

## On Not Yet Being Christian: J.M. Coetzee's *Slow Man* and the Ethics of Being (Un)Interesting

Craig Smith  
Independent Scholar

*Slow Man*, J.M. Coetzee's first Australian novel, has been widely perceived as somewhat of a non-event in an otherwise celebrated literary career. As Roman Silvani explains, the novel "got mixed reviews"<sup>1</sup> upon its initial publication and subsequently "has not provoked a great number of literary critics to analyze it" (135), making it a marginal text in the Coetzeean canon. The relatively few extant commentaries on *Slow Man* are in broad agreement on two issues: on the one hand, it appears radically disconnected from the fiction Coetzee wrote before emigrating to Australia,<sup>2</sup> and, on the other, it is anything but a fast-paced, stimulating novel. One might be tempted to suspect that there is a connection to be made here, and, indeed, critical opinion tends toward this conclusion. If, as Tim Mehigan contends, "Coetzee's thematic concerns in the first novel published after his relocation to Australia bear no South African imprint, nor even a faint afterimage of South Africa" ("Slow Man" 192), the apparent correlative of this emerges in critical assessments of the novel that deem it to be "a slow book" (Silvani 135) that is less "successful" when contrasted with Coetzee's other novels (Hayes 225). If the book's initial minimal "momentum...is lost" (Hope) with the appearance in the novel of Coetzee's familiar Australian authorial alter-ego, the "tiresome" and "tedious" (Banville) Elizabeth Costello, that loss of momentum has much to do with *Slow Man*'s apparent inability to engage with its readers' emotional and critical sensibilities following its author's relocation to an Australian setting that, in *Slow Man* at least, does not bring with it the contextual relevancy attendant to his South African fiction.

The two charges against *Slow Man*—that its narrative is dull and that it is unlike Coetzee's earlier South African fiction—thus account for its lukewarm reception and relative critical neglect. Standing behind these charges, indeed uniting them, appears to be a related third charge of ethico-political irrelevancy. As Patrick Hayes explains, "[o]ne of the reasons *Slow Man* was felt by many to be disappointing is because of its interest in a subject that...seems rather unimportant" (253). What is interesting to me about the discussions of *Slow Man* that depict it as uninteresting, disengaged from his earlier work, and of limited relevance is not so much their content, with which I tend to disagree, but the extent to which the novel anticipates and pre-empts its own reception. As I shall

argue, *Slow Man* takes an interest in how it is read, not so much for its own sake, but rather to interrogate the values and assumptions that lie behind how contemporary critics and readers have responded to it.

If, as Simon Gikandi argues in a recent publication of *PMLA*, “one of the most important developments in literary studies in recent years has been the turn to questions of human rights” (521), *Slow Man* seems a novel deliberately designed *not* to appeal to prevailing critical priorities. Viewed alongside other Coetzeean novels, *Slow Man*’s ethico-political obliqueness stands out, not because it steers clear of issues pertinent to human rights-oriented readers but, on the contrary, precisely because it approaches them so closely without directly addressing them. A novel that announces its own Australianness, *Slow Man* speaks to the vexed and timely issues of national identity and belonging and challenges the still-powerful one-nation discourse that casts Australianness as primarily a white, Anglo-Celtic affair.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the novel’s silence on the politics of race and immigration in contemporary Australia is striking. The post-9/11 context in which Coetzee produced *Slow Man* disappears entirely from the manifest content of a novel whose thematic interest in national belonging in Australia confines itself to “ex-Europeans” in the form of a family of Croatian immigrants and Paul Rayment, the French-born protagonist with a step-father he calls “The Dutchman” (172, 66). Although published in 2005, several years into Australia’s participation in the controversial War on Terror, *Slow Man* takes place in the year 2000, prior to the attacks on the World Trade Center, and thus deliberately, if subtly, removes its narrative from the more ideologically-fraught post-9/11 era that has seen the questions of national identity and belonging in Australia take on a different, and at times violently racist, inflection as it has had to contend with the dilemmas of immigration and asylum-seeking refugees in a wartime context.

That this context is absent in *Slow Man*—is, in fact, excised from it—becomes all the more apparent when it is contrasted with Coetzee’s next novel, *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), in which the author-protagonist, J.C., writes an opinion piece wherein he laments that a “decent, generous, easygoing people close their eyes while strangers who arrive on their shores pretty much helpless and penniless are treated with such heartlessness” (111). What is interesting about the contrast between *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year* is the way that the earlier novel deliberately masks the shared historical and political contexts out of which both texts emerge. If, in *Diary of a Bad Year*, J.C. can speak critically of a national indifference to “system of deterrences” that is indeed a “spectacle of deterrence” embodied in the “Baxter Detention Centre out in the South Australian Desert” (112), it is the comparative (if false) quietness of the times, its lack of spectacle, that characterizes *Slow Man*. Though there is social criticism to be found in *Slow Man*’s exposure of the “well-intentioned but ultimately indifferent young people going through the motions of caring for [Rayment]” (15), the critique of youthful indifference (or of what J.C. calls heartlessness) is not tied to the

particularities of a contemporary Australian dilemma, as in *Diary of a Bad Year*, but is instead a generalized, timeless concern; Rayment, after all, “is not the first person in the world to suffer an unpleasant accident, not the first old man to find himself in hospital” (115). The questions of human rights that for Gikandi have become of paramount concern to literary criticism are thus not as easily broached in *Slow Man*.

