

Broken Tongues in Dialogue: Translation and the Body in *Slow Man*

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In "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin claims that when understood as a mode, translation highlights kinship and disparity between different languages. Thus, without effacing linguistic and cultural differences, this "translationability" exposes innate alterity within each language. When this "mode" is conceived with cultural and individual particulars in mind, it can institute a more refined understanding of translation that is more sensitive toward the Other. *Slow Man*, the first novel published by J. M. Coetzee after he changed his nationality from South African to Australian, suggests a model of translation that explores this possibility. This essay will analyze two contrasting functions of translation that *Slow Man* stages and argue that Coetzee explores the ethical dimension of translation by examining the ways in which dialogic translation interrupts the gendered and nationalized discourses by which the body is constructed.

Thinking about the body is almost always inextricably connected to the problem of language, as Judith Butler reminds us in *Bodies That Matter*. A body is never a pure materiality—or there is no way to think and write about it that way. The body is always conceived through social discourse that is already in existence. Butler claims that this existence is always already troubled, and for Paul Rayment, the old protagonist of *Slow Man*, who has recently lost a leg in a car accident, this is painfully true. Frustrated by the new condition it is in, Paul initially attempts to denounce his body. Later, he strives to make his new body intelligible to himself by calling all the regulative norms to his aid. In his attempt to reconceive his newly handicapped, aging body, Paul displays the first kind of translation that *Slow Man* features: internal translation. Similar to mechanical translation, internal translation replaces original words with semantic equivalents, and this technique aggravates Paul's moral predicaments by concealing the friction within his own language—the language he mobilizes in his attempt to reimagine and represent his body as a fertile, masculine one.

This futile undertaking, in turn, prevents Paul from developing an ethical relationship with others.

Toward the end of *Slow Man*, a different mode of translation appears. I call this mode dialogical, as it involves dialogue between two distinct individuals in a Bakhtinian fashion. In fact, Coetzee stages a blatantly failed example of translation, in which the target language never attempts to have any claim to the original meaning—an instance of contact between different languages that does not end in a seamless transfer of semantic content. The instance is dialogic in the sense that the endless production of self-serving words by a conscious self is radically interrupted by the Other's language. In the instance of dialogical translation, all languages appear fractured and limited; this, in turn, exposes the erasure by which Paul's self-image of the normative male body is made legible. In the last part of this essay, I will examine this significant moment in the narrative and suggest that Coetzee locates the beginning of compassion and understanding, regardless of how tenuous they may be, in this exposure. When Paul finally opens himself to be disrupted by the total alterity of the Other, he succeeds in accepting his own body as is—imperfect and mediated by language. Coetzee thus offers a glimpse of the possibility of ethical communication that is uncharted and unlimited by prevailing national and cultural discourses.

In order to understand the significant role translation plays in *Slow Man* properly, we first need to examine the figure of Elizabeth Costello in *Elizabeth Costello*. *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee's lecture/fiction published before *Slow Man*, is important not only because its eponymous main character reappears in the latter novel, but also because it illustrates the dead end that an author who positions herself in the realist tradition can face in the course of her literary career—the same dead end that Coetzee successfully breaks through with the help of translation in *Slow Man*.

Elizabeth Costello

In 1996, Coetzee delivered the Ben Belitt Lecture at Bennington College, entitled "What Is Realism?" Instead of a conventional lecture, however, he read a fictional piece in which an elderly female Australian writer, Elizabeth Costello, makes a speech at an American college. Since this first occasion, Costello has frequently reappeared in Coetzee's public lectures. Derek Attridge, who attended both of the Tanner Lectures that Coetzee delivered at Princeton University in 1997, describes the experience of listening to Coetzee's reading of the Costello pieces as "disquieting": "What made the event in which we were participating all the more disquieting was our gradual realization that it was being mirrored, in a distorted representation, in the fiction itself" (*Ethics* 193). In other words, the fiction was

realized—or, rather, the reality was fictionalized—and the audiences were made to witness the distorted faces of themselves.

As if to underscore the irony he creates, Coetzee highlights the specific location and condition of Costello's body in the lectures. For instance, the first of the Costello lecture pieces, "What Is Realism?," concludes with Costello's aged body. After Costello makes an acceptance speech under the same title on receiving a literary award at an American university, her son John observes his mother sleeping in his car on their way back to the airport. Realistic language focusing on the physical aspect of Costello's body causes John and the reader to become aware of the point from which the elaborate ideas that Costello had spoken about originate: the unglamorous physicality of the body that makes sounds:

She lies slumped deep in her seat. Her head is sideways, her mouth open. She is snoring faintly. Light flashes from the windows as they bank, the sun setting brilliantly over southern California. He can see up her nostrils, into her mouth, down the back of her throat. And what he cannot see he can imagine: the gullet, pink and ugly, contracting as it swallows, like a python, drawing things down to the pear-shaped belly-sac. He draws away, tightens his own belt, sits up, facing forward. No, he tells himself, that is not where I come from, that is not it. (34)

