

## **Embodied Encounters: The City and an Alternative World of Possibility in J.M. Coetzee's *Slow Man* (2005)**

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Coetzee's move away from South Africa in 2002 and settlement in Australia, another white settler culture with significant similarities in terms of colonial history, indigenous oppression, and multicultural hybridity, coincides with a renewed tension in his new work between the demands of fiction and non-fictional discourses such as philosophy, politics or commentary. The revised theatre of action and narrative point of view move from Coetzee's earlier preoccupation with the plight of the Other who lack the powers of speech (eg Friday in *Foe* or the unwanted dogs in *Disgrace*) and his / Elizabeth Costello's concern for the lives of animals (1999)), to centre on the ageing subject, in particular on a heightened experience of the body, its waning functions and precarious health. The body as a new site of subjectivity in novels like *Elizabeth Costello* (1999, 2003), *Slow Man* (2005) and *Dairy of a Bad Year* (2007), either as decaying ecosystem, vulnerable to the encroachments of time or disease, or disabled and dysfunctional due to accident, demarcates his characters' intimations of mortality, heightening feelings of disempowerment, frustration, even victimisation.

In *Slow Man* in which the protagonist, Paul Rayment, loses a leg in a cycling accident, the urban territory of Adelaide becomes marginalised and the search for alternative forms of being is represented through a narrative self-consciousness about the construction of the text. Paul's resistance to new forms of physical mobility through prosthetic enhancement, is paralleled by a struggle towards fictional mobilisation as demanded by his alter ego, Elizabeth Costello (a character from an earlier work), and

creates a dimension of fictional performativity . But post-modern textual performance, I shall argue, only exposes the liminality of space in this novel, as the narrator/ character hints at other- as yet unknown- realms of fictional possibility through his subjective broodings.

As is often noted, the nature of embodiment – and its failure-- is a central concern in all Coetzee's work, and corporeal suffering and pain are grounds for subjective identity (e.g. Boehmer see Poyner *Approaches* 15; Rita Barnard 40), because the weight and power of the body are undeniable powers of authority. As Coetzee says: 'The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt... It is not that one grants the authority of the suffering body: the suffering takes this authority, that is its power' (*Doubling the Point*, 248).

In Coetzee's recent works, the suffering male body -- as wounded, ill or disabled -- is counterpointed by idealisation of the untouched, perfect body (compared in Elizabeth Costello, to the Hellenic ideal of beauty). The elderly, disabled protagonist of *Slow Man* admires the blooming health of the Croatian caregiver, Marijiana Jokic, for whom he develops a passion, and the angelic beauty of two of her children; in *Diary of a Bad Year* the protagonist, known as JC, who has Parkinson's disease and arthritis, is attracted to the Filipino woman Anya, because of her sexual aura and compact, inviting body. Coetzee moves between these polarized images of perfection and brokenness which anchor his narrative structures, exploring this fascination with beauty. Desire will never be translated into sexual passion for his elderly heroes, and he remains indifferent to any fictional possibility of recuperating any expressivity, dignity or bodily power from their depleted physical formations.

In both *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, the body and its flaws are linked to questions of authorship, and authority in the writing of fiction, and I suggest that the thematics of corporeal enfeeblement can be seen as an analogue to the waning of fictional powers of Coetzee's narrators. The focus on the state of mind in relation to bodily representation, and the pull towards non-fictional discourses appear in *Slow Man* in the metafictional interventions of the authorial alter ego, Elizabeth Costello into Paul Rayment's story, foregrounding the issue of writing a novel. They are typographically imaged in the generic innovation of *Diary of A Bad Year* with its three separate 'narrative' strands blocked out on each page. The protagonist who has illegible handwriting, and poor eyesight, no longer has the endurance to write a novel for which 'you have to be like Atlas, holding up the whole world on your shoulders' –and wants to write opinion instead (Diary, 54). Saying, 'I was never much good at the evocation of the real, and have even less stomach for the task now' (192).