My point in calling attention to *Slow Man*’s refusal to be judged, and indeed lauded, according to a critical paradigm that places a premium on literature’s contribution to human rights is *not* that the novel has nothing to say about or to contribute to the project of human rights. Certainly, a strong case could be made that its thematic concern with disability and aging, and with the elderly and infirm as signifiers of alterity, may suggest ways in which contemporary human rights movements have developed a critical blindspot in relation to the elderly and their inhabiting of what *Slow Man*’s protagonist deems a “zone of humiliation” (13, 61). Nevertheless, whatever interest *Slow Man* displays in broadening the scope of rights-centric discourses, its author’s primary interests lie elsewhere, in critical reading practices, in what is and is not fashionable, and in the priorities that guide the work of literary interpretation in order to lay bare not what is gained by the turn in literary criticism described by Gikandi, but what is *lost*. In taking up its own critical interpretation, the novel invites the consideration of what ethical positions may be rendered effectively mute by the paradoxically *uncritical* privileging of a politics of human rights on the part of literary critics.

Returning, then, to the critical dismissal of *Slow Man* discussed above, the relative neglect suffered by the novel suggests its failure to interest its readers in a couple of senses: as a narrative it seems to have proven too slow, too uneventful, and too lacking in passion to encourage reading for the plot; as a text to be read and analyzed according to the prevailing values guiding the work of literary criticism, it, unlike the author’s South African work, appears not to be of sufficient interest to the human rights-oriented critic. I suggest that these levels of disinterest are closely inter-connected in *Slow Man*. Put simply, it is not just that *Slow Man* has proven to be of less interest to casual and academic readers than earlier novels; in what is undoubtedly a risky move for a novelist, Coetzee actively courts a particular kind of disinterest in *Slow Man*—not to the point of being boring, which would encourage readers to stop reading, but rather to irk readers into a kind of self-reflective questioning. In his review of the novel, Anthony Gardner hints at what this might look like when he wonders why Coetzee’s writing seems “so much easier to admire than enjoy.” The praise that *Slow Man* has garnered, and to which Gardner’s question speaks, suggests a divide between a genuine appreciation of its *technical* virtuosity and an equal displeasure with its *affective* flatness; undeniably well-written, it neither performs nor excites passion. The appraisals of *Slow Man* that deem it to be wanting, at least in a relative sense, thus seem underwritten by an implicit question: Why, given the kinds of texts he has previously produced, has Coetzee written *this*

uninspired and uninspiring novel? However, the question that *Slow Man* asks its readers to consider instead relates not to the novel or its author but to ourselves. If we, as readers, find that our emotional reactions to *Slow Man* range, as was the case with one hostile reviewer, “from impatience to a dull rage to a sort of despairing boredom” (Prose), what does it say about us that *Slow Man*, as it stands, fails to interest us? Or, perhaps, to interest us much?

*Slow Man* is thus a novel that anticipates, and even stages, its own reading and reception. Overtly lacking, in critics’ eyes, the qualities which made Coetzee’s earlier, prize-winning fiction noteworthy and valuable, *Slow Man* is a novel self-consciously without ethico-political urgency and one which “goes nowhere and announces that this is so” (Marais 193). Tellingly, one of the central characters even worries that the narrative may produce “boredom” in its readers (227). My argument here is that the novel’s lack of movement, lack of urgency, and, for want of a better term, *uninterestingness* ought to be considered thematically central to the work itself, indeed, is precisely the point in a novel that makes functional use of its own relative lightness, triviality, and unimportance. *Slow Man*’s unwillingness to rise to an occasion, its disavowal of contextual relevance, and its refusal to generate interest in its own plot constitute its most challenging ethical position on the practices of novel writing and reading. Focussing self-consciously on an uninteresting character living in unremarkable times, Coetzee’s novel eschews an aesthetic and critical paradigm that invests heavily in interest, both in terms of readerly enjoyment and political urgency, in order to make the ethical point that there are alternative values by which we might wish to estimate the worth of a novel or character.

## II

If *Slow Man* can be perceived, as its title implicitly suggests, as slow and uninteresting, this might reasonably be perceived as resulting from those three most basic of narrative components: character, setting, and plot. The novel takes as its central focus the story of Paul Rayment, a semi-reclusive man in his sixties who attempts to come to terms with the amputation of a leg late in life after being struck by a car while biking in suburban Adelaide. There is, I wish to observe, nothing *inherently* interesting or uninteresting, relevant or irrelevant, urgent or otherwise, about such a narrative situation. It all depends on what use an author makes of it. Indeed, part of the game that the novel plays with us as readers is to extend an invitation to imagine what avenues for creative expression we might choose if we, like Elizabeth Costello, the fictional novelist who appears as a character partway through the novel and, improbably, also appears to be its author, could say to Rayment, “You came to me” (81). Would we take up the offer to continue this unbidden narrative situation or cast about for a different, more promising visitation and leave the story of

