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## Author and Character: Of Fathers, Foes, and Figurations

Author and character are commonly assumed to exist on different ontological levels—the author exists on the extratextual level in our everyday world, while their characters exist on the intratextual level, in a storyworld. One usually assumes that an author creates a character and is in a position of unalloyed power over this character. The relation between author and character is, however, much more complicated. Metaleptic narrative strategies and plot constructions have in recent years increasingly drawn attention to this. In metaleptic texts, we find author surrogates who interfere in their novels and interact with their characters, or characters who address their authors and seek them out. Metaleptic texts frequently draw attention to the boundary between world and storyworld, creating uncertainty about what is real and what narrative artifice. This chapter traces the function of metalepsis in two of Coetzee’s novels—*Foe* (1986) and *Slow Man* (2005)—and in his Nobel Prize lecture “He and His Man,” delivered in December 2003.

In *Foe*, metalepsis turns Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*—but also *Foe* itself—into sites of negotiation between author and reader. *Foe* responds to the socio-political situation in 1980s South Africa, especially to demands made on white writers and to attempts by black writers at self-representation. The narrative strategy of metalepsis makes it possible to approach the impossibility of giving Friday, the muted colonized other, voice, without appropriating his voice through the discourse of the white writer. Metalepsis emphasizes ambiguity, and, in so doing, opens a space for retelling. *Foe* depends on a reader who challenges its retelling of Defoe’s

text. While *Foe*, during the height of the struggle against apartheid, constituted at the same time a defense of the discourse of the novel and a challenging of processes of canonization, especially of the silences they entail, Coetzee's Nobel lecture was delivered as a response to Coetzee's own canonization. This lecture challenges authorial authority, including Coetzee's. The process of writing, as it is depicted in the lecture, is a movement into the unknown—the author loses control over their text to another force, to the extent that it becomes impossible to determine who is author, character, and reader, or what is original story and what figuration. *Slow Man* emphasizes the uncertainties this entails by depicting writing as an event with unforeseeable consequences. Elizabeth Costello and Paul Rayment, who both have an author and a character function, are equally powerless to determine how the story will develop, which can be read as a sign of Coetzee's doubts about the effects of his writing and about the value of his novels. In *Foe*, "He and His Man," and *Slow Man*, binaries of the author as the one in power and the character as the one at his mercy and command, or between the author as the knowing subject and the character as the object of knowledge, no longer hold. Unlike in many works of metafiction, metalepsis, in Coetzee's texts, does not simply showcase the author's power but rather emphasizes where such power ends. *Foe* shows that value may lie in such a destabilization of hierarchies and in the dialogue this creates. Yet, all three texts also emphasize that such dialogue is unpredictable, and thereby show that metalepsis and dialogue are not inherently valuable.

### *FOE*

*Foe* is concerned with the need to tell a story of one's life and to be listened to, with the power of narrative to give voice but also to silence voices—with its power to grant but also to deny recognition. The novel thematizes the silencing of the gendered or racial other through the canon of culturally validated works. *Foe* engages with two novels by Daniel Defoe: *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana*. Characters and events from these novels cross the boundary between Defoe's and Coetzee's storyworlds. In *Foe*, the protagonist Susan Barton from *Roxana* tries to tell her story as a female castaway but struggles over authorship of her story with an author by the name of Foe, and with the mute, possibly muted Friday, whose silence is a haunting presence in Susan's narrative and in *Foe* itself.

I read *Foe* as an example of Coetzee's ethics of writing in dialogue and put forward a hypothesis about how such dialogue may have been valuable in the socio-political situation *Foe* intervened in historically. Friday's silence is indicative here since it points to this novel's discursive limits and suggests that *Foe*'s act of rewriting is an unfinished project. Friday is mute. One is led to assume that his tongue has been cut out. *Foe* shows that it is impossible to give Friday voice, as the discourse of the white writer would silence Friday in the very attempt. Within the storyworld of *Foe*, Susan fails to make or allow Friday to speak, and Coetzee chose not to do so in his novel. Foe and Susan, the canonical male author and the excluded female castaway, fight over authorial power with some gains, however momentary and uncertain, for Susan, while Friday resists all attempts at being authored or being given a voice. Not engaged in the struggle for authorship, Friday's position is both the most marginalized and the one of most power in *Foe*. He survives both Susan and Foe, and he constitutes the lack that Susan feels to her substance. His silence is what neither Susan, nor Foe, nor the unidentified narrator of the fourth section, nor indeed the novel itself or the reader can penetrate.

*Foe* should be read in the context of criticism leveled against Coetzee's representation of largely passive silent or silenced marginalized figures and in the context of his comments on his understanding of the role of the novel and the novelist in political struggle. *Foe* allows conclusions about Coetzee's understanding of his role as a postcolonial writer and, more specifically, as a white writer in South Africa during apartheid. In her review of Coetzee's 1983 novel *Life & Times of Michael K*, Coetzee's fellow South African novelist Nadine Gordimer criticizes *Michael K* for failing to represent the revolutionary heroes who struggle against oppression by the apartheid state. In Gordimer's view, Coetzee's novel "denies the energy to resist evil"—an energy "made evident [...] heroically" every day in South Africa, and she finds fault with Coetzee's heroes "who ignore history" rather than "make it." Coetzee's 1986 novel *Foe* and his 1987 speech "The Novel Today" can be read as responses to this criticism. With *Foe*, Coetzee responds, not by offering a direct engagement with apartheid or South Africa, even less by offering a revolutionary freedom fighter character, but with a self-reflexive narrative that metaleptically acknowledges its own failures and comes to a halt before the mere presence of the black, mutilated body. Coetzee responds by turning to Defoe, that is, to the very beginnings of the novel, to the silences at the heart of the canon and to the responsibilities they entail for writer and reader. *Foe* responds to the

discourse of the novel rather than to the discourse of history—an explanation for which can be found in Coetzee’s speech “The Novel Today.” In this speech, delivered at the *Weekly Mail* Book Week in Cape Town one year after the publication of *Foe*, Coetzee makes a case for the discourse of the novel as coequal with and autonomous from the discourse of history. He opposes what he sees as the colonization of the former by the latter in South Africa in the 1980s, where he observed “a powerful tendency, perhaps even dominant tendency, to subsume the novel under history, to read novels as [...] imaginative investigations of real historical forces and real historical circumstances,” and to devalue novels that are perceived to not engage with “the so-called historical present” (2). Novels that do not subordinate themselves have, according to Coetzee, no choice, at least in this time and place, but to take a position of rivalry, from which they can “show up the mythic status of history” (3). He stresses that the discourse of history should not be granted an authoritative status since history “is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other” and since its authority “lies simply in the consensus it commands” (4). History—just the same as fiction—is a “construction put upon reality” (4). These comments explain why an engagement with discursive structures is at least as important for Coetzee as one with “the so-called historical present.” Moreover, these comments suggest that an engagement with the former is how he addresses the latter. *Foe* engages with the historical present at the time of its publication, but it does so in rivalry rather than in subordination to the discourse of history.

Coetzee’s choice to represent indecipherable black bodies (exemplary instances are the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Friday in *Foe*) has been criticized,<sup>1</sup> but largely it is read in positive terms—as Coetzee’s acknowledgment of the limitations of the white writer’s discourse.<sup>2</sup> I read Friday’s silence as an insufficient provisional step toward a

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<sup>1</sup>Benita Parry argues that Coetzee’s novels up to and including *Age of Iron*, while they challenge colonialism’s discursive power as well as their own, nonetheless re-enact the discursive mechanisms they criticize. She believes that by presenting silence as a form of resistance, Coetzee’s novels sustain “the West as the culture of reference” (150), and that they “pre-empt dialogue with non-canonical knowledges by presenting these as ineffable” (158).

<sup>2</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for instance, describes Friday as “guardian of the margin” and “agent of withholding,” who resists the “command of metropolitan anticolonialism for the native to yield his ‘voice’” (15–16). Attridge sees Friday’s

future in which Friday is able to speak and to be heard. This future is what *Foe* cannot yet create, what it however works toward through challenging its own attempts to create such a future, which functions to invite dialogue across the boundaries of the book. *Foe* ends with Friday's silent presence, or rather with an unintelligible sound, but this ending is only an intermediate step. Jarad Zimbley therefore describes *Foe* as an enterprise that is transitional and as belonging to a transitional period, during which "the privileged, empowered class represented by Foe (and, by implication, Coetzee) is both necessary and potentially destructive for the empowerment of the underclass; the white writer is both friend and foe" ("Under Local Eyes" 57). Zimbley reads *Foe* in the context of the Ravan Press journal *Staffrider* and the book series by the same name—projects that attempted to "lay the foundations for a black South African literary canon" (49). The fact "that its direction remain[ed] in white hands," that it was "published and subsidized by a radical white publishing house," made *Staffrider* transitional in Coetzee's eyes (Coetzee, "Staffrider" 236). "But under the circumstances of the late 1970s," he writes, it "may be the best that can be done" (235). The same might be said about *Foe*.