I would her elike to refer to the point made by Derek Attridge (which Marie Herbillon mentioned in her paper) that in *Slow Man*, which begins with an irrefutably 'real' experience, an accident which leads to the loss of a limb, the relationship between what is real and what is imagined comes under scrutiny. The accident triggers Rayment's crisis of mortality and a shift in reality, as he experiences what he later understands to be a near death state; his body spins out of his control when cycling along Magill Rd in Adelaide, his bike is hit by a car. In hospital his leg to be amputated without his permission. Feeling betrayed by his body he vows 'pain is the real thing' [REF]. He is cut off from his past – the man he used to be is just a fading memory (32), and also, it seems, his future (26: 'now a dog's life, says a voice out of a dark cloud'). His immobility leads to confinement in his apartment, dependence on carers to dress his wound, exercise his stump, and teach him to

move with the assistance of a zimmer frame/ crutches. Yet I suggest that representation of this crisis, as the protagonist's physical horizons shrink involves a revision of the meaning of the metropolitan. Places and streets of Adelaide – Magill Rd, Black Hill, Montacute-- now become poignant memories. This change in scale is further marked out by the novel's transnational features—elements which migrate between different languages, societies and cultures linking past and present and suggestive of possible alternative worlds to the present one, even in the future. This transmigration process begins with an embodied urban encounter between Paul and the Croatian migrant Marijanna Jokic and her family. :Paul's growing affections for and dependence on his nurse draw him into the orbit of her children and husband, one which leads him to revise his relationship to his past. I will come back to this.

Coetzee undercuts the level of realism with a metafictional dimension right from the beginning when the narrator says of himself in chapter two, that 'From the opening of the chapter'... he was not behaving well as he could, had not risen to the occasion' (14-15). But his role as author is emphasised only when the author figure Elizabeth Costello suddenly appears in chapter 13, evidently because of Rayment's refusal to progress his life due to his limbo-like state (221) is epitomised by his refusal to wear a prosthetic limb, and his inability to develop the story. In her sudden intrusion Elizabeth Costello shifts the boundaries between reality and representation, for she reiterates to Paul his own thoughts on the accident by repeating the opening of the novel, thus undermining his voice /presence and reinforcing him as no more than a construction in a novel and so in turn raising the question of who is constructing her. In foregrounding the role of writing, the need to tell the story and in challenging his authority, she appropriates his drama into her agenda, by

scripting aspects of his life— as he finds out, when he reads her diary and is provoked to think there might be two parallel universes (QUOTE)

Both characters lack some fundamental forms of embodiment. Paul lacks the motivation to act in ways that would empower his body, refusing to grant it greater autonomy or agency. In other words he rejects current sociological theories which emphasise the relationship between the socialised (i.e. not the natural ) body and the self, in which the corporeal can be shaped and brought under reflexive control with bodily regimes (such as working out at the gym,) requiring self-discipline and agency in order to reproduce a revised self image and modes of behaviour (e.g. the para Olympics) (Burkitt 139) . This line is not pursued. As Sue Kossew says [ REF to Contexts], the borders between mental and bodily states are tested in *Slow Man*, but disability does not bring Paul Rayment into any closer relationship with his body and he does not take advantages of the network of medical, caring relationships available to him postoperation to undertake what is called bodily ‘reform’ required by the amputation: that is, to reconstitute the embodied experience by using the prosthesis that is offered him, and improve his mobility by continuing the rehabilitation classes with the physiotherapist to which he is assigned (CHECK ), or even at the end of the novel to agree to become Rocket man, and drive the car that the Croatian family make for him. [ CUT? In other words the mind –body gap remains as he does not change his mental orientation to order to try and improve himself following the altered physical conditions.]