Paul Rayment untold? Would we allow our protagonist to linger in a state of malaise and to indulge in feelings of resentment directed at the boy, “Wayne something-or-other Bright or Blight” (20), whose careless driving resulted in the amputation of Rayment’s leg, and at the “welfare system” (22) that forces on Rayment the ministrations of the day-nurse Sheena, whose babytalk he “cannot abide” (24), before ultimately “confess[ing] his love” for his Croatian caretaker, Marijana Jokić (77)? Would we, as Costello does, try to spice up the narrative by arranging for Rayment’s involvement in a bizarre sexual encounter with the supposedly blind Marijana, or encourage him to “[c]onfront Marijana! Have a proper scene!” after it appears that her son Drago has stolen some of his prized photographs (227)? Or, alternatively, would we make of the original narrative situation a novel entirely different in nature from *Slow Man*? Would our protagonist be one possessed of an indefatigable spirit who treats his accident as but one more hardship in a life full of them, or would he be predisposed to succumb to depression and, ultimately, opt for a dramatic suicide to escape his now-wretched condition? Which of a potentially infinite number of narrative possibilities—from the optimistic to the pessimistic, the realistic to the unrealistic, the clichéd to the innovative, the dull to the dramatic—would we opt for in carrying on with this story? Ultimately, as diverting as such speculation might prove to be, we are left to grapple with the text at hand, not with the text that might otherwise have been.

It is at this point that the reader must acknowledge the deliberateness of Coetzee’s narrative choices in making something of a narrative situation that may very well have, as Costello suggests, come to him, “along with the pallor and the stoop and the crutches and the flat that [Rayment] hold[s] on to so doggedly and the photograph collection and the rest” (81), in only the most incomplete of forms. Of the range of Paul Rayment’s that could have been, Coetzee presents us with a central character who is, in his own eyes, “humdrum” and “above all boring” (53, 164), whose defining characteristic is his eponymous slowness, his “tortoise character” (228). In this way *Slow Man* quite literally pre-empts its critics’ claims concerning Rayment’s “refusal to behave in an interesting manner” (Thorne) and engages in a self-conscious exploration of what it means to be a novel centered on so uninteresting, so non-dynamic, so seemingly unliterary a character as Paul Rayment.

For Zoë Wicomb, Rayment is an unliterary character because he “fails to act and thus to embody character” (217). This failure of Rayment’s is, in turn, central to how *Slow Man* “turn[s] itself inside out” in order to “dramatize the real difficulties that beset the writer trying to produce a story from an initial, inchoate idea” (Wicomb 227, 218). Coetzee’s decision suddenly and abruptly to bring the fictional novelist Elizabeth Costello into the narrative in the novel’s thirteenth chapter utterly transforms what is at first a seemingly straightforwardly realist text about a cautious, emotionally reserved, fairly unlikeable man into a metafictional commentary on the work of the novelist, one that displays

the inner workings of the novelist's craft in order to lay bare the conventions of narrative. In staging the struggle of the author with the material body of the text, a struggle that in *Slow Man* is inseparable from Costello's struggle as a character with Rayment, Coetzee redirects our attention from the novel as a straightforwardly realist narrative *product*, to an awareness of it as *process*. The process Coetzee permits us to see, moreover, is failing, or is at least not entirely successful: the novel we read is never entirely the novel that Costello herself seems to want to write.

Throughout the remainder of the novel, after her initial appearance on the scene, Costello, who finds herself "wasting time, being wasted by time" (141), pleads with Rayment to act, goads, chivies, and taunts him with the express purpose of transforming him into what, in her eyes (not to mention Zoë Wicomb's), he patently is not: a bonafide literary protagonist. Near the novel's conclusion, in a growing state of exasperation with her uncooperative protagonist, Costello once again exhorts Rayment to act, before "we," fellow characters and readers alike, "all expire of boredom" (227). She advises him,

Remember, Paul, it is passion that makes the world go round. You are not an analphabete, you must know that. In the absence of passion the world would still be void and without form. Think of Don Quixote. *Don Quixote* is not about a man sitting in a rocking chair bemoaning the dullness of La Mancha. It is about a man who claps a basin on his head and clammers onto the back of his faithful old plough-horse and sallies forth to do great deeds. Emma Rouault, Emma Bovary, goes out and buys fancy clothes even though she has no idea how she is going to pay for them. *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... Become major, Paul. Live like a hero. That is what the classics teach us. Be a main character. Otherwise what is life for? (228-29)

What is striking about the advice Costello offers Rayment, which is, in essence, a plea for him to be a better and more interesting literary character by being more passionate, is what it suggests about the narrative medium in which she works. Crucially, passion, which motivates action, grabs attention, and creates interest, is what engenders narrative with its world-forming power. Costello's advice to Rayment directs our attention not simply to Rayment's unwillingness to have passion dictate how he lives his life but also and more importantly to Costello's perception of passion as that which renders narrative viable and valuable.