Despite John's denial, he does come from that body, just like the words Costello voices. By concluding with Costello's body, Coetzee makes it a focal point of the entire lecture, tying all the abstract, intricate philosophical ideas back to the image of a humble, physical body. And through the same body, he points to the matrix of individual interests where the bodies of individual speakers are inescapably situated.¹

In this manner, Costello's mundane body channels language into the specificities of her being. As a result, her language is presented not only as a philosophical discourse, but more as particular "utterances" in the Bakhtinian sense. Utterances always issue from a specific person and from a specific relationship that the person has with his/her interlocutor (*Speech* 91). Coetzee ensures that all her political opinions and abstract philosophical ideas are firmly grounded in Costello's frail body—in those of her feelings that are dictated by her bodily condition and in the interpersonal dynamics that surround her. The elaborate descriptions of Costello's aged and often fatigued body remind the reader that even the most sophisticated philosophical discourses are utterances. In other words, Costello's body grounds the language of her lecture in individuals in concrete situations.

Ironically, whereas the emphasis on Costello's body creates a sense of realism in the lectures, the same emphasis certifies the fictionality of the same lectures. Costello, hovering between a real audience and a fictional

world, performs the twofold task of representing the body and underscoring its absence. Costello speaks to her own audience, but through Coetzee's mouth, she also speaks to the real audience Coetzee faces. Coetzee talks of Costello's body, yet it is Coetzee's own body that is present. In other words, the mock reality of Costello's body highlights the physical reality that is the absence of her body. In this convoluted way, the Costello lectures invite the audience's participation as a fiction invites the reader's. That is, by replacing his presence with the fictional body of Costello in the lectures, Coetzee reminds his audience of what the conventions of philosophical discourse habitually disregard: the body and the specific circumstances of an individual who produces the philosophical arguments. In other words, Coetzee challenges the entire setting of academic discourse through his position as a novelist. His use of a fictional authorial double emphasizes the personal responsibilities that arise with the use of language: not only reading and writing, but also speaking and listening.²

In 2003, the lectures that feature Costello were collected and published under the title *Elizabeth Costello*. In the book, the previous lectures were presented as fictional works to be read. Without the presence of a live audience, the interpretive dynamics of the works change significantly, altering the implication of Costello's body. In the second-to-last piece in the book, namely the last chapter that features Costello, the female author who so passionately spoke about realism seems to pass into an afterlife that resembles a pastiche of Kafka's works. The piece is titled "At the Gate," and Costello finds herself stuck helplessly in a small town. The place certainly reads like a posthumous space, especially when the reader remembers all the implications of Costello's age and declining health in the previous lectures. In this chapter, there is less emphasis on Costello's body because it is eclipsed by the profusion of literary clichés, which makes the town a purgatory for the realist author. Her frustrated language is designed to make the reader share her feeling of being stuck. At one point, Costello cries out: "God save me! She [Costello] whispers to herself. *Too literary, too literary! I must get out of here before I die!*" (215; emphasis original).

In order to "get out of" the town and enter (or exit through) "the gate," Costello has to write a statement of belief. However, as a writer, Costello claims that it is not her "profession to believe" (194). At the last hearing before the judges, who have the authority to grant the permission to enter the "gate," Costello strives to earn their approval by imagining frogs in the Dulgannon mudflats as realistically and sympathetically as possible. Again, Coetzee uses Costello to substitute the problem of truth and sincerity with that of realism and artisanship; and as if to punish himself and Costello, the judges deny her entry for the last time. While Costello's imagination can push her into the body of those frogs in a remote place, her body solidly remains on this side of the gate, the literary purgatory where literary phrases proliferate while her body becomes diffuse. Along with

the fictional letter by Lady Chandos that follows it, "At the Gate" expresses a fiction writer's frustration with language and representation. This is the dilemma Costello is trapped in: if an author emphasizes the details of the body, that emphasis only highlights the literary body's fictionality. If no focus is put on the body, then the author ends up in a literary limbo without the hope of communication with the reader. Without the Other's voice breaking in, there seems to be no escape from this vicious cycle. The trite metaphors and exhausted literary settings correspond to the implied demise of Costello the novelist in *Elizabeth Costello*.

Costello reappears in *Slow Man* as the probable author of the novel. In many ways, Paul, a photographer in his seventies who has recently lost a leg in a car accident, resembles Costello in that he likes to talk and think his body away. By the time Costello enters and greets Paul in chapter 13, the reader is familiar with Paul's predilection for abstract rumination. For Paul, his body in pain serves as an excuse to be even more absorbed in his own isolated self, and Costello fails to goad this morose and inactive man to action. As the elderly female author unsuccessfully exhorts Paul to become "real," it almost appears as if she is punished with another version of the same literary purgatory in which she was trapped in "At the Gate." A breakthrough is achieved only when Paul, unanticipated by Costello, realizes Otherness in his own language through an interruptive moment of translation, after which Costello is unceremoniously dismissed.

