader do?), and resorting once again to similitude, that which structures the reading and interpretation of texts, I alight upon another contemporary work that produces a similarly vertiginous experience: Rachel Whiteread’s sculptures, her trademark architectonic cast-objects, like “House” in London. What links their works is the concept of substitution, and I will go on to argue for substitution as a key device in Coetzee’s articulation of the real. In “House” Whiteread substitutes for a real house on the Roman Road in London a casting of its interior, which demands that the viewer reimagine the original, real house from its negative. For the viewer such disclosure of normally concealed space is analogous to Coetzee substituting for a narrative the interior, normally hidden mechanisms and problems of writing a novel. Both works, as I will discuss later, find a common emblem in photography.

The following commentary on Whiteread’s practice precisely captures the experience of reading *Slow Man*. Fiona Bradley, comparing casting with photography, notes that it “combines that which is present with that which is other – the residue of the original which advances and retreats in the mind of the viewer” (1997: 11), a phenomenon also experienced by Paul as he struggles with consciousness, or with being written. Whiteread does not cast objects, but rather the space they occupy, the negative space inside them, so

that the sculptures, occupying different kinds of relationships with the “real” object, also reference different levels of the real.<sup>2</sup> The condition of entropy that according to Paul Rayment rules the world (p. 119) is experienced by the reader of *Slow Man* where Coetzee dramatises the real difficulties that beset the writer trying to produce a story from an initial, inchoate idea. In the process of doing so, the house of fiction, like Whiteread’s architectonic cast object, is turned inside out. Coetzee’s Marianna, the blind woman with whom the blindfolded Paul has sex, wears her dress “inside out, with the dry-cleaning instructions protruding like a bold little flag” (p. 36). This I consider as emblem of *Slow Man* which, staging the writer’s problem of how to proceed with a story and with a character that necessarily arrives inchoate, turns itself inside out, leaving its scaffolding intact and laying bare its own uncertain procedures, its own construction. Thus, like the viewer of Whiteread’s “House” in situ of a thing turned inside out in its casting, the reader of this novel must negotiate between the presence of the given text and absence of a narrative promised at the beginning and expected through the conventions of fiction. The real then is experienced at different levels and from different angles, demanding what Roland Barthes (1975: 61) calls a “cubist reading” of the realistic portrait. Whiteread makes material that normally exists as structured space. If the cast replaces what is lost – for in making the cast of a house, or bed, or bookshelf, she has to destroy the real object – *Slow Man* too trades in flamboyant substitutions, offering dizzying levels of reality for the reader to negotiate. Costello’s entry or eruption into the narrative voids the first level of reality, casting off the stabilising muffler of realism. She comes as a weary deus ex machina who, it turns out, is not up to the job, so that ultimately we are given multiple crossings over and are steered through a continuous slippage between reference and phenomenality. And as Costello’s position in the narrative shifts, fictionality turning inwards asserts itself more emphatically and leaves the reader to orientate him- or herself within the various levels of reality.

The interpretation of signs is of course interwoven with the representation of reality, and in *Slow Man* we do not have to hunt for signs: they are given, but rather than referencing things in the world, they refer to the novel itself. Towards the end of the novel Costello tells Paul: “Your missing leg is just a sign or symbol or symptom, I can never remember which is which, of growing old, old and uninteresting” (p. 229), a dismissal which at a first reading I find reasonable and set aside as unremarkable. Events in the novel

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2. A subsequent Whiteread work, the Holocaust memorial in Vienna’s Judenplatz, is derived from a cast of the interior of a library. The resulting monolithic cube is an impenetrable structure of shelves turned inside out so that the spines of the books face inward, and what is normally concealed on the bookshelf forms the surface of the sculpture. The sculptural conundrum is that of a bookshelf turned inside out, but in terms of a library, the structure is one of outside in, a reversal of “House”.

are after all bracketed by reference to signs. There is the flag of Marianna's dress label at the beginning, and at the end the substitute for a substitute, a recumbent tricycle with orange pennant, or flag, built by the nurse's son, Drago, as substitute for the prosthesis that Paul refuses (p. 255). These signs of signs, literally flagged in the text, would seem to indicate the infinite regress of sign reproducing the object that is represented by the sign. Or so an early reading suggests.

