

Paulina Grzęda

## A Novel about Novels? The Author, the Writer and the Character: Autorship in J.M. Coetzee's *Slow Man*

The problem of authorship and the sources of creative authority has been one of the central concerns in post-colonial literature but also, interestingly, one of the most contested constructs in literary criticism. Yet, few postcolonial works of fiction have placed the question of authorial agency, the nature of authorship itself and the relationship between the writer, the text he authors and its characters at the very core of their thematic concerns. In this respect, *Slow Man*, J. M. Coetzee's first novel since he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2003, appears to be an exception. As Adams asserts, in his recent novel, Coetzee: "Seems at pain[...] to dismantle the mechanisms of his storytelling; to let the reader pull back the curtain a little and see him at work on the levers of his fiction and witness his practised pressings of all the right buttons" (2005).

Indeed, both *Slow Man*'s thematic choice, as well as its selection of narrative strategies, its recurrent employment of intertextuality and extensive reliance on metafictional techniques, as well as the text's continuous workings to unsettle borders between reality and fiction, all seem to be aimed at deconstructing and exposing the very processes of producing fiction. Yet, the commentary that Coetzee's work offers on the nature of literary authorship is not an unambiguous, univocal one. On the contrary, drawing our attention to the multiplicity of agencies involved in the creative process, the writer compels the readers to reconsider the received assumptions about the authorial sources of fictional narratives.

In *Slow Man*'s opening scene, the main protagonist, Paul Rayment, is hit by a car when taking a bicycle ride in the streets of Adelaide. As a result, he is badly injured and has his leg amputated above the knee. The remaining part of the novel will address the character's struggle to come to terms with his newly 'diminished' condition or rather his reluctance to adjust and his continuous refusal to commit himself to any course of action. The disaster proves to be a turning point in his life. Confined to his flat, immobilized, he feels his 'universe has contracted [...] and will not expand again' (Coetzee 2006: 25). Living alone and being left to his own devices, Paul needs the daily care of a nurse. After some initial difficulties, a Croatian-born woman, Marijana Jokić, is assigned as his caregiver. Offering him unsentimental attention, discreetly attending to all his needs, she quickly becomes an object of his misplaced love. It is at the moment right after Paul declares his feelings to Marijana along with his willingness to extend his favours over the whole Jokić family that another important character enters the novel's scene. The visitor arrives at Paul's apartment unannounced and unexpected and introduces herself as Elizabeth Costello. Though clearly unwelcome, she quickly takes residence with the ageing man and through her decisive actions makes sure her role is properly recognised.

Clearly an intertextual reference to the protagonist of Coetzee's previous novels, *The Lives of Animals* and *Elizabeth Costello*, the widely acclaimed Australian novelist known as Elizabeth Costello, the insertion of this new character into the plot marks a division of the novel's narrative into two separate parts. Indeed, as Sue Kossew has pointed out, the novel splits into two distinctly marked sections: the

first one a realistic account of the accident and its consequences, which bears all characteristics of verisimilitude, and the second one introduced by Costello's metafictional intrusion, which intimates the existence of multiple levels of reality and unsettles the reader's expectations of certitude that have been up to that point perfectly fulfilled (2009: 63).

From the very first moment Costello's presence disorients the reader, blurring the borders between the fictional and the real. When indicating the purpose of her visit, she explains: "I wanted to explore for myself what kind of being you are" (81). Shortly afterwards, reciting the exact opening lines of the book, she asserts that she is only there because he 'came to [her]', seemingly against her own will (81). Such statements alert the reader to the existence of yet another level within fictional reality, which Costello seems to represent. In fact, we start to surmise that Elizabeth might be the author of the text we are reading. In retrospect, even the novel's first section, which seemingly constituted a matter-of-fact narration of events following the accident, bears traces of Costello's agency. When still in hospital, slowly regaining consciousness, Paul's thoughts are described as follows: "Something is coming to him. A letter at a time, *clack, clack, clack*, a message is being typed on a rose-pink screen that trembles like water ... E-R-T-Y, say the letters, then F-R-I-V-O-L, then trembling, the E, then Q-W-E-R-T-Y, on and on" (3).

As a number of reviewers of *Slow Man* have noted, the sequence of the first letters on the computer's keyboard clearly intimates that the process of writing at its very initial stage is taking place. Of course, we cannot be sure that the writer in question is Costello herself, but some critics have insightfully suggested that the very choice of words may indeed indicate so. Quoting an excerpt from *Ulysses*, in which Bloom invites Mrs. Breen to dance addressing her, "A little frivol, shall we [...]?", C. Kenneth Pellow remarks that such intertextual insertion is unlikely to have been made by Rayment himself, but could be easily expected from the Australian novelist, the author of *The House on Eccles Street*, a novel that re-tells James Joyce's *Ulysses* (2009: 542).

Some evidence of the processes of writing being at work is also exhibited in a metafictional remark acknowledging Rayment's passiveness as early as on page 14: "From the opening of the chapter, from the incident on Magill Road to the present, he has not behaved well, has not risen to the occasion: that much is clear to him."