Internal Translation and (Re)construction of the Male Body

On the first page of *Slow Man*, Paul is hit by a car and is at the moment flying through the air. The reader first encounters Paul from the inside, listening to his thoughts: "The blow catches him from the right, sharp and surprising and painful, like a bolt of electricity, lifting him up off the bicycle. *Relax!* He tells himself as he tumbles through the air" (1). Paul's monologue assumes a version of himself as a cynical listener, and this fragmentation of the self reveals Paul's tendency to avoid direct involvement even with his own self. Paul's language protects and secures his isolated ego by mediating and attenuating his bodily experiences.

The following part of the novel focuses on describing Paul's suffering body; yet the pain and discomfort Paul suffers only aggravate his tendency to detach himself from his immediate reality and from the people around him. When his body is in pain, Paul thinks to himself: "at a level far below the play and flicker of the intellect (*Why not this? Why not that?*) he, he, the he he calls sometimes *you*, sometimes *I*, is all too ready to embrace darkness, stillness, extinction. *He*: not the one whose mind used to dart this way and that but the one who aches all night" (26). Here, Paul conceptually separates himself from his aching body by addressing himself in pain as "he," not "I."

In this way, when left to a single individual, language tends to diverge from material specificity and fails to denote the individual consciousness's own limits and its inherent need for the Other. Paul demonstrates an excellent example of this failure when he conceives his body in a subjective and abstract way. When fighting extreme pain in the hospital after amputation, Paul tries to persuade himself that

[p]ain is nothing . . . just a warning signal from the body to the brain. Pain is no more the real thing than an X-ray is the real thing. But of course he is wrong. Pain is the real thing, it does not have to press hard to persuade him of that, it does not have to press at all, merely to send a flash or two; after which he quickly settles for the confusion, the bad dreams. (12; emphasis original)

These sentences play with the meaning of the word "real." Pain is real, even though it is without material substance, because it affects the body, and through the body it affects the mind and the use of language. It is also "real" in the sense that it exceeds language, as do other nonverbal claims of the body. However, as Elaine Scarry points out, pain not only resists language but also irreparably splits one's sense of one's own reality from the other person's (4). Consequently, Paul's anxious abstraction of his body results in blind monologue, which cuts him off from any interpersonal relation.

Peculiarly, Paul's alienation is expressed through his familiarity with another national language, French. Paul consciously uses French when he wants to distance himself from his newly disabled body, replacing a physical and emotional alienation with a linguistic one: "To himself he does not call it a stump. He would like not to call it anything; he would like not to think about it, but that is not possible. If he has a name for it, it is *le jambon*. *Le jambon* keeps it at a nice, contemptuous distance" (29; emphasis original). The detachment Paul creates in this passage is semantic as well as national, as he employs the term "*le jambon*" instead of "ham" for the very reason that the term is French. Paul de Man's account of translation's function illuminates the effect of this monologic translation: "We think we are at ease in our own language, we feel a coziness, a familiarity, a shelter in the language we call our own, in which we think that we are not alienated. What translation reveals is that this alienation is at its strongest in our relation to our own language" (84). Paul's translation, however, is not an instance of interruption but of seamless semantic replacements. It hides, rather than exposes, his alienation under the apparent unfamiliarity of a foreign language. Without an other's consciousness in conversation with him, Paul's internal translation only aggravates Paul's alienation from himself and the world.

Paul's use of French is a micro-level dialogue, what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "polyphony"—multiple social discourses embedded in one voice. However, without another individual who responds to Paul's language, his soliloquy fails to teach him about anything except his alienation, which he already knows. Consequently, polyphony in this case fails to elicit a true "dialogue." From the perspective of dialogism, language cannot be understood without considering the active consciousnesses of its users and the specific social interrelationships among them. In other words, language cannot be considered separate from the person who utters it. Addresses and answers always implicate different human subjects in specific contexts, and these subjects are fleshed out through different voices and discourses in turn. For a truly meaningful dialogue to occur, all participants should be able to provide something that the self could not have originated on its own, and each participant in the dialogue should be able to accept something that is totally alien (*Speech* 280). This means radical alterity of the Other is not a hindrance but rather an indispensable component of a dialogue.

In Paul's soliloquy, the reader witnesses a constant rebuilding of his self through French and English, and nothing more. If translation is limited to what Paul does with English and French, then it would only mean endless replacement of the words, which moves the translated words away not only from the original meaning but also from the person who uttered or wrote them. In other words, Paul's internal translation is a symptom of his abstraction of his ailing body, which is, in turn, an inevitable product of his isolated self.