Coetzee's notebook and manuscript revisions suggest that the reason for Friday's silence is that Coetzee was unable to provide a genuinely new vision of the future. Attwell notes that Friday was initially "an active, articulate subject," resisting Susan through mimicry (*J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* 154–155), and that Coetzee revised this earlier version because, as he writes in his notebooks, he did not want the novel to be "a vindication of Friday, with a simplistic moral," and did not want for Friday to "'win a round' against Cruso/Defoe" (Coetzee Papers, Notebook, *Foe*, 16 December 1983, qtd. in Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* 155), but that Coetzee saw this decision as an acknowledgment of failure. "By robbing [Friday] of his tongue (and hinting that it is Cruso, not I, who cut it out)," Coetzee writes, "I deny him a chance to speak for himself:

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(Footnote 2 continued)

silence as the necessary consequence of Coetzee's recognition of the limitations of his own discourse. *Foe*, according to Attridge, does not endorse "any simple call for the granting of a voice within the socio-cultural discourses that are already in place" since "such a gesture would leave the silencing mechanisms, and their repressive human effects, untouched" (*J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* 85). Dominic Head concludes that "Friday must remain silent, his story untold, unless it is to be appropriated by the novelist tarnished with the brush of cultural imperialism" (65).

because I cannot imagine how anything that Friday might say would have a place in my text. [...] What is lacking to me is what is lacking to Africa since the death of *Negritude*: a vision of a future for Africa that is not a debased version of life in the West" (Coetzee Papers, Notebook, *Foe*, 1 December 1983, qtd. in Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* 157). Attwell concludes that "[f]or a writer of Coetzee's social position and background, there is simply no uncompromised position from which to express [Friday's suffering and victimhood], denounce it or assume responsibility for its amelioration" (158).

Written in the 1980s, in the years leading up to the country-wide State of Emergency in South Africa, *Foe* intervened in a very particular historical situation. The novel constituted a radical intervention—radical not least in the form it took. A comparison with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's aims shows that *Foe* was two decades ahead of its time in the kind of intervention it made. *Foe* works toward a future in which black voices are able to testify and be heard in a period leading up to the height of the violent struggle against apartheid, many years before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission took on a similar remit. *Foe* does so through similar means as the Commission—means that aim at negotiation and reconciliation—namely through creating a space of the counterfactual and through rendering responsibility collective. *Foe* achieves this through metalepsis.

Mark Sanders's study of how ambiguity was at work in the Truth Commission hearings sheds light on how exactly metalepsis functions in *Foe*. Sanders uses *ambiguity* to refer not only to uncertain meaning but also to what he calls "the general condition of word and act, of word *as* act" (5). Deriving from the Latin constituents *amb-*, meaning "both ways," and *agere*, meaning "to drive" and serving as the root of "to act," "agent," and "agency," ambiguity can be taken to mean "an acting on both sides" and involves "action and reaction" (5). The potential of ambiguity is what Sanders calls the Truth Commission's wager, namely "that the transmission of words, the relay of a witness's voice across distance, awaiting a response, would do: something" (x). This is the wager also in *Foe*, and perhaps in most forms of writing.

Sanders delineates two ways in which ambiguity operated in the Truth Commission's work that can be found also in *Foe*. First, processes of transference and substitution in testimony constituted what Sanders calls "possibilities of responsible substitution" (9). The Truth Commission "generalize[d] responsibility across the body politic by making itself a

proxy for the perpetrator vis-à-vis victims whose testimony is solicited,” and, “[b]y extending this substitution to listeners to the simultaneous translation, and those tuned into the radio and television broadcasts, a phantasmatic perpetratorship became available, in principle, to anyone,” as did “a phantasmatic agency of reparation” (9). Second, testimony took place in a contested realm prior to “any fact falsifiable in pursuit of ‘factual truth’” (167)—Sanders calls this “the realm of the counterfactual”—where speaker and questioner jointly create meaning. Sanders likens this process to Derrida’s notion of invention, on which Attridge draws for his concept of creation.

The Truth Commission’s goal, as Sanders sees it, formed part of “a decolonizing logic” based on the assumption that listening to the testimony of largely black Africans “will restore something that has been lost, or has been taken away” (153). Sanders is critical of the Truth Commission’s success, however. While the actual hearings at times allowed victims to tell their stories in their own voice and in the realm of the counterfactual, the Commission’s report, Sanders stresses, mostly uses extracts from testimony as “illustrative, first-person attestations to the veracity of the historical narrative, written in the third person, that encloses them” (151). The Truth Commission, Sanders concludes, merely declared itself “hospitable to storytelling” but in its report “proves more at ease with statements that can be forensically verified or falsified” (153). The situation is different in *Foe*. The novel foregrounds the unverifiability of stories told by Susan and Foe, and, through how *Foe* turns back on itself, it foregrounds also the unverifiability of the story it tells, thereby anticipating readers’ attempts to settle on a single reading. Where the Truth Commission’s report settles on one coherent story, *Foe* sustains contradictions. The unverifiability of stories told within and by *Foe* is expressed nicely by Susan’s statement that “many stories can be told of Friday’s tongue,” but that “the true story is buried within Friday, who is mute” (*Foe* 118).

Metalepsis in *Foe* functions to challenge the tradition of the novel, to acknowledge *Foe*’s own limitations and failures, and to encourage the reader to challenge its exclusions, appropriations, and silences. The lack to Susan’s story becomes the reader’s, as do her, Foe’s, and Defoe’s violent inscriptions on Friday. The final approach to Friday at the end of the novel, when Susan and Foe have died and only Friday’s body and an unintelligible sound remain, tasks the reader to engage in new metaleptic dives into the narrative. This turns the text into a contested site, where, in the realm of

the counterfactual, prior to fact and fiction, meaning is engendered in dialogue. *Foe* counters structures of opposition and mechanisms of silencing with structures of transference and with the brute fact of the body standing for itself where voices cannot (yet) be heard. *Foe* counters the struggle against apartheid as it led up to its most violent phase by creating space for ambiguity. This is a perhaps more radical intervention than the kind Gordimer called for.

*Foe* sustains ambiguity through a metaleptic structure in which characters simultaneously exist on multiple levels of narration and through narratorial voices that belong to multiple people. The ambiguity is in part due to the text's intertextuality. The historical Daniel Foe, who later changed his name to Defoe, makes his way into Coetzee's novel, as do several of the stories and characters Defoe has written. Most prominently, these are the story of the castaway and the characters Cruso and Friday, but there are also other characters from less well-known texts. Susan Barton, the girl who refers to herself as Susan's daughter, and her maid Amy stem from Defoe's novel *Roxana*, and there is Foe's servant Jack, the pick-pocket from *Colonel Jack*.<sup>3</sup> While Susan's connection to *Roxana* may go unrecognized for some, Cruso, Friday, and the story of the castaways on a desert island will for most readers not only exist in Susan's report and in Coetzee's novel but also in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Moreover, Susan's voice as the narrator throughout most of the novel is not entirely her own. Authorship in and of *Foe* is shared.

The first section comprises Susan's report of her time on the island with Cruso and Friday. Whether this narration can be attributed entirely to Susan is far from certain, however. Her report and the novel start with an account of her arrival. She describes how on the shore she is met by "a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool" (*Foe* 5), who leads her away from the beach up a hill. She then breaks off the report of their ascent, simultaneously addressing the reader and, as one is able to infer later on, Foe, whom she seeks out to turn her report into a book:

For readers reared on travellers' tales, the words *desert isle* may conjure up a place of soft sands and shady trees where brooks run to quench the castaway's thirst and ripe fruit falls into his hand, where no more is asked of him than to

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<sup>3</sup>Attridge (*J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*) and Patrick Hayes provide detailed discussions of these and several other intertextual references in *Foe*.



drowse the days away till a ship calls to fetch him home. But the island on which I was cast away was quite another place: [...] There were ants scurrying everywhere, of the same kind we had in Bahia, and another pest, too, living in the dunes: a tiny insect that hid between your toes and ate its way into the flesh. Even Friday's hard skin was not proof against it. (7)

This passage is addressed to an audience with foreknowledge that one possesses only through awareness of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The words *desert isle* have not yet appeared in Coetzee's novel, and neither has Friday been mentioned. The island and Friday, who was before only described as "a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool," stem not from Susan's or Coetzee's authorship but from Defoe's. Moreover, it is the reader who has to "conjure up" these entities.

The fact that authorship is shared is encoded in pronouns that have several referents. For instance, when Susan's first meeting with "the stranger" is described (9), the insertion in brackets—"who was of course the Cruso I told you of" (9)—is at the same time Susan's address to Foe, whom, as one finds out in section two, she writes her report to, and Foe's, or perhaps rather Defoe's, address to the reader. When Susan tells Cruso of her life before the arrival on the island, confusion arises about the distinction between Susan's voice as character in and as narrator of *Foe*. She ends with a reiteration of the paragraph that begins with slight alterations:

"Then at last I could row no further. My hands were raw, my back was burned, my body ached. With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slipped overboard and began to swim towards your island. The waves took me and bore me on to the beach. The rest you know. (11)"

There is a change from article to possessive pronoun—"the island" (5) becomes "your island"—which can be attributed to the fact that Susan addresses Cruso. Yet, the pronoun is also ambiguous. It refers to Cruso as the island's owner but also to Foe and Defoe as creators of the island in *Robinson Crusoe*, to Coetzee as its creator in *Foe*, and lastly to the reader who evokes such an island. In Susan's statement "The rest you know," *you* refers at the same time to the reader and to Foe, who can both be assumed to have read the pages prior to Susan's reported speech but not to Cruso since he does not have access to Susan's report. A comparison of this passage with the initial paragraph in *Foe* moreover draws attention to an authorial voice that interferes in Susan's report. The novel's first paragraph

is more literary than Susan's version in conversation with Cruso. Her hands are not "raw" (11) but "blistered" (5), and the detailed description of her as she is swimming, "[w]ith slow strokes, my long hair floating about me, like a flower of the sea, like an anemone, like a jellyfish of the kind you see in the waters of Brazil" (5), indicates that a second narratorial voice enters Susan's first-person narration. These metaleptic transgressions between voices and narrative levels intertwine Susan, Foe, Defoe, Coetzee, and the reader.