Given the understanding of narrative articulated by the text's author stand-in, the passion of a character, the narrative, or the author who stands behind them is in many ways strikingly absent from *Slow Man*, Rayment's ill-advised and awkward declarations of love for Marijana aside. Indeed, in terms of a marked lack of passion, Rayment is by no means alone in the novel; nor is he even the least passionate of characters. Marijana, who provokes an uncharacteristic passion from a man who "is not sure he has ever liked passion, or approved of it" (45), is herself a less-than-passionate woman. Viewed by Rayment as "quite matronly" with "the ability to annul sex" (27, 30), Marijana is "sturdy" of build and of character (30), "solid, matter-of-fact" (174), possessed of great "energy" in the carrying

out of household chores (50), and a “*decent woman...through and through*” (32, emphasis Coetzee’s). On an ethical scale, these qualities may weigh in Marijana’s favour, but they do not make her any more of a legitimate literary character than Rayment; he may be no Don Quixote, but nor is she an Emma Bovary. Similarly, Marijana’s teenaged son, Drago, has interests—in motorcycles, in attending an expensive boarding school that will prepare him for service in the Australian navy, and in the possibilities that the new technologies of the digital age hold for recently arrived immigrants to feel at home in an Australia that has not been entirely welcoming—but he is never passionate in his attitude or actions, not even when Costello reminds Rayment that he is “in love with Mrs. Jokić” in front of her son (137). Far from the “great bear of a man, enraged and drunk,” possessed of “Balkan passions” imagined by Rayment (133), Marijana’s husband, Miroslav, does not respond violently to his wife’s unwelcome suitor but instead displays a shrewd, mercenary mindset, suggesting that Rayment could “make a trust fund for Drago” (147). Marijana, co-participant with Rayment in what the latter suspects is one of Costello’s “idle biologico-literary experiment[s]” (114), treats her sexual encounter with him as a kind of business arrangement, accepting as payment the four hundred and fifty dollars Rayment offers (107) and, in the act itself, “seems to know how to contain herself” (109).

*Slow Man* presents its readers, then, with somewhat of a paradox: in a novel that self-consciously sketches a brief literary history of narrative, from the epic poetry of Homer to the prose fiction of Cervantes and Flaubert, in which passion figures prominently, passion remains something to be discussed rather than displayed. Given that *Slow Man*, according to its own metafictional conceit, is putatively the product of the same character who happens to be the novel’s chief proponent of literary passion, Costello’s inability to people her novel with the kind of passionate characters she values is a rather curious failure on her part, just as it is a curious feature of *Slow Man* that the novel seems to invite precisely the kind of lukewarm reception it received from readers and critics. In a case of life mirroring fiction, it as if the experiences of *Slow Man*’s readers repeat Rayment’s own when he visits the Adelaide public library to read Costello’s novels and finds himself unmoved by the “colourless, odourless, inert, and depressive gas given off by [their] pages” (122). *Slow Man* thus does something remarkable in that it invites its own dismissal as a narrative *by the terms of evaluation that Costello herself brings to it*. What, then, are we to make of Coetzee’s strategy? What game is he after in *Slow Man*?

The case could of course be made that Coetzee’s goal is corrective; that Costello is simply incorrect in her understanding of how narrative works. Against Costello’s assertion that passion is “what makes the world go round” (228)—a claim that seems to parallel Peter Brooks’s argument, in *Reading for the Plot*, that desire is “the motor of narrative” (52)—Coetzee may simply be out to remind his readers that the world will go round as it always has regardless of human passion, or, to put it less

literally, that every narrative need not possess a motor. For every heroine of passion like Emma Bovary there is an Emma Woodhouse, protagonist of a novel that prompted Charlotte Brontë to declare of its author that “the Passions are perfectly unknown to her” (161). Against the model of heroism embodied in the passionate and adventurous sallying forth of Don Quixote, we might balance a figure like Coetzee’s own seemingly passionless hero, Michael K, who, when given the opportunity to join the “men from the mountains...who blew up railway trucks and mined roads and attacked farmhouses and drove off stock and cut one town off from another” (108), chooses to “stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening” (109). However, even if Costello’s understanding of the role of passion in the narrative medium in which she and Coetzee work is incorrect, or is simply partial, this is neither the only nor even the most important point in play in *Slow Man*.

Rather, by calling attention to the prominence that passion has possessed within the narrative tradition while at the same time focussing on a protagonist who, both because of who he is naturally and because of the narrative situation in which he is presented to readers, *cannot* be a hero of passion like Don Quixote or an Emma Bovary, the novel invites us to attend to what fills the void left by passion’s absence. What we are left with is a novel that instead of carrying out what Costello considers to be the proper business of narrative, focussing on a passionate hero and generating readerly interest in the varied significances of his comedic rise or tragic fall, expends its energies in alternative directions. Crucially, these directions are not foreign to the long narrative tradition into which *Slow Man* self-consciously places itself, but, rather, have been displaced from the center of narrative practice and critical concern. It is this displacement that *Slow Man* arguably seeks to set right.