Much like the position taken by Costello in her lectures, Paul's distant and cynical self is reminiscent of the western philosophical subject of thought, a position that analyzes and imposes order on the world as if it stood beyond that order. According to Elizabeth Ermarth, this transcendental subject position is "the ultimate problem" Heidegger finds in western "History." Naming such a transcendental subject position as "no-body," she states: "To exist in historical or 'inauthentic' time is to exist as nobody and thence . . . to act like an immortal or at least to act like someone who is able to pretend that finitude is not absolute" (214). This position of "no-body" is problematic because without a body, it is presumed to be unaffected by death. Immortality disables the reflection of a subject's own historical position. In addition, because the "no-body" exists outside time, it is impossible for the subject to conceive and form a fundamentally interactive relationship with others who reside inside time. Consequently, the imaginary position of "no-body" produces a fundamentally irresponsible and self-centered subject. The desperate attempts Paul makes to occupy the position of "no-body"—that is, to forget his vulnerability and mortality—reveal that he shares the same problem as the immortal subject of philosophy. Paul ultimately wants to understand himself as a subject free

of a body; however, having started *Slow Man* with an injury to the protagonist that impairs his body forever, Coetzee persistently criticizes and deconstructs Paul's aloof subject position.

Paul's denial of his own body induces his isolation as a subject, making any kind of communication impossible for him. For Paul, his ailing body is an excuse to push others away, and this self-containment leads to unfair judgments of others. Extricating himself from the network of relationships, Paul fails to take full responsibility for his own life and eludes any responsibility toward other people. His self-imposed linguistic and emotional "homelessness" serves as an excuse to remain emotionally detached and physically uninvolved. In his own words, Paul has been "missing" all his life (113). Naturally, Paul is unable to form an open and responsible relationship with other people; he is isolated in his own self-centeredness. Because he is disconnected from the body, the fluidity of his language functions only as "a disguise, or a mask, part of [his] tortoiseshell armour" (230).

When released from the hospital, Paul despairs upon learning that he will need to employ a caretaker for the rest of his life. Physically, it is now impossible for him to stay away from other people. Paul struggles to make his newly crippled body intelligible to himself and others, and the discourse that is readily available to him is that of gender and age. At the same time, feeling ashamed of his broken body, Paul strains to turn away from the degrading realities of the body—whether his or others'. This prevents him from treating other people with respect, as he shows no tolerance for any imperfection in anyone's body.

This is when Costello enters the novel. Even though she notices Paul's internal translation, she cannot break his habit of using it to dismiss his body, along with other people, in his mind. As Paul begrudges the loss of his leg and the fragility of his aging body, he is repulsed by Costello's old body and its sickly symptoms of aging. For Paul, Costello's aged body, primarily presented to him as sexless, symbolizes the abject body against which he has to reformulate the image of his own body. It is what Butler calls "constitutive outside to the domain of the subject" (8). As previously discussed, in *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee makes Costello's body a focal point of her philosophical lectures, tying all the abstract, intricate, philosophical ideas back to the image of her aged, often exhausted body. The same body that lost its feminine appeal is the exact opposite of the male body that Paul tries to imagine as his. Paul abhors the sexlessness Costello's ailing body symbolizes for him; it is the unintelligible chaos against which he wants to construct the image of his body.

On the other hand, Marijana Jovic, an immigrant caretaker from Croatia, satisfies Paul with her vibrant health and apparent fertility. In Paul's effort to reimagine his body as more male than old, Marijana and her three children appear crucial. She possesses the ideal female body beside

which Paul can imagine his body as fully male. He is indifferent to her interests and needs, yet because of his stumbling, eating, ejaculating, and urinating body, Paul needs constant care from Marijana. As if to compensate for this physical dependency, Paul persuades himself and Marijana that all he wishes for is to take on the role of the head of Marijana's family. Because Marijana's husband is alive, however, this wish only instigates serious conflicts in her family.

Because Paul feels that he cannot physically compete with Miroslav, Marijana's husband, who is still a young and vibrant man, he resorts to ignoring his bodily existence once again. He wants to own Marijana's motherhood and family, but what he really wants is to enjoy an extended version of himself by playing the role of a passive guardian. In his letter to Miroslav, he presents himself as a ghost, a being without a solid body, yet with obvious patriarchal authority: "As the priest in the ritual of baptism is the personification of the Son and intercessor, and the father is of course Father, so the godfather is the personification of the Holy Ghost. At least that is how I [Paul] conceive of it. A figure without substance, ghostly, beyond anger and desire" (224). This is just a harmless, benevolent suggestion in Paul's mind, but from Miroslav's point of view, it is interference. Paul shows resentful resignation about himself when he meets Miroslav. Paul's self-image oscillates between no-body and the masculine body, both of which are deeply problematic as they eliminate any possibility of ethical communication. It is Paul's way of ignoring his responsibility to his own life and to others. In other words, his strenuous disregard for the realities of his body engenders and intensifies his self-centeredness and irresponsibility toward other people.