Shared authorship constitutes a leveling of hierarchical structures between author, reader, and character, and between world and storyworld. At the level of plot, *Foe* elucidates that such shared authorship entails constraints but also freedom, risks but also possibilities—constraints due to stories that circulate in a given culture at a given time but also the freedom to tell them differently. For Susan, shared authorship means that she exists through stories that are told about her but also has the power to retell them. Thinking about this in terms of levels of narration, this means that Susan exists simultaneously as author and character, at an intratextual and at an extratextual level, and that what is world and what storyworld is not always clear. The concept of metalepsis helps analyze this condition.

The captain of the ship that rescues Susan and Cruso counsels her to offer her story to booksellers who would find an author to "set [her] story to rights, and put in a dash of colour too, here and there," but Susan asks: "If I cannot come forward, as author, and swear to the truth of my tale, what will be the worth of it? I might as well have dreamed it in a snug bed in Chichester" (40). This statement introduces uncertainty about who is author and who character, and about what is storyworld and what the "real" world—the "real" world in this context being an intratextual level in the storyworld of *Foe*.<sup>4</sup> It is this uncertainty that allows Susan to tell a story other than Defoe's. It is the same uncertainty, however, that also casts doubt on her story and on her ontological status as much as on Defoe's.

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<sup>4</sup>These distinctions were at issue already when Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* was published. It was frequently mistaken to be an autobiographical story written by a first-person narrator. Coetzee discusses *Robinson Crusoe* in an essay reprinted in *Stranger Shores*, and, in his Nobel lecture, "He and His Man," Coetzee stages the uncertainty about who is author and who character, about what is life and what is art, in a story about Robinson and "his man," Defoe.

Susan is able to negotiate her story because she engages in a metaleptic act. She pursues her author and challenges him. This is played out in the second section of *Foe*. Susan brings Foe into being as she narrates how she seeks him out to put her story into a form that will make it publicly read, which, as she hopes, will bring herself to life. Author and character are mutually dependent on one another, which means that neither holds power and that none of their acts of authorship has authority. Each act of narration nonetheless brings into being what it narrates, and this performative power of narrative is reflected in the present-tense narration Foe employs when he narrates and thereby creates Susan's past: "The story begins in London. Your daughter is abducted or elopes, I do not know which, it does not matter. In quest of her you sail to Bahia, for you have intelligence that she is there" (116). Susan herself acknowledges that she depends on Foe as her story's author, as can be seen in her plea that he speed up his writing because, as she stresses, "my life is dreadfully suspended till your writing is done" (63). Moreover, Susan acknowledges Foe as at her origin when she speaks of his house—a house of "many mansions," in which live "a castaway and a dumb slave and now a madwoman" (77)—as her home, familiar to her as if she had been born and raised in it (66). Foe's dependence on Susan becomes apparent when we read two conflicting accounts of him in his writing room. The contradictory accounts highlight that, at the level of discourse, Susan brings Foe into being as the first-person narrator of *Foe* while she is brought into being by him at the level of the story. In her letter dated April 20th, she describes Foe in his house at his desk:

You are sitting at a table with your back to me, a rug over your knees, your feet in pantoufles, gazing out over the fields, thinking, stroking your chin with your pen [...].

There is a ripple in the window-pane. Moving your head, you can make the ripple travel over the cows grazing in the pasture, over the ploughed land beyond, over the line of poplars, and up into the sky. [...]

Your papers are kept in a chest beside the Table. (49–50)

In a letter dated May 29th, she changes her earlier description:

It is not wholly as I imagined it would be. What I thought would be your writing-table is not a table but a bureau. The window overlooks not woods

and pastures but your garden. There is no ripple in the glass. The chest is not a true chest but a dispatch box. (65)

Susan and Foe are inextricably entwined, and this extends to their authorship. Foe's pen, as Susan tells him, "becomes mine while I write with it, as though growing out of my hand" (65–66), and her writing is stored in the same place as Foe's:

The story of Cruso's island will go there page by page as you write it, to lie with a heap of other papers: a census of the beggars of London, bills of mortality from the time of the great plague, accounts of travels in the border country, reports of strange and surprising apparitions, records of the wool trade, a memorial of the life and opinions of Dickory Cronke (who is he?); also books of voyages to the New World, memoirs of captivity among the Moors, chronicles of the wars in the Low Countries, confessions of notorious lawbreakers, and a multitude of castaway narratives, most of them, I would guess, riddled with lies. (50)

To these papers—known to us as Defoe's—Susan adds "The Female Castaway. Being a True Account of a Year Spent on a Desert Island. With Many Strange Circumstances Never Hitherto Related" (67) and her letters to Foe. The fact that both Susan and Foe add to the repository where "the story of Cruso's island" is stored strips authority from Foe's version of Susan's story but also from Susan's retelling.

Susan's gains in power as the author of her story therefore result not in triumph but in doubt about what is story and what life. Her doubts are strongest when Susan and Foe finally meet and he expresses his own doubts about what is fiction and what reality. She believed to be writing for Foe, narrating her life, first through her report of the island, then through the letters. She tells him: "In the beginning I thought I would tell you the story of the island and, being done with that, return to my former life. But now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me. [...] I am doubt itself. Who is speaking me? Am I a phantom too? To what order do I belong? And you: who are you?" (133). Finally in the same room with him, where, as she states, "I need surely not relate to you my every action" (133), she realizes: "I continue to describe and explain. Listen! [...] I relate your words and mine. Why do I speak, to whom do I speak, when there is no need to speak?" (133). Susan continues as the narrator of *Foe*. This entails power since she is narrating rather than merely

being narrated by Foe. However, she is also aware that nonetheless someone is “speaking [her]” and does not know whether she is phantom or real. The author’s position, she realizes, is one of doubt. At the end of the third section of *Foe*, both Susan and Foe ask about Susan’s daughter, “Is she substantial?” (152), and Foe’s answer expresses the position of uncertainty that neither of them can escape: “she is substantial, as my daughter is substantial and I am substantial; and you too are substantial, no less and no more than any of us. We are all alive, we are all substantial, we are all in the same world” (152). This is of course the world of Coetzee’s metaleptic novel—a world whose boundaries are transgressed by authors, characters, and readers, and whose substantiality is continuously called into question.

The very lack of substantiality that leads to Susan’s despair prepares the way for the reader’s approach to Friday; the fact that the boundaries of the world of *Foe* are permeable leads to Susan’s existential doubts about her ontological status and about the truth of her story, and therefore holds potential for repetition with a difference. Friday remains as a substantial body, whereas Susan’s and Foe’s existences are cast into doubt. Friday, as well, is a discursive product of course, but through his resistance to being captured by Susan’s story or by the reader’s attempts at interpretation, he is the most lasting presence in the novel, outliving not only its characters but also the novel itself. While Susan’s and Foe’s substantiality is continuously questioned through the stories they tell and those told about them, Friday’s bodily presence is a given. This attestation to the body standing for itself is a strong statement, particularly in the context of South Africa during the 1980s, when under the apartheid regime’s body of censorship many voices, particularly those of the black part of the population, risked being silenced.

To hear Friday’s voice is the task that remains at the end of *Foe*, and this is the task the novel sets its readers in a process of transference. Susan realizes that “[t]o tell [her] story and be silent on Friday’s tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty” (67). She attests to the lack and provisional nature of her story, and thereby *Foe* attests to its own provisionality. Susan tells Foe: “The story of Friday’s tongue is a story unable to be told, or unable to be told by me. [...] The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday” (118). And Foe tells Susan: “In every story there is a silence, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story” (141). Friday’s silence poses a challenge for Susan’s, Foe’s,

and the novel's discourse and constitutes a limit to the reader's interpretative power.

In *Foe's* last section, a narrator who is not Susan or Foe engages in two more attempts to hear Friday's voice. The narrator enters Foe's house and finds the bodies of Susan, Foe, and Friday. The narrator knows Susan's report, confirming on his or her first entry into the house that Friday's hair "is indeed like lambswool" (154), which matches Susan's description of "a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool" (5). Opening Friday's mouth, the narrator hears "the sounds of the island" (154). The second time the narrator enters the house, he or she finds Foe's dispatch box, and in it Susan's report, starting "'Dear Mr Foe, At last I could row no further'" (155). The next paragraph, now without quotation marks, reiterates the third sentence of Susan's report and Coetzee's novel: "With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slip overboard" (155). The *I* in this sentence refers to Susan and to the new narrator, who swim in water on which there are "the petals cast by Friday" (155). The sentence is reiterated, or entered, once more, this time slightly altered and with a different ending—"With a sigh, with barely a splash, I duck my head under the water" (155–156)—as the narrator dives to the wreck at the bottom of the ocean, to "a place where bodies are their own signs," to "the home of Friday" (157).