Elizabeth Costello is essentially parasitic, and has no life outside her character as author; as she points out when Paul turns her out of the apartment. Her role is to motivate him so that he might come back to life, and make the story move on. Hence she takes this germinating kernel of a narrative about his stalled romantic feelings for Marijana Jokic,

down a blind alley (literally), offsetting his unrequited feeling for his caregiver by devising another liaison – this is with the blind Marianna, a woman whom he first spots in a lift in the hospitable and for whom he feels an unaccountable attraction though not knowing she is blind - But as a shadowy and unrealised figure, both because of her blindness and the echo of her name, can she be read as any more than just a linguistic reconstruction of the first Marijana?

Described as ‘a weary deus ex machina’ [REF?], who must mobilise the ‘slow man’, Elizabeth Costello functions both a supplement to Paul in the fictional/textual writing sense, and as an unwanted interlocutor whom he can either resist or confide in about his unrequited love for the nurse Marijana. The corporeal limitations that she shares with Paul, as his alter ego, are projected in portraits that reaffirm their symbiotic relationship through writing /creating. Elizabeth Costello is grey faced and breathing fast on arrival at Paul’s apartment due to her heart condition (82) ; later she is tired and ‘unstrung’ with a bad cough, due to having to live rough after he throws her out-- as she has no home but with him (160) , (220) . The different forms of corporeal suffering –i.e. disability, ill health and ageing -- that she and the 60 year old Paul Rayment represent, come together intersubjectively when she tries to energise his writing and says ‘PUSH’ the mortal envelope [ REF]. As if she is giving birth herself she has a sudden turn, becoming waxen and faint. Paul has to care for her in this crisis and puns ‘ *the halt leading the Halt*’ (84), referring both to their infirmities and to the halting of the story. This use of the Biblical discourse of the halt and the lame furthers the analogy between bodily illness/ disability, the broken body and the body of the novel’s being laid bare as it is assembled from multiple discourses and by the breaking of the fictional illusion—a process in which Coetzee pushes fiction to its limit. Rayment conflates her illness with his physical disability,

in the phrase '*the halt leading the Halt*' (84), while Costello conflates his disability with his age by telling him that his missing leg is nothing but a sign of age (229), and that he too has a heart condition (i.e. an emotional state of being in love) of which he is unaware (198). This symbiosis is reinforced by her offer at the end to be the substitute for Marijana and to live with Paul and provide him with more fiction, hinting that the life of the author is one that consists of continual production, of story telling, rewriting and revising.

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But in the second half of the novel after the romantic/sexual contrivances of Elizabeth Costello, the first/primary level of realism which her appearance interrupts, gathers momentum with reference (albeit in limited way) to the Adelaide setting and the migrant story. Separate from the contest between Raymond and Costello over writing and authorship which occupies centre ground, but running alongside the discussion about these issues, This part of the narrative concerns Paul's engagement with the migrant Croatian family, the Jokics. Differences of cultural heritage and language are therefore marked out in the interactions between the European characters from France (where Paul comes from) and Croatia, with the shadowy presence of Paul's Dutch stepfather (i.e. displacing the Australian presence of Elizabeth Costello). The migrant story of new arrivals within the nation's ethnic, family and class structures is familiar: both Jokic parents are unable to find work, suitable to their professional training, they cannot afford the fees for the school [in Canberra] their son Drago wants to go to and Paul offers to help out financially.

Paul Rayment is a migrant from France as a child and has learnt how to fit in by performing Australianness - a foreigner all his life he can 'pass' as Australian, although not as French. His ambivalences about belonging are focused round his collection of heritage photos of the Australian gold rush of the 1850s by the renowned photographer Antoine

Fauchery. He is aware that the Anglo-Irish core of Australian nationalism, which confers an exclusive entitlement to belong, places him, as a boy from Lourdes, on the outside, a foreigner. But he also invokes the multicultural nation when he talks to Drago Jokic, Marijana's son, about donating this collection to the National Library of Australia on his death, (177), using the collective 'our' in the phrase because 'it is part of our historical record'. This utterance moves him to tears: for such an act might draw them as outsiders (he from Lourdes and Drago from Dubrovnic) into the national framework.