If *Slow Man* “abounds with references to lessons,” if it can be read as a text that offers readers “a lesson in reading, which is to say re-reading” (Wicomb 215), the lesson being to take things slowly, as the novel we think we are reading may not be what we actually read, the case could well be made that *Slow Man* thematizes literary lessons themselves. A self-conscious work of narratological “fiction-as-criticism” (Dovey 9), *Slow Man* both takes up literary lessons as one of its subjects and offers lessons of its own that are neither straightforwardly earnest nor entirely tongue-in-cheek. Reflecting on his childhood, Rayment remembers being told the “story of a woman who in a moment of absent-mindedness stuck a tiny sewing-needle into the palm of her hand. Unnoticed, the needle climbed up the woman’s veins and in the fullness of time pierced her heart and killed her” (55). As he remembers it, the story “was presented to him as a caution against treating needles carelessly” (55). The story that Rayment carries with him from childhood is significant to *Slow Man*’s thematic treatment of lessons. It surfaces not just as a singular narrative, an example that proves Costello’s point when she tells Rayment that stories teach us “many lessons” (96). Rather, because its moral is not something it carries but which is woven into its very fabric, because its



content does not simply *contain* a caution but *is* one, the childhood story exemplifies narrative as a literary genre: in it, the narrative act is distilled in its purest essence; story and lesson are one and the same. Yet, as Rayment later tells Costello, “[w]ith a little ingenuity...one can torture a lesson out of the most haphazard sequence of events” (198). In retrospect, from the perspective of adulthood, Rayment’s childhood story “reads more like a fairytale,” prompting him to wonder if steel is “really antipathetic to life” (55). The story Rayment recalls may well be a lesson, may indeed prefigure the capacity of all narratives, including *Slow Man*, to impart lessons to their audience, but this capacity receives ambivalent treatment in Coetzee’s novel. In a novel concerned to explore what it is that narrative *does*, one of the possibilities held up by the text, then, is that narratives possess a lesson-teaching function, even if one of the lessons embedded in *Slow Man* is that we should be wary about what kinds of lessons can be gleaned from literature.

The lesson that, after a lifetime of reading and writing, Costello sees fit to impart to Rayment, that the classics teach us to live as though we were literary characters, to be ruled by passion, to *be interesting*, is a lesson that comes to us only as one of a range of possible lessons on offer in *Slow Man*. Indeed, one of the lessons Rayment learns, a lesson familiar to Coetzee’s readers, has to do with the meaning of his own humanity. Rayment’s accident forces him to become a “body that...has grown ponderous” as a result of “[t]he blow [that] catches him from the right” in the novel’s opening sentence (1). The lesson Rayment learns is that he is not the disembodied being “with an undiminished soul-life” that he believed himself to be, that his body is not “just a sack of blood and bones that he is forced to carry around” (32), because, as he explains to Costello, his life “has consisted in...being rammed into the physical day after day” since his accident on Magill Road (234-5). Like the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, who learns that his torturers “were interested only in demonstrating to [him] what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well” and in doing so “show[ed] [him] the meaning of humanity” (113), Rayment similarly discovers that to be human is to be a body capable of great suffering.

Among the lessons that *Slow Man* carries, this lesson concerning the meaning of our humanity is perhaps paramount. In this regard, Coetzee’s novel might come across as somewhat old-fashioned, not unlike its protagonist, whose affection for Marijana is “true, old-fashioned love” and whose relentless contempt for the contemporary era prompts Drago to ask if he “hate[s] things if they are new” (94, 178). Crucially, in *Slow Man*, old-fashionedness is not simply a chief characteristic of the protagonist; it animates the novel and its thematic concerns. In exploring what it means to be human, Coetzee’s novel does not simply hearken back to earlier novels, but to the origins of Western narrative itself. The Homeric allusions that surface in *Slow Man*—in Rayment’s sense that his accident has left him *unstrung* (27) and in Costello’s imagining of the gods living

“in their own gated community,” virtually indistinguishable in nature from the humans whom they “love” or “punish” depending on their whims (190)—serve to remind us of the long history of narratives teaching us about our humanity, for what lesson does the *Iliad* impart if it does not teach that mortality is all that separates humanity from the gods who behave like us?

The deliberate and self-conscious old-fashionedness of a novel that contains characters who observe that “we are complicated creatures, we human beings” is of relevance to a novel that casts the era of which it is a product as one which attaches no value to the kind of man “who spent a year of his life putting together a duck out of cogs and springs” (158, 174). Like Miroslav Jokić’s feat of engineering in cobbling together something from the past and making it run again, *Slow Man* turns to the past to ask again a question with a literary heritage millennia long. *Slow Man*’s pursuance of this question leads to its running the same risks Paul Rayment runs in his preference for “feel[ing] natural” rather than “look[ing] natural” (59), in his deep longing for a form of care that is more than just “orthodox nursing practice” (63), and, especially, in his self-appointed mission to “save history” via his collection of Faucherys (48): *Slow Man* risks, that is, being perceived as “out of date” (23), replete with “sententious, old-geezerish pronouncements” (21), as useless as Miroslav’s mechanical duck, as laughable as Rayment in his desire to do good by “extend[ing] the shield of his benevolent protection” over the Jokić family (77), and as irrelevant as the preserving of photographic records of the past that are not nearly as “fixed” or “immutable” as Rayment initially believes (64).