An Instance of Failed Translation and the Broken Body

At the start of the novel, Paul is quick to judge other people by categorizing them with a limited number of stereotypes. For him, Costello is an old, and therefore unattractive, intruder; Marijana, a Balkan, and therefore a nostalgically traditional mother; Drago, Marijana's handsome, and therefore angelic and ideal, son, and so on. Compelled to interact with people from a social circle he never associated with before, just as the title of the novel indicates, Paul is "slow" at learning to open his mind to the others' voices and allowing them to change him. Paul's attitude toward himself and the others begins to change only when he is forced to confront the complete Otherness that Marijana and her family present. At first, Paul is attracted to Marijana's seeming deference toward his struggle to maintain manly dignity, and he proceeds to incorporate her in his endeavor to imagine himself as possessing a conventional male body. Marijana's faulty English, however, stands in his way, as it hinders smooth communication between them. Paul offers to correct her grammar, but Marijana does not appreciate

the gesture. When Paul finally hears Marijana's incorrect English not as an imperfect mastery of the language but as an alternative language—with a message of its own that has originated from the particular social and historical matrix—his encapsulated world of words breaks down, along with the strained image of his body.

In his desperate attempt to erase the difference, Paul uses Marijana's English as an excuse to patronize her, despite his own alienation from the language. Granted, he "rather likes" the unfamiliar combination of voices he hears in Marijana's English: "Marijana Jokic . . . speaks a rapid, approximate Australian English with Slavic liquids and an uncertain command of *a* and *the*, coloured by slang she must pick up from her children, who must pick it up from their classmates. He rather likes it" (27). Nevertheless, her confidence and the self-sufficiency implied in its richness disturb Paul's self-centered perspective. Just as Paul describes it, Marijana Jokic's language is another micro-level dialogue. The singularity of her character is amplified through the intervention of a foreign language. In addition, different social and subcultural discourses are meshed within it, as are the languages of Paul, Marijana, and other members of the Jokic family. In an effort to incorporate Marijana into his own self-centered world, however, Paul corrects Marijana's grammar in the same patronizing way he offers financial help for her children, and Paul's condescending attitude toward her prevents him from appreciating what Marijana can provide as a complete other.

When Marijana casually dismisses his correction, Paul makes an abortive effort to fabricate a common history, a collective identity he can share with Marijana so that their differences can be merged under the common inclusive pronoun "we." One day, showing Marijana his collection of rare nineteenth-century pictures of early Australian immigrants, Paul attempts to fabricate a common history that would provide Marijana and himself with one shared identity as "Australians." The project is fraught with historical and conceptual dangers. In the end, he is rightfully doubtful that he will ever be successful in connecting himself and Marijana's family through one collective history. When Marijana shows mild surprise at finding out that Australia indeed has a past that goes back to the nineteenth century, he thinks to himself:

Not just bush, he would like to tell Marijana. Not just black fellows either. Not zero history. Look, that is where we come from: from the cold and damp and smoke of that wretched cabin, from those women with their black helpless eyes, from that poverty and that grinding labour on hollow stomachs. A people with a story of their own, a past. *Our story, our past.*

But is that the truth? Would the woman in the picture accept him as one of her tribe—the boy from Laourdes in the French Pyrenees

with the mother who played Fauré on the piano? Is the history that he wants to claim as his not finally just an affair for the English and the Irish, foreigners keep out? (52)

Here, Paul touches on the danger of the assimilative process of fabricating a collective history: it is impossible to recognize, not to mention to subsume, all the individuals' disparate voices in one narrative in an ethically responsible way, regardless of their mores. The specters of the unaccounted undermine the common history as it is being formed. Indeed, the above scene reads like a playful parody of a theme Coetzee has explored in *Foe* with the silent figure of Friday. As Kim Worthington and James Meffan point out, Coetzee reminds the reader how "readily the narrative of another, particularly a silent Other, can be conscripted to meet the requirements of one's own story, one's own interpretation" (140).

Through Paul's doubts above, Coetzee maintains that individuals cannot hide behind an all encompassing "we"; they must assume their own independent positions, however uncomfortable and destabilizing they are. As Coetzee declared in an interview: "I take it as given that people must be treated as fully responsible beings: psychology is no excuse. Politics, in its wise stupidity, is at one with religion here: one man, one soul: no half-measures" (*Doubling* 249). When an all-inclusive "we" proves to be impossible, words need to belong to specific individuals. And because there are no "half-measures" between individuals, there is no way one can share the responsibility of his or her own voice with another. Paul, despite his fragmented self and a missing leg, has the full responsibilities and full rights of a man. Consequently, no matter how polyphonic his internal language is, ultimately it is Paul the individual who has to bear responsibility for his words. Not only is an all-inclusive "we" conceptually impossible, if forcefully formed, it cancels the possibility of an ethical dialogue, whether textual or interpersonal. For ethical communication to happen, the others always remain alien despite any interaction they might have.

In order to participate in a productive dialogue, Paul needs to learn that a subject should not incorporate the Other by imagination, sympathy, or representation. Whether the voice be Marijana's or that of a deceased Irish immigrant woman in the old pictures, the Other's voice never converges with the self's; it needs to remain distinct in order for ethical communication to occur. Each participant in a dialogue should be independent and distinct from each other and should take full responsibility for his or her own utterances—that is, one is responsible to offer something alien to the other, and also responsible to be open to the changes the same encounter might cause in oneself. Thus, only when Paul's monologue is interrupted through a contact with the Other's language can he be freed from the incessant yet abortive effort to conceive and present his body as a fertile young man.