In this story then of Paul Rayment, the amputee who develops a passion for his nurse Marijana, Costello is introduced as an agent to deal with the unsuitability of the passion, and thus to move on a story that threatens either to go in an unsuitable direction or to grind to a halt. Through substituting in loud postcolonial fashion for the discreet author of European realism, Costello throws into question the very nature of mimesis. And one of the hermeneutic keys that are (paradoxically) flagged, is substitution, a concept which structures the novel and at the same time admits to a problem within substitution: Costello herself has to be narrated; as a character who interrupts a narrative, she cannot replace the narrative agent employed by Coetzee, but rather, existing as she does at another level of reality, she is at the same time supplementary, and would seem to illustrate what Derrida discusses as the

internal division within *mimesis*, a self-duplication of repetition itself, *ad infinitum* .... Perhaps, then, there is always more than one kind of *mimesis*; and perhaps it is in the strange mirror that reflects but also displaces and distorts one *mimesis* into the other, as though it were itself destined to mime or mask *itself*, that history – the history of literature – is lodged, along with the whole of its interpretation. Everything would then be played out in the paradoxes of the supplementary double: the paradoxes of something that, added to the simple and the single, replaces and mimes them, both like and unlike ....

(Derrida 1991: 176-177)

I now list some of these substitutions in the novel, in events as well as in their emblems, and attempt to show how they relate to representation, including the connection with language itself, from textuality right down to the level of the symbol, the letter which may or may not be a phoneme.

1. Costello substitutes for an author who must solve the diegetic problems of the story as if they were events in the real world. But why? Readers are after all familiar with “unsuitable passions” and their consequences in fiction; we do not, like the naïve natives in Jane Campion's *The Piano*, lunge at a character on stage to prevent him from chopping off another character's hand (Campion 1993). Yet, here sophisticated readers who according to Paul de Man (1986: 11) would not dream of trying “to grow grapes by the luminosity of the

word ‘day’” are boldly confronted with the slippage between reference and phenomenism as a given. But, in a further resort to similitude, we should also remember wincing as the mute central character in *The Piano* has her fingers chopped off “for real” towards the end of that narrative.

2. The visual relationship between Costello and Coetzee’s names is enigmatic and supports the first substitution; it is also a reminder of the graphic aspect of writing. The crucial role of substitution in making visible similitude in poetic parallelism, where a degree of repetition coexists with difference, is visible here at the level of the letter. The patterning in the following,

C O E I Z EE -  
 C O S T E LL O,

with its repetitions, substitutions and centrally positioned chiasmus (the crossed “Es” and phonic repetition/difference between “S” and “Z”) serves to foreground the author function – as well as what Calvino (1986: 111) calls “the ... successive layers of subjectivity and feigning ... that we can discern underneath the author’s name”. The S/Z axis reminds us of Barthes’s focus on the process of reading and the crucial role assigned to intertextuality in the production of meaning, although chiasmic reversal also cautions against uncritical reading of Barthes. The final or extra “O” then could be read as supplementarity in Costello or as ellipsis in Coetzee, grammatical ellipsis itself being a form of substitution in which an item is replaced by nothing. In discourse analysis lexical substitution and ellipsis assume crucial roles in achieving textual cohesion; it is also worth noting that ellipsis leaves specific structural slots to be filled from elsewhere in a text. The character, Paul, on whose cooperation the author is so abjectly dependent, would seem to be a strong candidate.

3. When Costello arrives and recites/repeats the opening paragraph of the novel – this time in italics – the disruption of mimesis is also achieved through verbal substitution. The lexical item “*tumbles*” (*through the air*) (p. 81) substitutes for “flies” (p. 1) in plain text, and later in the same exchange, in free indirect discourse, Paul offers a further substitution of “[s]oaring through the air” (p. 83). Such minimal substitution indicates repetition with a difference, and italics are repeatedly used in the text to flag supplementarity.