Yet there is another shadowy dimension to belonging and identity in the novel, gestured at in the link between Marianna Jokic, the blind Marianna and the third iteration of this name in the Marianne who is a figure on the French national postage stamp, a symbol of liberty and a national emblem ? Hat [ REF]. As a child Paul always associated this Marianne with his mother's reading (the stamps were on the books from the Librairie Hachette what were sent to her in Australia) and his fond evocation of this name may be linked both to his affection for his mother and his emotional predilection for Mrs Jokic which extends to his wish to support her family, So in these poetic associations and echoes of names ( he does the same with Marijana's younger daughter Ljuba or Ljubica whose name in Russian means love (Lyubov) which he 'translates into French aimee or amour' [30 ] which evoke a different kind of desire, another picture emerges of a semi-autobiographical subjective world and of past affections that go back to boyhood and to family relationships. This is hinted at in the opening chapter where in the post accident state of shock he thinks of his family and the fact that he has no children to be his heirs, *'Those into whose lives you are born do not pass away. you bear them with you, as you hope to be borne by those who come after you.'* (8) The word 'love' is not mentioned in connection with his mother but it is with Mrs Jokic of whom he thinks of in terms of her

maternal quality, as she would have 'helped him out of childlessness,.. and still have love left over, mother love' (34).

This yearning dimension of the novel is marked by a new discourse on the universal concept of love as a feeling, value or aspiration. Love as Rayment says, 'the biggest of the big words' (213). It may be related to the earlier discourse on caring based on his amputation and on his thoughts, just after the accident, when he recalls the words of his namesake, or name saint, St Paul, that in the afterlife 'all shall love all with a pure love as God loves' (33). Love is not seen as necessarily redeeming or a counter to pain, vulnerability, and physical deterioration, although perhaps, even if just aspirational, it speaks of healing. In narrative terms it is a way of moving forward into a relationship with the Jokic family, that symbolically might be seen as an emotional prosthesis, substituting for the artificial leg which he had refused. I suggest that this universal term speaks not only of the world of the novel but embraces earlier works. In Coetzee's autobiographical novels, are confessions of the sins of love; in *Boyhood*, of the betrayal of maternal love and in *Youth* the betrayal of sexual love. So the portrait in *Slow Man* of frustrated romantic love, the accusations of being passionless, the willingness to sublimate love into caring but platonic relationships such as becoming godfather to the three Jokic children, might be considered not just as moving on from these earlier self exculpating scenarios, but also as part of a mental, emotional migration to future worlds.

*Slow Man* is about the protagonist's migration, one that has already taken place, so it is unlike the traditional migrant novel with its enigma of arrival, the subject's engagement with a different world, and its genealogical accounting – the telling of stories that satisfy the search for roots -- and its concluding reflections on mortality suggest the future belongs only to the migrant family, [for as Paul Rayment says of himself and

Elizabeth Costello, 'There is no such thing as a new life' (PAGE?). Yet from the beginning are hints that a new world can be found; the accident allows Paul to censure his earlier life as 'frivolous', 'a wasted chance' because he had been 'sliding through the world', He utters the sentiment that 'the cut seems to have marked off past from future with such uncommon cleanness that it gives new meaning to the word new, By the sign of this cut let a new life commence'. (26) Although the setting of this novel in Adelaide suggests some continuation of Rayment's pre-accident life, the novel is making significant internal transitions, as his new relations with the migrant family show, and the exploration of the meaning of love; these move ultimately take the place mentally of the playground of the city that he had once thought was his.

The commencement of a new life is the subject of Coetzee's next novel, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) a story about migrants who are survivors, cleansed of their pasts, making a new start, by being assigned a new home and language, searching (by the father / god father figure, and child) for a lost mother and the possibilities of new solidarities. In this context the performance of *Slow Man* is not just about the struggle to write a novel, but at another level an enactment of Coetzee's/the narrator's fuller response to Caritas, in seeking an alternative mode of being, straddling the boundary between present and future and ultimately in *The Childhood of Jesus* crossing into the imagined utopian/ dystopian worlds of Novilla/Estrella.

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