On the same day Paul shows his collection of pictures to her, Marijana dusts his books. When it is time for her to finish, Paul tells her to “[l]eave the cleaning. Finish it off tomorrow.” She replies: “I am finished in flesh of lightning,” and Paul is quick to correct her: “Flash. A flash of lightning. Flesh is what we are made of, flesh and bone” (54). Marijana’s unwitting mistake, however, is more than a simple play of words on the part of Coetzee. Literally speaking, the language with errors becomes the flesh, “what we are made of,” as it is what the characters of the novel are composed of. They are made of flesh—that is, differences in languages, including mistakes and context-specific elements that fracture and mark their utterances. Furthermore, the dissimilarity between Paul’s and Marijana’s pronunciation of the word “flash” materializes the untranslatable difference between them; it marks individual bodies and the specific social contexts they are produced in. Paul’s “flesh” is immersed in his regard of his own body, steeped in age and prejudices. Marijana’s “flash” implies the discursive construction of the word “flesh,” revealing the way language materializes the body through reiteration. Here, even translated and nonstandard English becomes the flesh, and Paul must learn that Marijana’s language, as well as her life, is complete in its own way and perfectly efficient without his patronizing grammatical corrections.

What makes Paul’s “flash” different from Marijana’s flesh are extralinguistic elements, the elements that make each articulation of the word a different utterance. As extralinguistic elements are only effective in situations where voices and bodies can interact directly, it is a way to make corporeal reality leak back into language. Moreover, as utterances can only function in the concrete social matrix that a body is placed in, they mark both the potential and the limit of language’s capability to represent the body. Marijana’s faulty articulation of “flash” registers her knowledge and practice of another language in a nonlinguistic way, and it disrupts the way Paul imagines his body. In other words, it is a device that Coetzee uses to break abstract and general “language” into utterances that materialize specific individuals and their concrete social contexts. Therefore, the singularity of Marijana’s language is a specificity that Paul should respect, rather than a mistake to correct. Language, even with traces of a foreign tongue, is inseparably tied to the body that it constructs and thus functions only in the concrete social matrix in which the body is placed. Later, Paul himself utilizes this irony with a resonance he does not fully understand: “That is how it happens. In a flash, in a flesh” (174). By thus anchoring language in individual bodies, Coetzee makes the responsibility of appreciating the other’s words parallel to the appreciation and care of the other’s body.

Coetzee’s exploration of ethical communication culminates in an extraordinary moment of translation at the end of the novel. When Drago leaves Paul’s apartment after staying with him for several days, Paul discovers that two pictures in his precious collection are missing. In place

of the missing originals, he finds two computer-modified copies of the pictures with Drago's family members' faces inserted among the early Australian immigrants. The copies appear as a visual parody of Paul's previous attempt to create a collective history of all Australians. Feeling ridiculed and betrayed, Paul visits Marijana's house unannounced, intending to take those pictures back. Marijana considers this interrogative visit rude, and apparently feeling insulted, she challenges Paul's idea of the "original," claiming that all photographs are copies. According to her, "original is copy already" (235). Disagreeing with her, Paul argues for the sanctity of the original: "Each becomes a new thing, a new real, new in the world, a new original" (235). According to this logic, however, the modified versions of Paul's precious pictures are also Drago's "originals" and deserve respect as such. The copy is not a degenerated replacement of the original in this context. It is an original in its own right.

In the same way, Marijana's faulty English is also an "original," a mark of her personality and uniqueness. After seeing how Drago has been displaying the pictures openly in his room and on the Internet, Paul realizes his accusation has been too grave for the boy's playful intention. Seeing his embarrassment, Marijana recommends that he live with Costello, whom Paul deems too old and ugly to be womanly. When Marijana cannot find an appropriate English word to describe Paul's unstable emotional state, Paul suggests "gloomy." It is not the word Marijana was looking for, however. She says: "'No more gloom. Is funny word. In Croatia we say *ovaj glumi*, doesn't mean he is gloomy, no, means he is pretending, he is not real. But you not pretending, eh?'" (251) Marijana's insight into Paul's flimsy gloominess comes from her translation of Croatian. Indeed, expecting Marijana to show sympathy, Paul had projected an image of a man unjustly hurt at the expense of others.