4. Phonology alerts us to the theme of forgery in the homophonic Fauchery photographs. Drago substitutes the digitally doctored photographs for the originals. Specifically, a Jokic grandfather substitutes for one of the Irish/Cornish miners, and Ljuba substitutes for one of the children in front of the settlers' mud and wattle cabin, a scene of poverty that Paul finds particularly poignant. Through substitution Drago inserts the Croatian immigrants into the Australian national memory so that the photograph literally binds the past with the future. I will return to photography as a device in Coetzee's exploration of the real.
  
5. Prosthesis, or the substitution of a real leg for an artificial one, which Rayment refuses, is (like Whiteread's house) present in the story as an absence. Attention is drawn to the word as early as page 7 when Paul discusses it with the doctor: "[p]rosthesis", he says, and then reflects, another difficult word". Prosthesis is also a linguistic term for the addition of a letter or syllable at the beginning of a word to facilitate pronunciation, or for prosodic reasons – a supplementarity that complicates the question of reference in phonology. In addition, linguistic prosthesis is known as, or substitutes for, the word prothesis (ellipsis of the "s"), which has a second meaning that relates directly to *Slow Man* as a display text. Prothesis means setting out in public, and refers to the Eastern Orthodox church where elements of the eucharist are set out at the credence table, where bread and wine substitute for the body and blood of Christ; in other words, where the real is transformed. It is then through language and wordplay that one mimesis is displaced into another, and the doubling effect of substitution serves to highlight ambiguities within the notion of the real. Transformation in the eucharist relies of course on belief, a commodity in the shape of suspension of disbelief that is required for the successful reception of a fictional text. And for the writer, the pursuit of an inchoate idea too is an act of faith: what is required is belief that the surprising or seemingly irrational events or images that arise in the act of writing will eventually link with other elements in a meaningful way.
  
6. Costello's solution to Paul's unsuitable passion is to substitute Marijana with Marianna, the dejected, blind woman. The difference between speech and writing is evoked: the names sound the same so that Costello has to specify – Marianna "with two *ns*" (p. 98), thus drawing our attention to print and representation, rather than to the women of phenomenism. Thus through substitution the text refutes a simple relationship between the thing and its representation: the inchoate Marianna clearly does not occupy the same degree of reality

as the woman she substitutes for. Her shadowy nature, her improbable behaviour, as well as the bizarre blindfolding suggest a character whom the author fails to develop and thus has to abandon; her fictionality is encoded in Paul's first encounter with what he calls "the crone leading the hastily clad princess in an enchanted sleepwalk" (p. 36).

7. The name Marianna recalls substitutions in *Measure for Measure* where Angelo, who substitutes for the Duke, pursues his illicit desire for Isabella. The Duke engineers the substitution of Isabella with the "dejected" Mariana (of one "n"), and the sexual act that takes place in the dark echoes Paul Rayment, blindfolded and manipulated by Costello, having sex with another dejected Marianna whose name with the double "n" points to substitution that is also the supplementary double of mimesis. As the Mari(j)an(n)as displace one mimesis into another, Paul's offer of money to the Jokics is shown to substitute for Angelo's mercy-for-sex. Angelo's callous sexual behaviour is again echoed later in *Slow Man* when Paul confesses that he once took to bed an unattractive employee who had fallen in love with him: "I left a note for her: a time, a place, nothing else. She came, and I took her to bed" (p. 200). Costello, substituting the unattractive "rugby player" for Marijana, is appalled by this story. She asks:

Your rugby player had enough love for two, you say. Do you really think love can be *measured*? That as long as you bring a case of it, the other party is permitted to come empty-handed – empty-handed, empty hearted? Thank you, Marijana, for letting me love you .... Thank you for letting me give you my money. Are you really such a dummy?