This section constitutes one more metaleptic transgression of narrative levels. The initial paragraph of Susan's report and Coetzee's novel are re-entered and taken in a new direction. At the end of Coetzee's novel, Friday's voice is still not intelligible to the new narrator but it possesses an undeniable force:

From inside [Friday] comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face. (157)

The ending of *Foe* is tentative but oriented toward a future in which Friday remains as a presence with a voice that, while it cannot (yet) be understood, is acknowledged as his own.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Hayes notes that the gesture toward Friday at the end of the novel comes at the cost of Susan and her idea of storytelling. Since she makes us see the novel not merely as an instrument of imperial authority but also as "a sphere in which the

The identity of the fourth section narrator is indeterminable, and this narrator has been read as representing both writer and reader. Attwell sees this narrator as “*the narrator*,” as evidence of “Coetzee’s sense of his own presence in the book,” and Attwell argues that the novel “ends with a revelation about its author, who in seeking to represent Friday discovers that Friday’s story is not his to tell” (*J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* 160). Tisha Turk stresses that this narrator “is represented not as a writer but as a reader, someone who is, quite literally, *moved* by Susan’s narration” (308). These two readings are perhaps not incompatible. The narrator stands for Coetzee, representing his failure to tell Friday’s story, but the narrator simultaneously represents the reader, and the ending thus calls on the reader to take on the responsibility to labor for a future in which Friday’s story can be told. *Foe* ends with acknowledging its own limits and professing its provisionality, and, in so doing, calls on the reader to undertake renewed metaleptic dives into its narrative, challenging it, reworking it, and taking it in new directions. It is metalepsis that enables the negotiation of stories in *Foe* and ultimately of *Foe* itself. Metalepsis allows *Foe* to revisit *Robinson Crusoe*, and it allows the reader to revisit *Foe*. Furthermore, metalepsis makes it vital for readers to do so since it turns *Foe*’s failures and responsibilities into their own.

*Foe* depends on readers who continue its work, and, since the reader’s response is unpredictable, this dependence entails uncertainty. Just as “many stories can be told of Friday’s tongue,” many stories can be told of *Foe*. While such uncertainty must be frustrating if one wants to bring across a specific message, it may be inevitable and even appear promising if one does not know the form the future should take or the way that will lead to it. What Gordimer criticizes in *Life & Times of Michael K*—that no one takes part in determining the course of history, and that no one “is shown to believe he knows what that course should be”—could be a criticism leveled also against *Foe*. Coetzee’s novels do not propose solutions to the problems they address, but this has the potential of leading to an as yet unimaginable future and makes it possible for Coetzee to write even though he knows that his discourse cannot overcome the mechanisms of silencing with which it

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(Footnote 5 continued)

individual can emerge to insist upon the equal value of her own humanity against those who wish to silence her,” he suggests that one can celebrate the novel’s ending only reluctantly if at all (123).

engages. *Foe* exemplarily shows that literature, as Horace Engdahl said, when he introduced Coetzee as the new Nobel Laureate in 2003, can be “the third alternative to speaking and remaining silent.” *Foe* speaks but does not claim authoritativeness. It speaks in an egalitarian dialogue across ontological levels—a dialogue that Coetzee’s Nobel lecture allegorizes through a story about the relation between two forces in the process of writing and reading, represented by “he” and “his man.”

### “HE AND HIS MAN”

Having been honored with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2003, Coetzee used the occasion of the award ceremony to offer a reflection on the process of writing, challenging assumptions about the relation between author and character, especially about the author’s power in this relation. His lecture took the form of a story about two characters—one of them called “he” and the other “his man”—who can be inferred to be Robinson Crusoe and Daniel Defoe. Robinson is the author of his man and of the reports that this man sends—reports very similar to works by the historical Defoe—but Robinson also receives these reports as a reader, and he has of course already been brought into being by the historical Defoe. Rita Barnard notes that Coetzee’s Nobel lecture compels us to ask “who writes whom, or writes in the service of whom” and “whether fiction is an allegory of the real or the real an allegory of fiction” (85). In “He and His Man,” attempts to answer these questions fail since boundaries between author and character, or between original and figuration, are continuously transgressed.

The emphasis on the author’s lack of control and lack of knowledge is telling, especially in view of the occasion for the lecture. Celebrating an author, the lecture seems to suggest, means celebrating them for something that comes to them from a source unknown, unbidden, and uncontrollable. The emphasis on the author’s powerlessness is telling also in view of Coetzee’s treatment of the canon in *Foe*. While *Foe* criticizes processes of canonization, Attridge notes that there is a tension already in Coetzee’s early novels between opposing and claiming access to the canon. Through their allusiveness to canonical works, Attridge remarks, Coetzee’s novels “offer themselves [...] as already canonized” and “run the risk of appearing as intrusive attempts to claim membership of the existing tradition” (*J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* 68–69). With the Nobel Prize—if not before—Coetzee attained canonical status and was granted the authority of the canon he had partly sought access to and partly



opposed. He was speaking no longer from a position of opposition for a discourse threatened by a colonizing process but from a position of authority. This position, endowed upon him by the Swedish Academy on this specific occasion, is what Coetzee undermines in his Nobel lecture. “He and His Man” challenges the author’s authority, including Coetzee’s own. Perhaps attaining authority can be seen as a necessary provisional step for overturning others’ and one’s own authority, as happens in both *Foe* and “He and His Man.”

Writing, as it is depicted in “He and His Man,” is a movement into the unknown. The author’s loss of control is represented through metaleptic transgressions between author and character. These transgressions level power structures and unsettle distinctions between what is real or original and what fiction or copy. The transgressions take place at the level of plot, through intertextual allusions, at a linguistic level, and lastly through Coetzee’s performance of the lecture.

Coetzee introduces uncertainty about the distinction between author and character in his preamble to the lecture. He refers to his lecture as “the piece called ‘He and His Man,’ or ‘His Man and He,’” and claims, “I cannot remember which comes first, he or his man” (“J. M. Coetzee—Nobel Lecture”). Coetzee then reports how, as a child, having read *Robinson Crusoe*, he was surprised to be told in the children’s encyclopedia “that someone else was part of the island story—a man with a wig named Daniel Defoe,” someone “referred to as the author of *Robinson Crusoe*,” which “made no sense since it said on the very first page of *Robinson Crusoe* that Robinson Crusoe told the story himself.” The relation between author and character is mysterious to Coetzee as a child, and the lecture and his novels suggest that this mystification remains. His question “Who was Daniel Defoe? [...] Was Daniel Defoe perhaps another name for Robinson Crusoe, an alias that he used when he returned to England from his island and put on a wig?” is a question about the relation between author and character explored in “He and His Man” and in many of Coetzee’s novels, the answer to which seems less straightforward than the encyclopedia entry suggests.

At the level of plot, Robinson, returned to England after his years on the island, receives reports from someone referred to as “his man,” who, through these reports, can be inferred to be Defoe. Robinson has stepped out of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and is now reading Defoe’s writing. Robinson, however, not only receives and reads these reports but is also responsible for writing them and writing their author: “In the evening by

candlelight he will take out his papers and sharpen his quills and write a page or two of his man, the man who sends report of the duckoys of Lincolnshire [...] and of numbers of other things” (“He and His Man” 549). Through writing, Robinson brings his man—Defoe—and the latter’s reports into being, though the historical Defoe has already brought Robinson, as he appears in *Robinson Crusoe*, and the reports, as they appear in Defoe’s *A Tour thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain* and *A Journal of the Plague Year*, into being. In “He and His Man,” Defoe’s character is simultaneously Defoe’s author.

“He and His Man” emphasizes that author and character mutually depend on each other and that neither holds power. Robinson’s identity stems from Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, evoked through a reference to Friday and to the island story, and we can infer that his man is Defoe only since there are references to Defoe’s writing—most prominently to *Robinson Crusoe*—in Coetzee’s lecture. Robinson’s and Defoe’s identities respectively depend on the other but also on Coetzee, who includes references to Defoe’s texts in his lecture, and, lastly, on the reader, who has to pick up on these references. In “He and His Man,” as in *Foe*, authorship is shared. This disorients ontological hierarchies. It is impossible to differentiate between original and copy, as Robinson realizes. Initially, he considered other castaway tales “feigned,” written by “plagiarists and imitators,” by “a horde of cannibals falling upon his own flesh, that is to say, his life” (551). His revised opinion is that “there are but a handful of stories in the world” (551), and he comes to conclude that different stories are merely different versions of one and the same thing: “a visitation by illness may be figured as a visitation by the devil, or by a dog figuring the devil, and vice versa, the visitation figured as an illness, as in the saddler’s history of the plague” (552). Since the distinction between original and copy does not hold, Robinson believes that “no one who writes stories of either, the devil or the plague, should forthwith be dismissed as a forger or a thief” (552). The consequence is that multiple versions of a story are allowed to coexist, and that there is no hierarchy between world and storyworld.

This leveling is reflected in Robinson and Defoe’s joint act of writing and in the ambiguity of referential and possessive pronouns. Their respective acts of writing cannot be kept apart. “His man,” echoing Robinson’s writing routine, “writes in a neat, quick hand, with quills that he sharpens with his little pen-knife each day before a new bout with the page” (548). Their acts of writing are synchronous, and the words and ideas somehow belong to both. Robinson wonders:

How then has it come about that this man of his, who is a kind of parrot and not much loved, writes as well as or better than his master? For he wields an able pen, this man of his, no doubt of that. [...] *Like charging Death himself on his pale horse*: those are words he would not think of. Only when he yields himself up to this man of his do such words come.