In fact, *ovaj glumi* is not a correct translation of the word "gloomy." Marijana seems to have chosen the phrase based on its sonic resemblance to the English word. In other words, in the commonly understood sense of the word "translation," this is an example of an elementary mistake. Yet it is the disparity between the two expressions, instead of the exact semantic match between them, that transforms this conversation into an instance of ethical encounter. Regarding the effect of translation, Coetzee points out that "because of the closeness of fit of particular languages with particular world views, a speaker does not become aware of the mediatory role of language between reality and mind" (*Doubling* 183). Only when a language user is confronted with a different worldview, implied and expressed by a different language, can she realize how her self is composed of a limited number of unarticulated assumptions. Therefore, "the task that faces the translator at every turn is one of carrying across from one language to another not so much words as the systems of assumptions lying behind those words" (*Doubling* 182). Through intrusion of a foreign

expression, *ovaj glumi*—not only the expression itself but also the different way gloominess is interpreted—Paul's familiar way of interpreting himself and other people breaks down, forcing him to see himself from a different angle. What Paul perceived as "reality" is disrupted, and he now sees the gap between reality and his language, which exposes unspoken assumptions about sex and age.

The way dialogical translation works here can be explained better with the help of Amit Pinchevski's theorization of ethical communication. In *By Way of Interruption: Levinas and the Ethics of Communication*, Pinchevski contends that when faced with irreducible difference, communication is destined to fail, and this interruption reminds a subject that its interlocutor possesses total alterity that can never be assimilated or consumed. Accordingly, he contends that interruption, rather than complete and transparent exchange of ideas and emotions, upholds the possibility of ethical communication as it exposes the self to the ultimate Otherness of the Other without the prospect of reducing or merging with it. Accordingly, "Communication depends on the multiplicity and irreducible difference between communicators and language" (Pinchevski 142). Because it "reveals the fundamental dialogical aspect of language, exposing the fact that language is never complete within itself as private or national" (138), translation most dramatically reveals this awareness of Otherness within languages.

Thus, it is crucial to notice that the above scene does not picture an ideal moment of mutual understanding or compassion. To borrow Pinchevski's terms, Marijana's translation of "gloomy" into "*ovaj glumi*" and "*ovaj glumi*" back to "pretending" and "not real" shows more of an interruption than a smooth flow of meaning from one language to another. Her translation expresses, rather than effaces, their differences. Paul, also, is still fraught with misunderstanding and tension. However, in this moment, "language" becomes visible—constitutive of one's emotions and body. Translation, thus, becomes a point where one can imagine a different kind of relationship, one that is generated by the intractable difference between the self and the Other rather than commonality and reciprocity between them. After all, "communication understood as the ability to reproduce meanings and effects from one mind into another is in essence an assault against the integrity of another as a distinct and singular being, as an Other" (Pinchevski 7).

In this context, Marijana's faulty command of English is not a weakness; rather, it is an important possession that only she can offer to Paul—a totally alien perspective that enables Paul to recognize his own self-pity. Also, translation in this case does not distort or corrupt meaning; nor does English hold the prestigious position of the "original." In fact, the juxtaposition of "gloomy" and "*ovaj glumi*" adds another layer of meaning through their interaction. The Croatian expression is treated as another species of discourse that enriches the overall polyphony of the novel, and

it is the very difference—the untranslatability of the two languages—that makes their interaction so fruitful. And not surprisingly, this dialogic moment is accompanied by Marijana's sympathetic kisses on Paul's cheeks, as if symbolizing the brushing contact between their two different worlds and languages. These kisses and a recumbent bicycle Drago built for Paul force him to realize and simultaneously become ashamed of his disregard for Marijana and her family. He later admits that he has never felt so ashamed of himself (258). The moral shame he acknowledges is the ethical outcome of translation, in which he encounters a foreign element, an Otherness that cannot be fully captured in words. And this shame prepares Paul for further changes.

When Paul agrees to ride the recumbent bicycle Drago made for him, he still feels humiliated on it; but it is the first instance in the novel that he voluntarily faces his handicapped reality as it is. At last, he is morally humbled—cured of his self-righteous grief: "He [Paul] can feel a blush creeping over him, a blush of shame, starting at his ears and creeping forward over his face. He has no wish to stop it. It is what he deserves" (252). When self-centered and isolated, he cannot see others—their uniqueness or their hospitality. Paul finally sees himself as what he is to the Jokic family—not a generous patriarchal guardian but one who needs and accepts help. It is their kindness that makes him realize how he is viewed: "They must have spent weeks on it, father, son; mother too. The blush has not left his face, and he does not want it to" (255). The relationship he realizes he is in is not exactly reciprocal, but it is more equal than he imagined it to be. Before this moment, heavily dependent on visual cues, he refuses the rhetoric his rehabilitation coach uses: that his body is a "new body." Instead, he insists that his body is inferior for lacking a leg, and any device, including a prosthesis, that helps his body to move about is a "fake." This is how he feels about the recumbent bicycle, too: "A recumbent. He has never ridden one before, but he dislikes recumbent instinctively, as he dislikes prostheses, as he dislikes all fakes" (255). Nevertheless, Paul's new body condition is not a "fake," as he realizes on the recumbent bicycle; his old, disabled body needs to be respected and responded to as it is.

After coming back to his apartment at the end of the novel, Paul repeats Marijana's sympathetic kiss on Costello, whom he has never touched voluntarily before. And thus Costello, an author who is ensnared in a self-consuming reality of language, is dismissed.