(p. 202; my italics)

These variations on the name Mariana illustrate Barthes's point about the proper name acting as a magnetic field for the semes (Barthes 1975: 67), its meanings accrued through a variety of intertexts. Perhaps the most pertinent of these is the echo of the name in Calvino's character, Marana, translator in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. If *Slow Man* does not endorse that text's desire to absorb experience into a totalising concept of language, or its overarching concern with the role of the reader, it nevertheless alludes to the Marana who produces counterfeit texts, substitutes manuscripts, and mixes works and authors. Marana believes that "the author of every book is a fictitious character whom the existent author invents to make him the author of his fictions" (Calvino 1992: 142). The first-person narrator in *If on a Winter's Night*, who could be seen to be identical with Calvino, explains that Marana is interested in him "first, because I am an author who can be

faked; and second, because he thinks I have the gifts necessary to be a great faker, to create perfect apocrypha” (1992: 142). The question of real and fake overtly addressed in *Slow Man* will be discussed later.

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From a postcolonial perspective, intertextuality as a way of reading offers more than an openness of the text and the productive role of the reader; it operates also as a form of substitution aimed at re-presentation. *Slow Man*'s dramatisation of the problem of what to do with characters who arrive inchoate and for whom a history has to be created is also staged via intertexts from the author's own oeuvre – the introduction of textual echoes, images, and repetition of strategies from, for instance, *Foe* and *Elizabeth Costello*.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Rachel Whiteread's analogous sculptures not only revise and re-present buildings or objects, but there is, as Stuart Morgan notes, “a strong sense of interplay between separate sculptures ... a rich dialogue ensues between one piece and the next” (1997: 23). In other words, both artists plunder events and images from their previous works in order to revisit the questions of authorship and the ambiguous relationship between representation and the real.

For *Slow Man* on the whole, the internal, hidden mechanisms of producing a narrative and the research that precedes writing substitute for a narrative. Having turned itself inside out, the novel reveals its halting construction which substitutes for the story and at the same time constitutes the story. Substitution then, is multifunctional: serving the interest of the real, and by definition a version of the original, it is staged in the text at a variety of levels. In its shifting relationship with language and representation, substitution insists on engagement with the real which is, however, shown to be heterogeneous, shifting, elusive and illusionary. Again, Whiteread's house which substitutes for a real house, and which allows for the viewer's *simultaneous* apprehension of both the house of phenomenalism and the not-house work of art is helpful here. The representation is at the same time supplementary; it supervenes upon the real; these works, while insisting upon the real, at the same time do not allow the traditional notion of the real as that which is distinct from and which precedes mimesis. Instead, we see Derrida's paradox of the supplementary double: “something that, added to the simple and single, replaces and mimes them, both like and unlike” (Derrida 1991: 177).

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3. *Elizabeth Costello* was preceded by a real performance in 1996, when Coetzee on invitation by PEN International in London delivered what promised to be a talk on the subject “What is Realism?” On that occasion, Coetzee, the real author/speaker, substituted the genre of the lecture with a story about a fictional Australian writer, Elizabeth Costello, who delivers an acceptance speech on the subject of realism.

If substitution in the above instances points variously to replacement, reversal, ellipsis, trickery, ambiguity, excess, or supplementarity, it is also significantly bound up with transformation. The linguistic shift from prosthesis to prothesis references transformation, instantiated in the first place in the figure and name of Paul Rayment, the boy from Lourdes where miracles of healing are available for believers. His very name, Paul, speaks of the conversion of Saul on the Road to Damascus, and there is the promise of further transformation into a fully fledged character who will transcend the flaws of the gloomy, hesitant and abject amputee. Costello has come to save him from himself, but this amounts to little more than nagging him to act: “this is your story, not mine. The moment you decide to take charge, I will fade away” (p. 100). Her offer of the blind Marianna “is like a sea beating against his skull .... The slap of water that will in time strip his bones of the last sliver of flesh. Pearls of his eyes; coral of his bones” (p. 100). However, the promise of Shakespearean transformation fails as the sexual act amounts to no more than manipulation by Costello who lacks Prospero’s magical omnipotence, and since Paul resists his author, Marianna too cannot be fully animated into a character, so that the event constitutes a dark cul-de-sac in the narrative. But the promise of salvation persists. In Marijana’s last visit as a nurse, Paul laments the fact that he is too *labile* for her taste. That, he says, is the word she is hunting for (p. 210). But *labile* has another meaning: not only liable to lapse (as does Angelo in *Measure for Measure*) but also liable to undergo displacement in position or change in nature and form – another reference perhaps to prothesis and the eucharist table. In other words, Paul is aware of the potential for transformation that coexists with the drive to lapse, its mechanisms achievable within language and representation. And yet, the promise of transformation is not kept: when Paul says goodbye to Costello there is no salvation, no resolution on offer. *Slow Man*, after all, remains a novel about the failure of an author to transform her raw material into a credible work of fiction.