The risks that Coetzee takes in *Slow Man* are thus risks taken in full awareness; they also, to my mind, exhibit Coetzee’s particular brand of courage in writing the novel. To some extent, the questions it pursues *are* old-fashioned; exploring the meaning of our humanity seems more fully to belong to a bygone era than to our own. To a utilitarian perspective, hallmark of the “brave new world” in which Rayment lives (23), the relevance of inquiring into such matters is negligible; the usefulness of exploring what narrative does is doubtful; the treatment of literary passion as a literary subject is potentially laughable, most especially when it is undertaken in earnest. *Slow Man* denies none of these claims. The paradox it presents is that both it and its central character *are* old-fashioned, useless, silly, and irrelevant and yet somehow, crucially, ultimately worthwhile. Paul Rayment *is* passionless, boring, incapable of living like a hero and yet worth reading or writing about all the same. *Slow Man* asks questions that it acknowledges are without immediate use value yet insists that these questions ought to be asked anyway.

Despite Rayment’s ever-present fear of being laughed at, of appearing ridiculous, and of being pitiable, these are the very qualities that, ultimately, reveal him to be a genuine literary protagonist. Near the novel’s conclusion, in the final scene that very well may not qualify for the literary-critical adjective “climactic,” Costello mockingly refers to

Rayment as her “knight of the doleful countenance” (256), referencing the hero of Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. Like his similarly “old-fashioned” literary ancestor (Cervantes 9), Rayment is a combination of the pitiable and the noble, the ridiculous and the righteous, the silly and the sublime. Rayment’s blindfolded, smartly-dressed participation in what amounts to a sexual encounter with a disfigured prostitute is as absurd and comical as Quixote’s mistaking ramshackle inns for castles or herds of sheep for clashing armies, his famous tilting at windmills, or his numerous defeats at the hands of opponents he creates in sallying forth in search of adventure and fame. Yet, like Cervantes’s hero, Rayment is basically, as Marijana states, “a good man” (250), one whose vision of how life might be lived is both appealing and at odds with the prevailing values that contribute to his being dismissed as valueless in his contemporary world. If Don Quixote is to be judged not only by his actions but also in light of the “depraved and miserable times” in which he undertakes them (Cervantes 50), then Cervantes’s novel is as likely to produce “[i]ncreased sympathy for a protagonist who increasingly reveals himself to be an intelligent, well-intentioned, self-doubting man, the victim of his fellow man as well as of his own presumption” as it is to produce scorn or derision (Allen 45). Something similar happens in *Slow Man*, as Rayment’s voicing of an equivalent displeasure with his own times transforms him into a Quixotic descendent of sorts. As such, it cannot simply be dismissed as the habitual griping of a grumpy, lonely, suddenly-disabled old man, but is instead at the heart of the text’s ethical concerns.

While it is undeniable that Rayment considers himself let down *personally* by “the caring professions” (23), this does not lessen the broader ethical charge levelled at the era that has shaped them: that we do not take sufficient care of one another; that we fail to show enough interest in each other’s well-being. Coetzee encapsulates the spirit of the times early in the novel: “If in this new world the crippled or the infirm or the indigent or the homeless wish to eat from rubbish bins and spread their bedroll in the nearest entranceway, let them do so: let them huddle tight, and if they wake up alive the next morning, good on them” (23). As foolish as Rayment’s attitudes and actions make him throughout the novel, it is difficult to fault him, completely, for wanting more and for expecting better than this. It is also difficult to judge Rayment too harshly for the values by which he professes to live. He explains to Costello,

Ever since the day of my accident, ever since I could have died but seem to have been spared, I have been haunted by the idea of doing good. Before it is too late I would like to perform some act that will be—excuse the word—a blessing... So: *Would Jesus approve?* That is the question I put to myself nowadays, continually. That is the standard I try to meet. (155-56)

Like Don Quixote’s pronouncements concerning his duty “to hinder violence and oppression, and succour all people in misery” (Cervantes 128), an admirable if presumptuous duty he is woefully inadequate in carrying out, Rayment’s words may produce ridicule or respect. Delivered

with the solemnity he feels suits them, Rayment's words here border on being silly, particularly given his own unwillingness to forgive "the boy who drove his car into me, no matter what Jesus may say" (156). The combination of solemnity with absurdity in the character of a protagonist, however, need not eventuate in the former being overwhelmed by the latter. Indeed, the combination is a hallmark of many of Coetzee's protagonists, the long line of "fool-heroes" that includes Elizabeth Costello herself (Hayes 249); it also characterizes the literary antecedents, from Cervantes's famous hero to those of Samuel Beckett, who contribute to the making of Rayment's character. Arguably, what makes these well-known literary protagonists interesting, from an ethical viewpoint, is precisely this combination: their value emerges not in spite of their ridiculousness—the practical untenability of their viewpoints, the hopeless ineffectuality of their actions—but because of it.