And decoy ducks, or duckoys: What did he, Robinson, know of decoy ducks? Nothing at all, until this man of his began sending in reports. (551)

The words that Robinson cannot think of without his man stem from Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*. The fact that both Robinson and his man are author of these reports is reflected linguistically in the equivocality of pronouns. Robinson's musings about the identity and the fate of "this man of his," for instance, are at the same time reflections on himself. "Let him be a man of business, a grain merchant or a leather merchant, let us say; or a manufacturer and purveyor of roof tiles," Robinson decides (549). "Make him prosperous," Robinson continues, "give him reasonable happiness; then bring his happiness suddenly to an end" (549). The fate of this businessman, whether he deals in grain, leather, or tiles, is "a figure of the shipwreck and the island where he, poor Robin, was secluded from the world for twenty-six years, till he almost went mad" (549). The difference between "he, poor Robin," and "this man of his" is elided. The latter's ruin and solitude are also the former's. The same holds true for another "report from that time of woe" (550). *He* and *his* interchangeably refer to Robinson, to "his man," and to the man who appears in this report:

Able no longer to bear the pain from the swellings in the groin and armpit that are the signs of the plague, a man runs out howling, stark naked, into the street, into Harrow Alley in Whitechapel, where his man the saddler witnesses him as he leaps and prances and makes a thousand strange gestures, his wife and children running after him crying out, calling to him to come back. (550)

"[H]is man the saddler" seems to refer to the businessman created through Robinson's narration shortly before, while grammatically the possessive pronoun signals that "his man the saddler" belongs to the man running into the street. This man's "leaping and prancing," we are told, is allegoric of "his own leaping and prancing" (550), referring potentially to "his man the saddler" but also to Robinson. The latter seems more likely since the

“leaping and prancing” is said to allegorize “his own [...] when, after the calamity of the shipwreck and after he had scoured the strand for signs of his shipboard companions and found none, save a pair of shoes that were not mates, he had understood he was cast up all alone on a savage island” (550). The “he” who “scoured the strand” and “understood he was cast up all alone” would then seem to refer unambiguously to Robinson, unless, that is, one reminds oneself that the calamities befalling his man the businessman are also “a figure of the shipwreck and the island.” Since pronouns in Coetzee’s lecture cannot be unambiguously attributed, which story is the original and which a figuration, who is in power and who at service, who is author and who is being authored, cannot be determined. Knowing which comes first, “he” or “his man,” would shed light on this confusion, but Coetzee cannot remember.

Coetzee does not exempt himself from the ontological leveling that takes place in his lecture. He invites drawing an analogy to his own position as the author of these two characters. Some way into the lecture, we learn that “[h]e (not his man now but he) sits in his room by the waterside in Bristol and reads this” (548). The demonstrative pronoun *this* refers to the report by “his man,” but also, potentially, to the words we are reading. While this effect may be reserved to a reading of the text in printed form, Coetzee’s performance of it has perhaps an even stronger effect of locating Coetzee himself in the text. James Meffan points out that the performance emphasizes a parallel between Defoe and Coetzee. Coetzee, “[a]t a podium, white and gilt, in a fine suit and tie, [...] represents the kind of respectability seldom seen among the characters of his novels, just as bewigged Daniel Defoe couldn’t be at a further social remove from Robinson Crusoe” (176). By leveling Robinson and Defoe, Coetzee himself steps down from a hierarchically superior extratextual level at which the author holds power over his fictional creations.

The form Coetzee chose for his lecture—the fact that he chose fiction for his reflection on authorship—is crucial in this context. In “He and His Man,” the moment of the author’s powerlessness, the moment when “he yields himself up to this man of his,” is when it becomes possible to use words that were not at the author’s command and to write of things unknown to him. This is the moment when the writer is in dialogue with a force outside his or her control. Attridge calls this the self-division between “the person who lives in the world and the person, or impersonal force, that produces the words,” a self-division that fictional writing necessitates and that is explored in “He and His Man” (*J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of*

*Reading* 200). Coetzee himself speaks about this division. He tells Attwell: “what I am doing when I am writing a novel either isn’t me or is me in a deeper sense than the words I am now speaking are me” (*Doubling the Point* 205). When talking about his fiction, he feels that what he says is “continuous with the rest of the daily life of a writer-academic like [him]self,” it is “simply [his] utterance, continuous with [him]” (205). Writing a novel, in contrast, is the experience of going to a place where events have “less and less discernible relation to the daily life one lives or the lives people are living around one,” to a place where “[o]ther forces, another dynamic, take over” (205).

Coetzee’s description of writing as the moment when another force takes over allows for three different readings. First, there is a notion of writing as an encounter with the muse, with an inspirational force outside the writer’s control. The statement can also be read as a structuralist account of the subject as socially and linguistically constituted, functioning as mere channel for what is preconditioned by language. In this sense, other forces speak through the writer both in fiction and criticism. Lastly, the statement can be read as an acknowledgment of the reader’s active part in creating meaning in a text. Coetzee’s works depict writing as a process in which other forces are at play in all three senses. The surrogate Elizabeth Costello—but not necessarily also Coetzee—pictures writing as an encounter with the muse. That the self is conditioned by linguistic structures is foregrounded whenever Coetzee’s protagonists, and often also his works, hit discursive limitations, when language is inadequate and fails. Coetzee’s comments on writing as awakening countervoices and as trying to become aware of voices in one’s head also point in this direction. Writing as a negotiation between author and reader is thematized through the many reader figures in Coetzee’s texts, and his refusal to provide interpretations of his novels suggests that he understands writing in this way. My claim that Coetzee’s ethics of writing is a commitment to dialogue builds on the second and third sense in which the writer’s voice is not entirely their own. I see the self-questioning as inviting the reader’s creative engagement with the aim of overcoming discursive limitations.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>This understanding of Coetzee’s ethics of writing differs markedly from Marais’s, who sees Coetzee’s commitment to opening himself and his writing to other forces as a welcoming of “writerly inspiration” (xvi).

The author's self-division in writing fiction, according to Coetzee, makes his position "the weakest of all," since he can neither claim "the critic's saving distance" nor "pretend to be what he was when he wrote—that is, when he was not himself" (206). This statement may at first sight seem at odds with Coetzee's claim, on a different occasion, that his words lack power outside fictional discourse. Coetzee remarks that, having been invited, as a novelist, "to address what are called problems and issues," he does not speak his own language but "a fragile metalanguage with very little body, one that is liable, at any moment, to find itself flattened and translated back and down into the discourse of politics, a sub-discourse of the discourse of history" ("The Novel Today" 3). These statements can be reconciled if one pays attention to the distinction between the writer's position (which is weak in fictional and stronger in critical discourse) and the writing itself (which is weak in the case of critical and stronger in the case of fictional discourse). What makes the novelist's position the weakest of all strengthens their writing. The text gains in power as the author cedes authority. This power that inheres in weakness is the power of Coetzee's fiction.

The force that empowers the text comes through the reader but the text is at the same time threatened by this force. The reader in turn not only exerts power over the text but is also affected by the encounter. This is how Attridge theorizes the event of writing. In "He and His Man," the two forces that constitute this event never meet. While Robinson "yearns to meet the fellow in the flesh, shake his hand, take a stroll with him along the quayside and hearken as he tells of his visit to the dark north of the island, or of his adventures in the writing business"—such familiarity, Robinson fears, will not happen, "not in this life" ("He and His Man" 552). He and his man are "like two ships sailing in contrary directions, one west, the other east," or rather "deckhands toiling in the rigging," their ships momentarily passing "close enough to hail," but he and his man are "too busy even to wave" (552). In *Slow Man*, the meeting is played out. As in Coetzee's Nobel lecture, the forces that are at play in the process of writing and reading are figured as author and character. They meet at the level of the story into which the author figure has metaleptically entered. However, the encounter is not as harmonious as Robinson imagines, and at the end of the novel author and character part, leaving it doubtful whether their meeting has had any, much less a valuable, effect.

*SLOW MAN*

*Slow Man*'s protagonist Paul Rayment moves slowly. This occasions Elizabeth Costello to make an appearance as a character in the story of which she is also the author, in order to spur some movement. *Slow Man* depicts narrative and material intrusions into people's lives. Wayne Blight causes a rupture in Rayment's life when Blight's car hits Rayment on his bicycle, Costello intrudes into Rayment's life both physically and through her writing, and Rayment in turn interferes in the Jokićs' lives in confessing his love for Marijana. These intrusions cause disorder and incite change. As a writer, Costello desires such intrusions. Referring to the attitude toward life of Flaubert's Emma Bovary and Cervantes's Don Quixote, Costello urges Rayment: "Give it a whirl, Paul. See what you can come up with. [...] So that you may be *worth* putting in a book. Alongside Alonso and Emma. Become major, Paul. Live like a hero. That is what the classics teach us. Be a main character. Otherwise what is life for?" (*Slow Man* 229). Where Costello sees potential for Rayment to become a main character, Rayment would much rather have his old life back. To give things a whirl is a risky business with unpredictable consequences. *Slow Man* is Coetzee's metanarrative reflection on what it means to write without knowing where the writing will lead, who will read it and how. As in *Foe* and "He and His Man," the metaleptic crossing of the author figure into the text she seems to be writing functions not to emphasize authorial power but as a dehierarchization of author and character, which entails a dehierarchization of world and storyworld.

*Slow Man* begins with Rayment's accident. An accident, Rayment reflects, is "something that befalls one, something unintended, unexpected" (21). The accident at the beginning of *Slow Man* represents the unforeseeable event of writing and reading, unforeseeable due to the interaction of author, text, and reader. Stephen Mulhall notes that the blow at the beginning of *Slow Man* is "not simply the shock of an ordinary life being displaced from its own parameters; it is also the shock of a character's birth" (247). *Slow Man* emphasizes that meaning in narrative arises unpredictably for both author and reader. The uncertainty this entails is represented through Costello's and Rayment's lack of knowledge of the future and through their lack of control of the story's development.