The concept of reality to which every representation necessarily refers is also overtly discussed by the characters. Costello arrives as a doubting Thomas, taking Paul’s hand to establish his and also her own reality. There are numerous occasions when Paul questions reality: “Now let me ask you straight out, Mrs Costello: Are you real?” Her reply, “Of course I am real. As real as you” (p. 233), is within the realm of fiction perfectly acceptable. At the same time it confirms the work as fiction, that which is separated from empirical reality and is commonly discussed in terms of a self-reflecting mirror. Not surprisingly then, the cloth that Paul draped over the mirror in his house has been removed by Costello; this he discovers after she has left when he once again covers the mirror (p. 164). Later he tells Marijana that everyone should be more *labile*: “We should shake ourselves up more often. We should also brace ourselves and take a look in the mirror, even if we dislike what we will see there” (p. 210). In other words, the

reflection is not congruent with what we think of as our “real” selves, thus a lesson inheres in such an act of looking. When Costello repeatedly comments on the Jokics’ house with its Japanese garden, – “So real! ... So authentic! ... Who would have thought it!” (p. 242) – Paul, who exists on a different level of reality, assumes that she is being ironic. For the reader, however, it is surely a reference to the protean nature of representations, the propensity of fiction to slip beyond the author’s control, and to beget further fictions. The Jokics as characters, who arrive via Mrs Putts, that is, not in Costello’s original scheme (p. 99), have unlike Paul taken off, and represent a level of reality at which even the author must marvel. The fiction, turned in upon itself, cannot be cut adrift from referentiality; even the illusionary must refer to the world of things, so that the simulacral nature of a Japanese garden in an Australian suburb does not detract from its reality. Costello’s problem is that she cannot achieve the same level of reality for her character Paul: “‘I stay on’, she says, ‘because I don’t know what to do about you’” (p. 155).

The inherently reproductive nature of fiction is shown to have a number of consequences. The disconcerting level of reality introduced by Costello’s arrival in the text is followed by a further disruption: the character of Drago moves centre stage to oust Costello, who after all has no story to tell other than to lament the impossibility of advancing with Paul’s story. When Paul casts her out, we are also reminded of the first level of mimesis: she is only another fictional character making mischief among characters, rather than omniscient author. She may have arrived with a history for the Jokics, but Miroslav, in telling his history to Paul, adds details that Costello appears not to know. It also transpires that she knows nothing of Paul’s childhood; he had come to her “with no history attached” (p. 195). She is a representation of an unreliable author/character, who, for instance, forgets her own story about sleeping rough. It is clearly the case that the story *does* have reference independent of Elizabeth Costello, and that there is another level of mimesis, although these levels, shifting and sliding as they do into each other, are not stable. The scene by the riverside where she feeds the ducks (an ironic allusion perhaps to The Ugly Duckling’s tale of misrecognition and misreading which passes for a tale of transformation), and where a couple in a swan-shaped pedal boat passes by, offers something of a commentary on the text and its narration. The swan is fake, and although there are indeed “real” people sailing by in a “real” pedal boat of plastic, the spectacle points to the simulacral, so that we question the nature of this reality. In this scene Costello and Rayment’s self-reflexive discussion overtly raises the question of the real. She sketches out the complexity of a phenomenalist position: “[L]et me tell you what you see, or what you tell yourself you are seeing. An old woman by the side of the River Torrens feeding the ducks .... But the reality is more complicated than that, Paul. In reality you see a great deal more – see it and then block it out” (p. 158).