Rayment's admission of his own shortcomings certainly ironizes his solemn pronouncement—by what means does Rayment hope to gain Jesus's approval if not by attending to his words?—but it does not deprive it completely of the ethical weight with which Rayment hopes it will be imbued. Moreover, while the explanation Rayment offers in his own defense may betray a hint that his motivation is in part self-serving—his fear of judgment, of being found wanting, is palpable in his desire to do good before time runs out on him<sup>4</sup>—what motivates Rayment is arguably less important than what he identifies as his guiding principles and what they, in turn, suggest about the meaning of his character and actions in light of the world in which he lives. The Christian-inspired rhetoric Rayment uses, which can only be used apologetically, half in embarrassment, half out of fear of giving offence, treads the line between being comical and being profound. Perhaps tainted by a whiff of the spate of merchandise bearing the evangelical Christian slogan "What Would Jesus Do?", Rayment's concern with the approval of Jesus still retains the power to suggest a valuable guide to ethical behavior. If, like Costello and some of the novel's reviewers, we are bored by Rayment, if we grow frustrated with his character, *Slow Man* seeks to turn the tables on us by asking us to consider the implications of our rejection of him. Why is it that a character who makes of the ethical content of Christianity a guide for living should be less interesting and thus less worth reading about than, say, a vain adulteress like Emma Bovary or a madman like Don Quixote? What does this preference suggest to us about who we are?

In confronting his readers with the suggestion that there might well be worse things for a character to do than to make Jesus's approval the standard by which he lives his life, Coetzee does not simply ask his readers to take a moment to take stock of their own standards and values; he also asks us to consider, from an ethical standpoint, the novel genre itself and the standards by which it operates and is judged. As a genre that has historically risen to prominence in the modern era and largely on the basis of its ability to create interesting characters and place them in interesting situations, that has been prized, as its name suggests, on its

*novelty* value, the novel has tended to place a higher premium on interesting characters than on good ones, while novel readers have tended to prefer to read about passionate heroes as opposed to ethically upstanding ones. Writing about Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee takes note of these tendencies when he explains that the "disobedience that Crusoe claims as his original sin is in fact a precondition of the interest in his story. No one wants to read about docile sons" ("*Robinson Crusoe*" 20). If Coetzee expresses concern about the ethical implications of the prominent place that interestingness has assumed as a criterion for evaluating the worth of a novel, he shares this concern not only with Cervantes, whose *Don Quixote* finds its contemporary counterpart, at least in a limited sense, in *Slow Man*, but also with another "master" of the novel who has earned Coetzee's admiration, Fyodor Dostoevsky. Despite the Russian author's reputation for offering brilliant insights into human psychology, Dostoevsky is, for Coetzee, "not a psychological novelist at all," as "he is finally not interested in the psyche, which he sees as an arena of game playing" (*Doubling* 249); this constitutes Dostoevsky's "ethical critique" of what are "merely ways of making oneself into the hero of a story for the modern age—merely ways of being interesting" (244). The dismissal of what is *merely interesting* that Coetzee perceives in Dostoevsky and that is crucial to his own *Slow Man* suggests that the work of the novelist living and writing in the era of modernity entails, for Coetzee, the ethical obligation to offer readers more than just an interesting tale.

At the conclusion of one of the interviews with David Attwell collected in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee responds to a question about grace in *Age of Iron* by noting that he is "not a Christian, or not yet" (*Doubling* 250). Coetzee's response offers a fascinating, if discomfiting, suggestion that Christianity exerts a powerful pull on the author's sympathies despite its historical ambivalence in a number of colonial contexts, including Coetzee's native South Africa and in his adopted Australian homeland. A reiteration of this idea appears more than two decades later, when, in a letter to friend and fellow author, Paul Auster, Coetzee explains "I would not be who I am without...that aberrant Jewish prophet Jesus of Nazareth" (*Here and Now* 146). Coetzee's fictional and non-fictional utterances alike speak not to something so personal as the author's faith but rather to Christianity's lingering, if not entirely willed, ethical appeal. Moreover, they cast Coetzee and his fictions as exemplars of the kind of secularism defined by Graeme Smith as "Christian ethics shorn of its doctrine...the ongoing commitment to do good, understood in traditional Christian terms, without a concern for the technicalities of the teachings of the Church" (2). In *Slow Man*, Rayment's setting of the approval of Jesus as the standard he wishes to meet, however ridiculously or impossibly, exemplifies the post-Enlightenment "public transformation of Christianity from a religion of doctrinal orthodoxy to a religion of ethics" (Smith 14); that is to say, it gestures toward the role that an historically informed Christian-influenced ethics might have to play, as

Patrick Hayes describes it, “in a cultural space dominated by the sceptical, rational, and egalitarian side of post-Enlightenment political culture” (223). What Coetzee’s fictions continue to do, particularly for a readership more likely than not to self-identify as secular, is question the extent to which we might consider the “absence of religious language from Western liberal democratic discussion” to be a social, political, or ethical good (Smith 200).

I want to conclude, then, by suggesting that one of the concerns that appears throughout Coetzee’s writing, both in his non-fictional prose and in novels such as *Slow Man*, has to do with secularism as the predominant cultural formation of the contemporary West and, in a related vein, with the related issue of postcolonial postsecularism. As Manav Ratti has it, secularism “as an existential outlook has produced its dissatisfactions” (xx), both in the West and, particularly, in its former colonies. The complementary modern historical processes of Christian evangelism in the colonies, and state and cultural secularization in the West have had, as their repercussions, the culturally humiliating dismissal of indigenous cosmologies as unmodern and the removal of theologically based ethical systems, including indigenized versions of Christianity, from the public spheres of state and society in a number of locations around the globe. If, as Ratti puts it, “[t]he task then is to explore secular alternatives to secularism,” literature may well be best positioned to perform this work (xx). Like Mr. Isaacs in *Disgrace*, who, despite living in a “post-religious age” (4), asks David Lurie if he may “pronounce the word *God* in [his] hearing?” (172), Paul Rayment, at least implicitly, interrogates the value of relegating religious language to the private sphere when he informs Costello of the ethical standard he has set for himself. Yet, at the same time, Rayment’s disregard for the specific theological content of the Christian ethics he professes takes us beyond a personal shortcoming on Rayment’s part, and instead serves to locate the value of (postsecular) Christianity outside of any kind of doctrinal orthodoxy.