Through Costello's metaleptic intrusion into *Slow Man*, character and author find themselves in the same moment on the same ontological level. The ontological and temporal sameness entails hierarchical and

epistemological equalization. Currie points out that this metalepsis “construct[s] a direct link between the temporalities of writing and acting” (170). Costello is “in a position equivalent to Rayment’s in terms of her knowledge of the future,” “an author without Olympian height, who has fallen into human time,” “lowered to the level of participation in a universe with an unforeseeable future” (170). Currie reads Costello’s arrival in the novel “as a kind of authorial crisis resulting from the condition of not knowing what is going to happen next,” and he notes that, in this respect, “she shares the authorial function with the character of Rayment” (170). Costello’s metaleptic intrusion into the novel she is also writing, and into Rayment’s life, is occasioned by their joint lack of knowledge of what Rayment calls “his meaning” (*Slow Man* 79). After having confessed his love for his nurse Marijana, he tries to explain himself in a letter. He writes, “I fear you may have misunderstood me,” and then changes *me* into *my meaning* (79). “When I first met you,” he continues, “I was in a shattered state” (79). *Shattered* is not the right word, however: “His knee might have been shattered, and his prospects, but not his state. If he knew the word to describe his state as it was when he met Marijana, he would know his meaning too, as it is today” (79). Costello does not possess superior knowledge but turns up in order to help Rayment find his meaning and to find the right word for his state, seeing their encounter as a “chance to get to know [him] better” (94). *Slow Man* shows Costello and Rayment to be equally unknowing, jointly waiting and mutually dependent on one another for what is to come.

They both perceive themselves as passive and powerless. Costello tellingly refers to the initial sentences of *Slow Man* not as something she wrote but heard (81) and to Rayment as what “came to [her],” in the sense of “occurred to [her]—a man with a bad leg and no future and an unsuitable passion” (85). She stresses that she is “not in command of what comes to [her]” (82), and that she “did not ask for this any more than [he] did” (85). “Where we go from there,” she states, “I have no idea,” asking Rayment, “Have you any proposal?” (85). Costello offers “a touch on the shoulder, now and then, left or right, to keep [him] on the path” (87), but she does not know the path any better than he. She wants Rayment to take control and tells him, “The moment you decide to take charge, I will fade away. You will hear no more from me; it will be as if I had never existed” (100). Rayment, in contrast, feels that, since “the idea came from our friend Elizabeth,” as he tells Marianna, whom he believes to be a ploy of Costello’s to incite movement in his life, since Costello had “[t]he first



impulse,” “[s]he issues instructions, we follow” (111). Costello, in turn, stresses her lack of control through another passive construction. When Rayment suggests that she take up another story, perhaps making Marianna the protagonist, she responds: “Drop you, take up Marianna: maybe I won’t maybe I will. Who knows what one may not be driven to” (117).

Ambiguous words and phrases draw attention to the fact that it is uncertain who is in control—author or character, Rayment or Costello. Depending on which meaning one chooses, whether one attributes these words and phrases to Rayment or to Costello, and whether one reads them as referring to the act of writing or to the world of the story, they weaken either Rayment or Costello. *Slow Man* starts with Rayment’s accident and the surfacing of a literary consciousness that manifests itself in words that occur to Rayment, coming seemingly from a force outside his control. “The unusual word *limber* or *limbre* is on the horizon” as Rayment is caught by a blow, lifted off his bicycle, and flies through the air (1). *Limber* means “[e]asily bent (without damage to shape or structure); flexible, pliant, supple” (“LIMBER, adj.”). Referring to persons, to their bodies and movements, it means “[b]ending or moving easily; lithe and nimble,” and it can be used in an unfavorable sense to refer to something that has become “[l]imp, flaccid, flabby.” These different meanings are at play in the first paragraph of *Slow Man*, reflecting conflicting understandings of the division of power in the relation between author and character. Rayment, as a person and in his movements, may be lithe and nimble, which would be in line with the insertion in italics and brackets—his, or Costello’s, or Coetzee’s?—“(flies through the air with the greatest of ease!)” (*Slow Man* 1). Yet, Rayment may also, as a character in Coetzee’s and perhaps Costello’s novel, be easily bent and supple in his subordination to an author’s design. This meaning of *limber* is more in line with Costello’s alteration of the paragraph, when, in chapter thirteen, she makes her appearance in the novel, reciting its first sentences to Rayment. In this version Rayment no longer flies but “tumbles” (81), which suggests lack of control of his body and life. Lastly, Rayment may have become limp, flaccid, and flabby, which would account for his slowness in terms of his physical movements but also for his indecisiveness and hence for the slowness of the story, which is what Costello suffers under. This last meaning of *limber* signals neither Rayment’s independence nor his submission but rather indicates that Costello and Rayment are interdependent.

*Slow Man* draws attention to several more ambiguities that reflect the interdependence of author and character, many of which introduce uncertainty about what is world and what storyworld. The second chapter centers on the word *serious*. In the sense of “significant or worrying; giving cause for anxiety or concern” (“SERIOUS, adj.2, n., and adv.”), the word refers to Rayment’s injuries. In the sense of “deal[ing] with deep, grave, or profound matters; not intended simply to amuse, please or entertain; requiring or meriting deep reflection” (“SERIOUS, adj.2, n., and adv.”), *serious* is opposed to popular or light and refers to art. The chapter introduces the issue of the distinction between reality and artistic figuration, or between original and substitute. This is a very serious distinction for Rayment but one that others—the medical staff, in this chapter, and later Costello and Marijana’s son Drago—treat as slight or even negligible. Rayment’s most pressing question after the accident, “if there is time for only one question,” is: “Is it serious?” (*Slow Man* 4). The answer, at least from a medical point of view, is that, “as regards his condition in general, considering what can and does happen to the human body when it is hit by a car going at speed, he can congratulate himself that it is *not serious*,” even “so much the reverse of serious that he can count himself lucky, fortunate, blessed” (6). The reverse of serious, in terms of Rayment’s medical condition, is harmless, benign. The leg, from a medical point of view, is nothing of importance; it is, in Rayment’s case, best removed and replaced with a substitute. While there is the option of a “reconstruction,” the unanimous decision has been for a “prosthesis,” which Dr. Hansen explains to be an “[a]rtificial limb” (7). *Artificial* is opposed to natural and often used—here the meaning bears on art and its relation to life—to describe something that is contrived. This meaning is evoked, when Rayment reflects that “the whole of today [...] has the feel of a dream,” “[c]ertainly this *thing*, which now for the first time he inspects under the sheet, this monstrous object swathed in white and attached to his hips,” and most of all “the other thing,” which he pictures as “a wooden shaft with a barb at its head like a harpoon and rubber suckers on its three little feet” (9). The prosthesis “is out of Surrealism,” “out of Dali” (9). The artificial limb is pictured as a creation of the imagination and set in contrast to “this strange bed, this bare room, this smell both antiseptic and faintly ruinous,” which “is clearly no dream, it is the real thing, as real as things get” (9).

Since Rayment refuses a prosthesis, his life is halting. *Slow Man* points to a double meaning of the word *prosthesis*, and, in so doing, indicates that

Rayment's bodily lack leaves him lacking also as character; he has not been fully realized in the storyworld. *Prosthesis*, or rather the variant spelling *prothesis*, which is closer to Marijana's pronunciation—"Prothese: she pronounces it as if it were a German word" (62)—has two meanings, in addition to the medical one, that are at play in *Slow Man*.<sup>7</sup> Linguistically, *prothesis* denotes the "addition of a letter or syllable" ("PROTHESIS, n."). *Prothesis* also denotes the preparation for the act of turning bread and wine into the blood and body of Jesus in the Greek Church ("PROTHESIS, n."). Rayment refuses a prosthesis in the sense of not wanting an artificial leg, not wanting to "look natural," but to "feel natural" (*Slow Man* 59). The refusal of an artificial limb that would help him move is also a refusal of *prothesis* in the sense of transformation. Rayment's refusal is a resistance to being, or becoming, a character in a fictional world.<sup>8</sup> He therefore remains in a state of waiting; he is, as he himself calls it, "caught in limbo" (112). The linguistic meaning of *prothesis* makes for a pun that stresses the link between artistic creation and the material body. Referring to the addition of a letter or syllable, *prothesis* designates the *o* added to the *limb* that has been removed, creating Rayment's state of *limb-o*. The two other meanings of *prothesis* emphasize that Rayment depends on authorial help to enable his movements but that story and author depend as much on his accepting the transformation of (a) prothesis to move the story out of its state of waiting.

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<sup>7</sup>The OED notes that *prothesis* and *prosthesis* can be used interchangeably to refer to an artificial replacement for a body part, and the entry here refers to the etymological note, which explains that *prothesis* is used in this sense "apparently by confusion" with *prosthesis*, probably due to the French term *prothèse*, the Italian term *protesi*, and the German term *Prothese*, all denoting the medical use ("PROTHESIS, n."). Marijana's pronunciation invites thinking about the ambiguity of the variation *prothesis*.

<sup>8</sup>Discussing the religious meaning of *prothesis*, Zoë Wicomb points out that "[t]ransformation in the eucharist relies of course on belief" (14). Belief, she notes, is "a commodity in the shape of suspension of disbelief that is required for the successful reception of a fictional text" (14). In this light, Paul Rayment's refusal of a prosthesis, or Elizabeth Costello's failure to effect prothesis, stand for the author's or reader's lack of belief, which amounts to a failure to bring the storyworld into being. Chapter 3 discusses *Slow Man* as metanarrative reflection on the necessity of belief for the creation of storyworlds.