Here levels slide into each other as Costello attributes the text to Paul whom we remember is not only character but also focaliser, the agent who substitutes for the narrator, so that she quotes back at him the opening words of that chapter, “*He finds her by the riverside ...*”, this time represented in italics. In the following, she alludes to a reciprocal relationship between reality and representation; writing does not only imitate, it animates and vitalises the world: “It is not good enough. It does not bring me to life ... it has the drawback of not bringing you to life either. Or the ducks, for that matter, if you prefer not to have me at the centre of the picture. Bring these humble ducks to life and they will bring you to life” (p. 159).

Costello in attributing the text to Paul, suggests that he as focaliser/narrator is another substitute for the author. Calvino’s question: “How much of the ‘I’ who shapes the characters is in fact an ‘I’ who has been shaped by the characters?” (1986: 113) is pertinent. Costello herself has not produced any of the text we read; like all the other characters she too has to be animated through the fiction, and as representation of an author she can only be apprehended through the narration. In the process of writing, characters animate each other, and author and character are interrelated: “You were sent to me,” she explains, “I was sent to you. Why that should be, God alone knows” (p. 161). In this reciprocity, they are both versions of the author function, albeit at different levels of reality, but it is also the promise of intersubjectivity, whether Paul likes it or not, that is asserted, as well as its crucial role in the world-disclosing function of the sign – as Habermas in his argument against postmodernism would have it.

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The real in *Slow Man* is bound up not only with substitution, but also with the story’s exploration of photography. It is in dialogue with *Camera Lucida* where Barthes speaks of photography as “the Real, in its indefatigable expression” (Barthes 1993: 4) precisely because it is never distinguished from its referent. Contrary to the imitations of painting or discourse, he states, it is “the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph .... I can never deny that *the thing has been there*” (Barthes 1993: 76). In other words, substitution of the thing by the image does not impinge on the real; rather, the photograph tells for certain (as opposed to writing) what has actually been; it has an evidential force and “its testimony bears not on the object but on time” (Barthes 1993: 87). This is echoed by Paul who explains to Drago about the collection of Fauchery photographs which on his death will become public property, part of their historical record (p. 177). Moved by one of the images, Paul speaks of the way in which

this distribution of particles of silver that records the way the sunlight fell, one day in 1855, on the faces of two long-dead Irishwomen, an image in

whose making he, the little boy from Lourdes, had no part and in which Drago, son of Dubrovnik, has had no part either, may, like a mystical charm – *I was here, I lived, I suffered* – have the power to draw them together. (p. 177)

What is valorised here is the real, its transformation through photography that not only recalls the actual subjects of the past, but has affective value in the present. But Barthes himself allows for a chink in his certainty about photography as evidence of the real. There is a foreshadowing of Drago’s digital trickery, when Barthes laments the “sensation of inauthenticity” in a portrait photograph where he sees himself as subject-become-object, a micro-version of death: “[O]thers ... turn me, ferociously, into an object, they put me at their mercy, at their disposal, classified in a file, ready for the subtlest deceptions” (Barthes 1993: 14), he complains. When he finds the same photograph on the cover of a pamphlet he is distressed by the artifice of printing. It is such artifice, updated by digital technique, that drives the story of *Slow Man* to its ending. Drago has doctored the Fauchery photograph leaving Paul with the substituted forgery, and Costello takes him to the Jokics’ house where Marijana is outraged by his demand for the original: “What is this thing, original photograph? You point camera, click, you make copy .... Camera is like photocopier. So what is original? Original is copy already.” Paul’s reply addresses the complex relationship between the real and representation: “That is nonsense, Marijana .... A photograph is not the thing itself. Nor is a painting. But that does not make either of them a copy. Each becomes a new thing, a new real, new in the world, a new original” (p. 245).