According to Ratti, it is writers who “are doing the work of the postsecular. In the very act of their writing, in the very search for affirmative values, they are creatively on the borderlines of received ideas of the secular and the religious” (xxv). *Slow Man* occupies the liminal border area of which Ratti speaks; Rayment’s desire for the approval of Jesus is ultimately not theological, not rooted in a desire for salvation, but is precisely invested in the search for affirmative values. That those ethical values are grounded in a tradition and a faith to which *Slow Man* cannot wholeheartedly subscribe does not entirely negate their value. Indeed, given the postcolonial setting of *Slow Man*, its historical awareness, and its unrelenting scepticism concerning those narratives—grand and petty—purporting to offer universal lessons to an uncritical audience, the text’s refusal to make Rayment’s adoption of an ambivalent ethics of a secularized Christianity the bedrock on which a new public morality might be founded speaks to the challenges facing societies concerned to (re)establish an understanding of the good in the wake of secularization.

Ultimately, *Slow Man* is not a Christian novel. There is no hint, for instance, that Rayment's suffering and humiliation are in any way overlaid by a Christian narrative of redemptive suffering; as was the case with the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, who comes to the conclusion that "[i]n [his] suffering there is nothing ennobling" (112), Paul's pain cannot be understood in terms of Christ's passion, enabling us to look past his current situation to a future endpoint from which his present suffering could be reduced to the middle stage in an essentially comedic narrative. Rather, *Slow Man*'s end—wherein Rayment rejects Costello's offer to accompany him for what remains of his, or her, life and "kisses her [goodbye] thrice in the traditional manner he was taught as a child, left right left" (263)—resists precisely that kind of narrative closure that lends itself to being read in archetypal terms as either Comedy or Tragedy. Instead, the novel might well be best understood as a work of the postsecular imagination insofar as it "neither proselytizes secularism nor sentimentalizes religion" (Ratti xxi), supplementing whatever narrative interest it may generate with its adamant insistence that there are worse things for a novelist to do than to write an uninteresting book, worse things to happen to a novel than being saddled with a protagonist who makes the approval of Jesus his standard for living.

## Notes

1. Reviews of the novel vary greatly. For John Banville, the novel succeeds mainly because of Marijana Jokić, whom Banville considers "one of the most rounded characters... that Coetzee has ever invented." By contrast, in a particularly negative review, Yvonne Zipp dubs it "the worst novel I've read by a Nobel winner." Even the more enthusiastic of the novel's reviews, such as Banville's, tend to express their admiration ambivalently, as when he states that Coetzee "gets away with what in any other contemporary novel would be jeered at as a tired and pretentious piece of postmodern trickery." Banville continues: "[w]hat saves *Slow Man* from being a sterile, self-referential literary exercise is the vividness of the characters who animate it." Ostensibly praised, the language of Banville's review of *Slow Man* tells a divided story about the novel it lauds.

2. The question of the relation between Coetzee's "South African" fiction and his "Australian" fiction is a complex one that cannot be addressed fully here. To my mind, Johan Geertsema has it essentially right when he states that "Coetzee's more recent fiction... would appear to constitute a more-or-less radical departure from his earlier work"; however, that apparent dissimilarity belies the "important continuities... on a formal and conceptual level" that connect Coetzee's earlier and more recent fiction (209). The issue that still needs to be resolved, however, has to do with the "larger connection between... Coetzee's recent work since

his migration to Australia, and his earlier fiction” (Geertsema 212). As Geertsema has it, “[a]ll of his earlier novels...either concern themselves directly with South Africa and its political trauma, or lend themselves to being read as concerned with this topic indirectly” (209). Whatever the larger similarities that unite an Australian novel like *Slow Man* with Coetzee’s earlier body of writing, there are important distinctions to be made between it and, say, novels such as *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg*, the South African novels with which it arguably has the greatest affinities. Despite their apparent interest in putatively larger, more universal issues, both *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg* can be read convincingly in local, South African terms. Unlike eighteenth-century England in *Foe* or Czarist Russia in *The Master of Petersburg*, however, the Australian setting in *Slow Man* does not give ground to a reading of the novel in terms of its South African concerns. If *Slow Man* resembles Coetzee’s earlier fiction, then, it is not because of its concern with specifically South African political traumas or ethical conundrums.

3. Cf. Mariam Dixson’s *The Imaginary Australian*.

4. It is difficult not to detect an echo of *Elizabeth Costello* in Rayment’s words about wanting to do good. In the earlier novel, as Costello prepares to deliver a talk on the topic of the problem of evil, the narrative focalization reveals Costello’s thoughts: “If she, as she is nowadays, had to choose between telling a story and doing good, she would rather, she thinks, do good” (167).

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