The ambiguity of the word *unstrung* also reflects this interdependence. To be unstrung, for Rayment, means to be deprived of his ability to move but also to be free from authorial control. The word “comes back to him” from a scene in Homer’s writing, in which “the limbs are unstrung”—as Rayment’s have been—and in which “the body topples like a wooden puppet” (27). A more positive meaning of *unstrung* signals a gain in freedom. To be unstrung means “[h]aving the string(s) relaxed or removed” (“UNSTRUNG, adj.”). Rayment is a puppet no longer controlled by the puppet-master but also no longer able to move since the strings have been relaxed. The metaphor of the puppet and the puppet-master is frequently used to describe metafiction, and Rayment himself uses this image to think about the relation of author and character:

“You treat me like a puppet,” he complains. “You treat everyone like a puppet. You make up stories and bully us into playing them out for you. You should open a puppet theatre, or a zoo. [...] Rows and rows of cages holding people who have, as you put it, *come to you* in the course of your career as a liar and fabulator.” (*Slow Man* 117)

In accusing Costello of treating people like puppets, Rayment accuses her of submitting them to her will and command. *Slow Man*, however, gives a different picture of authorship. *Slow Man* shows that the ambiguity inherent in language empowers text and reader, and that the author in consequence loses control. The relationship between Rayment and Costello, Elizabeth MacFarlane writes, “reveals the cruel mechanics of the author; cruel both to the ‘puppet,’ as Rayment calls himself, and the puppeteer” (89). What happens to Rayment also happens to Costello.

Costello, as does Rayment, reflects on the word *unstrung*. She also comments on the figure of speech *no strings attached*. Her thoughts indicate that she, as author, depends on a force that empowers her story. She uses *unstrung* in the sense of “[w]eakened” (“UNSTRUNG, adj.”), and she stresses that people are bound to one another. Rayment insists that there are “no strings attached” to his offer to pay Drago’s school fees (*Slow Man* 151), but Costello reminds Rayment of invisible strings, such as “heartstrings, [...] strings of affection” (153), of which Rayment’s offer is certainly not free. Invisible strings—strings of responsibility, if not affection—seem to be in place also in the relation between author and character. Rayment’s attempt to sever these leaves Costello without energy and without support. She tells him: “I may be nearing my limit. I can’t begin to

tell you how tired I am. [...] I feel, to use Homer's word, *unstrung*. [...] No more tensile strength. The bowstring that used to be taut has gone as slack and dry as a strand of cotton" (160).

The interdependence of author and character is drawn attention to also through allusions to *Foe* and to the author-character relation in this novel. Rayment's assertion that he is "not Robinson Crusoe" (14) invites us to read Rayment precisely as another figuration of Defoe's character. Costello is paralleled with Foe when she tells Rayment that he would like her house in Carlton, which, as with Foe's, "has many mansions" (234). After the accident, comparable to the event of the shipwreck, Rayment, similar to Robinson Crusoe, finds himself accustoming himself to new circumstances. Rayment's "universe has contracted to his flat and the block or two around, and it will not expand again" (25). The boundaries of his metaphorical island are created by writing as the event of the accident that forces him to lead a literally "circumscribed life" (26). The story of Sinbad, which appears in *Foe* and *Slow Man*, stresses that the act of writing circumscribes Costello's life as much as Rayment's. In *Slow Man*, Costello tells the story to Rayment:

"By the bank of a swollen stream," she says, "Sinbad comes upon an old man. 'I am old and weak,' says the old man. 'Carry me to the other side and Allah will bless you.' Being a good-hearted fellow, Sinbad lifts the old man onto his shoulders and wades across the stream. But when they reach the other side, the old man refuses to climb down. Indeed, he tightens his legs around Sinbad's neck until Sinbad feels himself choking. 'Now you are my slave,' says the old man, 'who must do my bidding in all things.'" (128–129)

Rayment assumes that he is to understand that the old man in the story represents Costello and that he is Sinbad. He tells Costello that she has "no means of getting onto [his] shoulders" (129), but Costello replies, "Perhaps I am already there" (129). In *Foe*, Susan sees herself as Sinbad and Friday as "the tyrant riding on [her] shoulders," but Foe reminds her that Friday would argue that it is the other way around (*Foe* 148). Susan's and Foe's uncertainty about who sits on whose shoulders, and Rayment's and Costello's uncertainty about who is in power, reflect the leveling of power structures in Coetzee's works. The unforeseeable event of writing happens to Costello as much as to Rayment, to the author as much as to the character. *Slow Man*, as *Foe* and "He and His Man," depicts writing as a dialogic process in which two interdependent forces jointly create meaning.

The fact that this dialogue takes place on equal footing may be ethical but, as *Slow Man* shows, in the case of forces as uncooperative or incompatible as Rayment and Costello, leads not to transformation but to stasis.

This stasis has existential consequences; Costello and Rayment are caught in a state of limbo, in between worlds or levels of narration. She tells him: “the sooner you settle on a course of action and commit yourself to it, the sooner you and I, to our mutual relief, will be able to part. What that course of action should consist in I cannot advise, that must come from you. If I knew what came next there would be no need for me to be here” (*Slow Man* 136). But since “nothing is happening,” Costello, as she complains, is “wasting time, being wasted by time” (141). Costello’s very existence is dependent on Rayment, as much as his on her. When Costello reprimands Rayment for not bringing her to life, the circularity of author and character is made explicit. She recites a passage from the beginning of the chapter—“*He finds her by the riverside, sitting on a bench, clustered around by ducks that she seems to be feeding*”—and tells him that “it is not good enough. It does not bring me to life” (159). This implies that Rayment is the author of *Slow Man* as much as Costello. MacFarlane reads Costello’s pallor as a sign of Rayment’s failure to “[fill] her, or [flesh] her out,” which shows that the relationship between author and character, which “was supposed to be symbiotic has become unequal” (91). Rayment’s failure has consequences also for his own existence. “Bringing me to life may not be important to you,” Costello tells him, “but it has the drawback of not bringing you to life either” (*Slow Man* 159).

As in *Foe* and “He and His Man,” the ontological leveling in *Slow Man* extends to Coetzee. There are parallels both between Coetzee and Costello and between Coetzee and Rayment. Coetzee and Rayment share Adelaide as their place of residence and cycling as their hobby. Costello and Coetzee share their occupation as professional novelists, both having rewritten canonized works of literature, and Costello has of course functioned as Coetzee’s surrogate before, when he performed her opinions in public lectures. Thus, Coetzee has a double both in the author figure and in the character figure, which suggests that he, as author, does not hold unalloyed power over the text. This is emphasized in those instances in which *Slow Man* metaleptically turns back on itself at the level of discourse. When Rayment recites the beginning of a chapter or when Costello recites the beginning of the novel, ontological confusion about the words we are reading—are they Coetzee’s, or Costello’s, or Rayment’s?—is brought

about by the same means as in *Foe*, when Susan tells Cruso of her arrival on the island, reiterating the first paragraph of this novel.

Reading these instances of metalepsis and the parallels between Coetzee and both Costello and Rayment as Coetzee's own stepping down from a hierarchically superior level may at first sight seem to involve a paradox: Coetzee depicts author, character, and reader as ontologically, temporally, and epistemologically leveled but does so in a published novel, the end of which has clearly already been written, which means that the story's development is known to him and predetermined rather than unpredictable. The fact that Rayment and Costello are stuck and that the story fails to move forward shows how to resolve the apparent paradox. Currie argues that Drago's role is "authorial and readerly" (170–171). Costello enlists him: "Come on, help us, advise us. What should we do?" (139). Costello's and Rayment's dependence on Drago as a reader-cum-writer figure represents the author's dependence on the reader's interpretative power to bring a text into being. *Slow Man* stages Coetzee's description of writing as the moment in which another force is taking over and Attridge's understanding of literature—as a site of dialogue, open to the future, where meaning is created only through the act of reading. In this sense, the author does not know where their writing will lead any more than a character.

The leveling of author and character also destabilizes the hierarchy of original and figuration, or life and its representation in art. Metalepsis in *Slow Man* functions to level but not equate them. Metalepsis sustains ambiguity by maintaining multiple levels of narration or multiple versions of a story in parallel and by giving none primacy. Rayment and Costello represent two extreme positions of how to respond to the ontological confusion that ensues. Throughout the story, Rayment tries to distinguish between original and figuration, or between world and storyworld, but ultimately fails. He believes that the woman Costello brings to his apartment is either, in line with "the story he has been presented with" by Costello, "the woman he saw in the lift" and "her name is truly Marianna; [...] she truly lives with her crookbacked mother, her husband having abandoned her because of her affliction; and so forth" (*Slow Man* 115), or she is, in line with "an alternative story, one that he finds all too easy to make up for himself," an escort "known otherwise as Natasha, known also as Tanya" (115). The pressing question for Rayment is: "Was Marianna Marianna or was Marianna Natasha? That is what he must find out in the first instance; that is what he must squeeze out of Costello" (116).

A second question follows, and this question is attributable to Rayment but also to Costello or to a narrator: "Only when he has his answer may he turn to the deeper question: Does it matter who the woman really was; does it matter if he has been duped?" (116–117). Costello would probably answer in the negative. She is much more relaxed about the distinction between world and storyworld, and she sustains different versions or interpretations of an event. When Rayment insists that he is not acquainted with Marianna, Costello admits: "Yes, perhaps I am mistaken, that is possible. Or perhaps you are the one who is mistaken" (97), and she continues to refer to the past as containing these two possibilities, namely to the day "when [Rayment] might or might not have taken [Marianna's] photograph" (89). Costello also takes liberties with how she tells her own story. She tells Rayment that she "sleep[s] outdoors, under a bush in the park, among the winos, and do[es] her ablutions in the River Torrens," which, she admits, "may be exaggerating a little" but is nonetheless "an apt story, apt to [her] condition" (203).