In linking representation with renewal and by implication devaluing the notion of authenticity and origin, Coetzee also avoids the reductive divide between the referential, that is to say Barthes’s “*necessarily* real thing”, and the simulacral of poststructuralism. Instead, the real is presented as renewable, substitutable, supplementary, and characterised by slippage between reference and phenomenalism. (It is such renewal that Habermas sees as a way out of the infinite regress of the sign.)

Costello’s proposal that she and Paul live together comes with further elucidation of the relationship between the real and representation: “You can tell me more stories ...” she says, “which I will afterwards tell back to you in a form so accelerated and improved that you will hardly recognise them” (p. 232). This is not as preposterous as it sounds. Paul’s account is already a reworking of original events, and what is writing but an endless re-production of words that takes shape also through substitution? Paul’s question aptly explains the process: “Isn’t the whole of writing a matter of second thoughts – second thoughts and third thoughts and further thoughts?” (p. 228). By accelerating and improving his stories, she would be addressing Paul’s ponderousness, the characteristic that prevents him from acting.

The final section of the novel directly tackles the question of writing and the relationship between author and character. Costello laments the burden of being “an old woman who scribbles away, page after page ... damned if she knows why. If there is a presiding spirit ... then it is me he stands over, with his lash” (p. 233). Art is the tyranny that binds the author to her own creation, to a character who must be animated into action. Costello’s description of the partnership, “For me alone Paul Rayment was born and I for him. His is the power of leading, mine of following; his of acting, mine of writing” (p. 233), contains the linguistic figures I listed earlier in my sketch of substitutions – chiasmus, parallelism, ellipsis. The absolute authority of the author is relinquished in favour of a figural reciprocity: it is the character with his origins in the real world who, once animated, takes off and cooperates in producing the diegesis of fiction; in other words, he too ideally assumes an author function. And the notion of animation that introduces a magical, irrational element into creativity, is a long way from Barthes’s death of the author.

But Paul Rayment cannot act in the way his author wants him to. The scene at the Jokics’ house confirms his resistance to the fiction. Marijana says of Drago’s gift, the recumbent: “It suits you. I think you should give it a whirl” (p. 257). Not only is Marijana’s own fictionality underlined in the classical posture of thought she adopts in propping up her elbow and holding her chin, but her words establish fiction’s relationship with other fictions. They echo Costello’s earlier urging that he should act, be less of a tortoise. She chides him: “*We only live once*, says Alonso, says Emma, *so let’s give it a whirl!* Give it a whirl, Paul. See what you can come up with” (p. 229). And in choosing Emma Bovary and Don Quixote as models, with their actual words re-presented in italics, Costello references Calvino’s “Levels of Reality in Literature” where the same characters are cited. But Paul resists; he won’t be a real character, the subject of a novel, just as he will never use that one-off, custom-made, original construction which is the recumbent.

Such oscillation between fiction and the real is also enacted in the forgery which turns out to be a joke. Indeed on page 259 where Paul and Costello discuss the visit to the Jokics the word “joke” occurs nine times, as if we were in danger of forgetting the phonological link with the Croatian family name. Costello, who appeared to have foreknowledge of the trickery, now reveals that the photograph has not disappeared and thus that Drago’s manipulation cannot strictly speaking be called a forgery. We may be tempted to ask whether the entire event is not fake, unreal. There are after all discrepancies such as Marijana’s comment that Paul should give up the idea of being their godfather, before she reads the letter in which he proposes this. But by now we know that to question whether event or character is real is meaningless in this narrative conundrum with its multiple reflections that converge and collapse on the reader. The simple distinctions between reality and representation as well as between the real and the



simulacral have been refracted; we can be certain only of being engaged in reading a fiction that has as its subject the plight of an author writing a fiction that cannot be fleshed out to imitate reality. What is also dramatised is the intersubjectivity between author and character who always to some extent originates from an existing character whether in fiction or in the real world. The autonomy and omnipotence of the author is itself shown to be a fiction, which is not to say that the author is dead and that the text is constructed entirely by the reader, but rather that a complex web of relations holds between the real and the represented, between the author and the character he or she has animated.