In an Other-oriented communication model, the Other remains unknown because a dialogue is always an ongoing process, and by this definition, the final, all-revealing answer never arrives. In the same way, the relationship with the Other in Coetzee's works is an ongoing experience rather than a singular moment, and thus it is as open-ended and future-oriented as translation. The kisses that Paul receives and gives seem to symbolize the touch between differences; they show a "point of

contact where differences meet" which "is not merely a disjunction that divides Same and Other but, rather, a junction that brings them together as different—a disjunctive junction, a site of proximity and touch exclusive of symbiosis or merger, and as such, a veritable site of interruptions" (Pinchevski 250). This is why Coetzee struggles to see the body not as a romanticized abstract but as the specificities each instance of translation produces—as an opening where difference can meet and be accounted for. Though there is no clear indication that Paul has absorbed his lesson and has become a completely new man, the ending is open enough to let the reader construe that some changes have begun to unfold inside Paul.

In an interview, Jacques Derrida imagined a community whose knowledge of its own limits is "its *opening*" (*Points* 355; emphasis original). For Derrida, cultural identity is not the "self-identity of a thing": he sees cultural identity as "a way of being different from itself," as "a culture is different from itself" and "language is different from itself" (*Deconstruction* 13). In light of this perspective, translation can be seen as another possibility to be open to another community, another culture, and other people, not to become united, but to be in interaction and in dialogue.

Moreover, the same principle can be extended to the relationship between the author, the text, the translator, and the reader. Translators are, of course, first and foremost, readers.³ In a recent essay, Coetzee confesses that he is constantly mindful that his works are being translated into various languages, and that as an author, he has limited control over the process. Indeed, authors like Coetzee, whose names are recognized in the global book market, cannot help but become conscious of the fact that their works are being and will be translated, and through that process, their works become a juncture where different cultures and languages intersect. Because such awareness is inevitable, it is not surprising that in such authors' works, cultural and linguistic confrontations become an important motif. *Slow Man* features various kinds of interplay between different national languages, and the incommensurability of different languages is rendered as a point on which the characters can truly communicate, not because of some hidden homogeneity or universality but because of the absolute difference involved.

In Coetzee's novels, neither the author nor the reader is privileged for his or her knowledge. Rather, the author claims that it is his job to open a future-driven dialogue: "Writing fiction is one [act] of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road" (*Doubling* 246). In the international book market, the reader can easily feel distanced from the novel and the world it depicts, which can result in a generalized and abstract reading of the novel. As if to prevent this from happening, Coetzee translates differences in language into particular individuals in specific situations, and the constant emphasis on the body and the way

it is constructed through language facilitates this process. Thus, ideally, reading *Slow Man* in a language other than English, or translating it into another language, will mean providing one more language that can interact with the languages the novel stages. The moment when “*ovaj glumi*” and “gloomy” collide invites yet another language, another view, to interpret and qualify Paul’s emotional status and the words used to describe his body. In this sense, *Slow Man* is one of those contemporary novels that “trump an ignoble ‘translatability’ not by resisting translation but by demanding it. They ask to be read across several national and political scenes” (Walkowitz 228). *Slow Man* extends the range of address and response beyond the boundary of one national language, transforming the dialogue of the novel into an international one.

In the moment of translation, when the close fit of the reader’s language with her worldview is broken through the intervention of another language, the reader will be able to realize her responsibility toward the text and the culture that produced it. *Slow Man* thus articulates a model of translation that is based on dialogue, the productive instances of interruption in intercultural communication. This model prompts us to think about a translation theory that makes sense of the site and moment of inevitable disruptions. Close attention to the differences that clash and the responsibilities they evoke may be more significant than examination of what is transferred, or even lost, in translation. All translation is doomed to fail, and that may be the very reason why “ethical” readings of translation need to be devised. Rethought in this manner, translation would mean creative introduction of new meanings into the text, provided that the translator and the reader remember what they bring to the text: their bodies, the specificities of their lives and languages—their limits and their possibilities.

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NOTES

1. For instance, in “The Lives of Animals,” Costello insults a Jewish professor and annoys her daughter-in-law with her two emotional and radical lectures on animal rights. As elaborate as her language is when describing her sympathy toward suffering animals, the interpersonal conflicts she causes reveal a certain self-centeredness at the core of her reasoning. The lecture series on animal rights ends with another focus on Costello’s flesh through her son John: “They are not yet on the expressway. He pulls the car over, switches off the engine, takes his mother in his arms. He inhales the smell of cold cream, of old flesh” (*Costello* 115).

2. Because of this, critics like Derek Attridge and Gayatri Spivak often discuss Coetzee’s works in the context of literary ethics. See Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* and J. M. Coetzee and *Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*; and Spivak, “Theory in the Margin: Coetzee’s *Foe* Reading Defoe’s *Crusoe/Roxana*.”

3. Coetzee, like many other critics, notes that translation is primarily a reading practice (*Doubling* 90).

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