Costello's lax attitude toward the distinction between world and storyworld is no more endorsed by the novel than Rayment's attempt at strict differentiation. Costello's position leads to a disregard for pain and suffering. For Rayment, the loss of his leg is very real. Yet, from a writer's perspective, Costello reminds him that the "missing leg is just a sign or symbol or symptom [...] of growing old, old and uninteresting" (230). If the missing leg is a sign or symptom, it indicates Rayment's condition of growing old and uninteresting. Both the loss of his leg and his condition of growing old and uninteresting are real. If the missing leg is a symbol, it merely represents this condition, but the loss of the leg is not real. Costello, however—as Coetzee, who has forgotten who comes first, "he" or "his man"—"can never remember which is which" (230). Neither Coetzee nor the author surrogate in *Slow Man* feels confident to pronounce on what is world and what storyworld, what original and what substitute or figuration. While Costello brushes the issue aside, for Coetzee it is one of the main concerns throughout his career and one that, as my discussion throughout this book stresses, leads to moral qualms and to doubts about his writing and his role as author.

In *Slow Man*, what is world and what storyworld is indeterminable. As in *Foe*, world and storyworld here both refer to levels within the storyworld of Coetzee's novel, but these levels represent the relation of life and art in general. In *Slow Man*, stories are not fixed and immutable but change shape. They do so in the act of writing, where multiple options offer



themselves, and in the act of reading, where multiple interpretations are possible. In *Slow Man*, there is epistemological uncertainty—Rayment and Costello do not know which version of a story is true—and ontological uncertainty—Rayment and Costello are being brought into being differently through each act of writing or reading. Zoë Wicomb points out that Costello, in reprimanding Rayment for having failed to bring her and her surroundings to life, alludes to “a reciprocal relationship between reality and representation” (19). The result is a state of being in which Rayment and Costello are not yet fully realized, which is cause both of Rayment’s fears and hopes. He fears the power Costello has to narrate his life, but the option of retelling and reinterpreting also allows him to imagine his life differently and to resist her authorial power.

Rayment fears that Costello’s writing effects his translation to “what at present he can only call *the other side*” (*Slow Man* 122). Reading her notebook, he has an epiphany:

There is a second world that exists side by side with the first, unsuspected. One chugs along in the first for a certain length of time; then the angel of death arrives in the person of Wayne Blight or someone like him. For an instant, for an aeon, time stops; one tumbles down a dark hole. Then, hey presto, one emerges into a second world *identical with the first*, where time resumes and the action proceeds [...]—except that one now has Elizabeth Costello around one’s neck, or someone like her. (122)

What Rayment pictures here as the translation from life to afterlife is his moment of birth as a character in *Slow Man*. Rayment’s revelation is triggered by the word *dog* in Costello’s notebook. He realizes that this is “[q]uite a leap to make, from the word *D-O-G* in a notebook to life after death. A wild surmise” (123). It is significant that this leap has been made before, in a different context, by (perhaps a different) Elizabeth Costello. In Coetzee’s novel *Elizabeth Costello*, published two years prior to *Slow Man*, the title character spells out what Rayment here alludes to. She has a vision of a dog on the other side of the gate through which she is unable to pass but does not trust this vision, “does not trust in particular the anagram GOD-DOG” since it is “[*t*]oo literary” (*Elizabeth Costello* 224–225). The fact that the leap from *dog* to *God*, from life to afterlife, from world to book, is made by both Costello and Rayment stresses that the act of translation or prothesis is an act performed jointly by author and reader. In *Slow Man*, the act hinges on which way the word *dog* is read. Depending

on which way it is read, either Rayment or Costello is in power. The word that occurs to Rayment in this context, typed “letter by letter behind his eyelids by the celestial typewriter, is *puny*” (*Slow Man* 123). The translation to the other side may turn out to be “nothing but a trick that might as well be a trick with words, [...] a mere hiccup in time after which life goes on as before” (123). Rayment wants to “refuse it—refuse this deathlessness, this puny fate,” and return to his life before the accident (123). *Puny*, in the sense of “insignificant,” (“PUNY, n. and adj.”) emphasizes how small the difference is between reading from left to right or from right to left. In the sense of “inferior in rank, subordinate,” “weak” (“PUNY, n. and adj.”), *puny* designates Rayment as he considers his position in his relation with Costello. He believes that she is in power, writing his life. Referring not to Rayment but to his “fate,” *puny* describes the story Costello tells, showing that it is weak since it depends on Rayment for movement, who however refuses to move or be moved.

Toward the end of the novel, Rayment comes to a revised understanding of the loss of control that the act of writing and reading entails but is not yet able or willing to embrace it. For much of the novel he deplores that he has been uprooted from his life through the impact of the accident that brings about his birth as a character. Eventually, he attributes a more positive value to such events of uprooting. At a metanarrative level, this is an altered evaluation of the unforeseeable event of writing and reading. Rayment’s reflection on the words *shattered* and *shaken* shows that his perspective has changed. *Shattered*, which is how Rayment initially describes himself as he was after the accident, although he knows that this is not the right word, means “disrupt[ed] into parts” and can mean “damage[d] or destroy[ed]” (“SHATTER, v.”). Toward the end of the novel, Rayment finds a more adequate word, describing himself as *shaken*. After his second accident—he falls in the shower—he reflects on what caused his feelings for Marijana and what makes him reveal them now. Rayment attributes his feelings to the accident at the beginning of the novel, which “shook [him] up” (*Slow Man* 209), and now he believes that this is something to be affirmed. While he fears that Marijana finds him “too labile,” that is, “[t]oo much at the mercy of [his] feelings,” “speak [ing his] heart too openly” (208), he tells her: “We should all be more labile, all of us. That is my new, revised opinion. We should shake ourselves up more often” (210). To be shaken means to “[m]ove abruptly or violently with a blow or shock,” and to hence be “weakened in structure” (“SHAKEN, adj.”). It entails lability or limberness, which means that it

allows for another voice or consciousness to enter, and indeed Rayment wonders whether his confession is “some stranger speaking through a mirror, taking over his voice” (*Slow Man* 210). In the event of writing and reading—an event that shakes one up—dialogue between one consciousness and another becomes possible, but Rayment remains skeptical of the value of such an effect. He compares his outpouring of words to bile and vomit (210), and, at the end of the novel, is still reluctant to accept the dialogic state of existence that is the state of writing and reading. He remains in limbo, unable to make up his mind between refusing a helping hand that would allow him to move—he does not want the recumbent that Marijana’s family has built for him, is convinced that “he will never put it to use” (256)—and accepting help—he promises Marijana, “I’ll give it a whirl” (257)—ultimately refusing Costello’s offer, which is also a plea, to “tour the whole land, the two of us, [...] north and south, east and west” (263).

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*Foe*, “He and His Man,” and *Slow Man* move us from an understanding of self-reflexivity as a turn away from the world to an understanding of self-reflexivity as a turn both to discourse—to mechanisms and responsibilities in the construction of storyworlds—and outward to the world—to narrative and interpretative practices in (the construction of) the world, and to responsibilities in such acts. These works show that metalepsis has been understood too narrowly, neglecting the ethical dimension of its ability to unsettle hierarchies. By reflecting on discursive structures and by turning back on their own discourse, Coetzee’s texts show up their limits, their lack of authority, and the provisional nature of their storyworlds.

In *Foe*, metalepsis functions to challenge Coetzee’s own text and to turn it into a site of dialogue. The issues *Foe* addresses—silencing through procedures of colonization and canonization—and the socio-political context in which *Foe* intervenes—oppression of voices and people in South Africa during apartheid—contextualize Coetzee’s self-reflexivity as an ethical commitment to dialogue in service of writing against power structures, including his own authorial power. In “He and His Man,” Coetzee emphasizes his lack of authority as author at the moment when others bestow such authority on him. *Slow Man* is a reflection on what it means to write without authority, highlighting the unforeseeability of the event of writing and reading. Coetzee practices an ethics of writing that affirms such uncertainty, but *Slow Man* shows that he does so far from self-assuredly. *Slow Man* ends not on a future-oriented note, as *Foe* does, but in a state of

exhaustion for author and character alike. Costello and Rayment have not made much progress, if any, at the end of the novel. Where *Foe* ends on a call on the reader to challenge its own shortcomings, *Slow Man* ends on Costello's call on Rayment but this call remains unanswered.

The potential and the risk of writing as an unpredictable event is explored also in other of Coetzee's works and remains the focus in the chapters to come. Chapter 3 stresses Coetzee's doubts about the wager on writing but also the necessity, an existential and ethical one, to take this wager. The chapter further modifies our understanding of self-reflexivity and metalepsis. The focus on the interaction of author and reader, and on the function of self-reflexive elements as a means of rhetorical control and persuasion, brings to light that, while such elements anticipate objections to statements made in or by Coetzee's texts, self-reflexive narrative strategies also serve to strip authority from these statements and to render the storyworlds of these texts malleable. Chapter 4 foregrounds what is apparent already in *Foe*, "He and His Man," and *Slow Man*, and what can be seen in all of Coetzee's works, namely the autobiographical dimension of their concern with discourse and authorship—the ethical and existential necessity of the wager on writing for Coetzee.

J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Narrative Transgression

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