Marijana urges Paul to live with Costello as an antidote to his gloom. She points out that in Croatian the word *glumi* means pretend, not real; the suggestion being that taking up Costello's invitation would be entry into the "real", which is to say into fictionality. But for Paul pretence does not pose a problem. For instance, on their return trip from the Jokics, Costello claims to recognise Drago as one of the young men who flash by on their motorcycles. Paul knows that it is too much of a coincidence but he does not insist on being realistic: "[L]et them pretend nevertheless that the one in the red helmet was Drago". Theatrically he sighs, "Ah Drago ... ah for youth!" (p. 262). And within this dissimulation a truth emerges: the connection between Paul's gloom and the real raises the question of youth's antithesis – the wrecked body that Costello had so cavalierly dismissed as a sign or symbol. It is hard to believe that, as reader, I had so readily and perversely accepted the dismissal. The absence of a leg, which for Paul is the real presence of a stump, that the reader encounters in all its raw physicality, could be discussed in terms of what Hal Foster calls traumatic realism, one of the conceptual shifts in contemporary art "from reality as an effect of representation to the real as a thing of trauma" (1994: 146).

Costello's final offer to Paul of joining her in Melbourne is of herself as nurse, a substitute of sorts for Marijana. Paul declines; he will not be transformed or redeemed. He chooses to remain a one-legged inchoate character, and they part with sardonic reference to the flags they could attach to their comic vehicles. Costello's flag, he says, would be mottoed as *malleus maleficorum*, a reference to the multi-authored fifteenth-century Counter-Reformation text that advocated the persecution of witches, and particularly targeted midwives as the most dangerous of witches. In other words, a wry comment on the role of the writer, whose task it is to bring characters into being. It is also a wry inversion of the idea of art as apotropaic: how could animation into art avert evil influence or bad luck when an accident at the first level of mimesis had turned Paul Rayment's leg into an obscene stump and had tumbled him into another level of fiction, into the hands of the writer/midwife? Paul's refusal then could be read as an assertion of traumatic realism, a refusal to unite the imaginary and the symbolic against the real. In his discussion of trauma discourse, Hal Foster

cites Kristeva on the body as primary site of the abject, which she defines as a category of (non)being, of neither subject nor object, a condition that Paul the amputee claims for himself against Costello's importunities, against her insistence on textuality. Foster's description of appropriation of art that pushes illusionism to the point of the real is pertinent to this novel turned inside out: "Here illusionism is employed not to cover up the real with simulacral surfaces, but to *uncover* it in uncanny things" (1994: 152). In contemporary art practice, Foster identifies a bipolar postmodernism in which the real, repressed in poststructuralism, returns as traumatic. Both the textual model of culture and the conventional view of reality are dismissed by artists who wish to "possess the obscene vitality of the wound and to occupy the radical nihilism of the corpse" (1994: 166).

It is the fact that its referent adheres, says Barthes, that makes photography unclassifiable, and thus a condition of disorder. Such entropy also inheres in the fact that no matter how long he contemplates the photograph, it teaches him nothing – there is an arrest of interpretation because of the certainty *this-has-been* (1993: 6). Rosalind Krauss finds Barthes's comments on photography pertinent to a reading of Rachel Whiteread whose congealing of space into a rigidly entropic condition also strips it of any means of being "like" anything. However, her words on the monochrome plaster of Whiteread's casts that "announce their own insufficiency, their status as 'ghosts'" (Krauss 1997: 81), uncannily describe *Slow Man* and its characters. Krauss, by way of commenting on Whiteread, cites Barthes on photography as a kind of death, both structured and asymbolic, in other words paradoxical, which leads him to say "I have no other resource than this irony: to speak of the 'nothing to say'" (Krauss 1997: 76). If photography's absence-as-presence takes me back to entropy and the concern with death in both Whiteread and *Slow Man*, it also brings me to the irony of an arrest in interpretation: *Slow Man* offers itself as prosthesis, lays out on the credence table its own hermeneutic. It waves its flags; there is ultimately nothing hidden; I can only describe what-has-been-read.

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