What is more, Costello appears to be well-acquainted not only with the story of Rayment's life, but also with the stylistic and linguistic choices of the very narrative that inscribes Rayment's life into the novel's plot. Shortly after her arrival, Elizabeth confesses that she will accompany him for "the foreseeable future" (84) with the intention of assisting him, giving him "just a touch on the shoulder, now and then, just to keep [him] on the path" (87). Although the otherworldly nature of Costello's visitation starts to dawn on the readers, Paul does not seem to fully grasp her significance in his life. He keeps on reproaching her for examining him just to use him later as a character in one of her books. At some point, he even accuses her, "You treat me 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[...] put us in cages with our names on them' (117). He only starts to embrace the true nature of her presence, when it becomes clear that Costello is not only familiar with the crucial events in his life, but also with his most intimate thoughts and desires. Rayment notes: "It is as if she were reading his diary. It is as if he kept a diary, and this woman crept nightly into the flat and read his secrets. But there is no diary, unless he writes it in his sleep" (97).

This sense of intimacy with his inner life is at its starkest when Costello provides Paul with an elaborate description of his brief encounter with a blind woman called Marianna and his interest in this mysterious woman. Seemingly, it is Elizabeth Costello's viewpoint that the readers are confronted with from the very opening lines of the book. The narratorial voice of *Slow Man* may indeed be hers. Costello appears to have assumed the role of the author who brings the character into life and determines his actions, thus displaying the divine power to create and guide the narrative. To reinforce her position as the author/creator, she relies on biblical allusions. Inviting Paul to move in with her, she advertises her house in Melbourne as bearing resemblance to the house of God, "You will like it. It has many mansions" (234). A number of metaphorical associations that Paul starts to make between Costello and God only further foreground her godlike status as well as the main character's gradual coming to terms with the true nature of her intervention:

It is as he feared: she knows everything, every jot and tittle. Damn her! All the time he thought he was his own master he has been in a cage like a rat[...] with the infernal woman standing over him[...], recording his progress. Or is it worse than that, incomparably worse, so much worse that the mind threatens to buckle? (122)

The passage seems to mark a shift in Rayment's understanding of his predicament, he gradually starts to acknowledge the possibility of Costello being not just an intruder, a mere manipulator, but rather a godlike figure that might determine his life.

Yet, though Costello's relationship to Rayment resembles one of the creator to the thing created, some of the novel's episodes seem to suggest quite the contrary. At various points, the plot proves Costello's power to be limited. Far from assuming the role of an omniscient narrator, she whimsically changes accounts of her actions, exaggerates her predicament and often enigmatically denies familiarity with certain facts that, as an omniscient narrator, she would certainly have to know. Furthermore, her knowledge of characters' lives seems to be fragmentary. When Rayment is astonished by her ignorance of his past, she replies, „It is news to me, Paul, I promise you. You came to me with no history attached[...] Your prior life was virgin territory” (195). Her status as an unreliable narrator is further reinforced when the events she plots in her notebooks (which at some point Paul gets to read) never materialize. The existence of this parallel, alternative plot may well indicate that Costello is no more than a liar, a manipulator trying to galvanize Paul into action. Yet a number of other solutions can equally come to the reader's mind. As Pellow has suggested, scribbling down her notes, Costello may still be revising the novel, not entirely sure which thread to follow, she may simply be mistaken or „she and Rayment may at this point both be playing the ‚godgame’- competing divinities” (538).

It is striking that, on a number of occasions, it is rather Paul, not Costello, who proves to be the main focalizer of the story. In his brief conversation with Marianna, he asserts, „Mrs. Costello does not know everything. She cannot know what I do not know” (106). Another example of Costello's inaptness as a deity is her apparent inability to control her own life. When explaining the purpose of her visit, she states, „You came to me[...] In certain respects I am not in command of what comes to me” (81). Clearly, far from representing the godlike figure of the omnipotent creator, her role is rather the one of a helper, a guide, whose main task will be to prompt her character into action.

Yet, paradoxically, she does not seem to be any more successful in this respect. In fact, her failure to trigger a ‚twist’ in the plot, to develop her character, to provide him with an incentive to take his

life in his own hands, only further undermines her authorship. Instead, her authorial fiasco redirects our attention towards the role assigned to the novel's protagonist in the processes of producing fiction. May it be possible that just as no one's destiny is predetermined, no fictional character's life story is just written by the godlike figure of the writer? Can protagonists take active part in the process of writing? Is there indeed a certain amount of freedom granted to characters within the text? The answer *Slow Man* offers to these questions appears to be affirmative. From the very first moment Costello intervenes in Paul's life, all her interactions with the protagonist are aimed at persuading him that "Living one's life is writing one's story" (Dancygier 2010: 243). Therefore, it is up to Paul now to perform in order to determine the course of his life and in the process 'come into being' as the novel's main protagonist. Costello reminds him: "I say it again: this is your story, not mine. The moment you decide, to take charge, I will fade away" (100).

Yet, the problem seems to lie in Paul's continuous reluctance to commit himself to any course of action, as reflected in his most obstinate refusal to use a prosthesis. Thus, his failure to take his fate in his own hands, to make his life meaningful, to a certain extent undermines his status as the novel's main protagonist, whose actions should drive the story. The novel's plot at risk of grinding to a halt, it seems that Elizabeth Costello needs to be introduced as an agent whose responsibility it will be to move the narrative and ensure the story's continuation. Aware of the difficulty of the task assigned to her, she cannot refrain from expressing her strong dissatisfaction with the twist the action has taken in the wake of Paul's decision to declare his feelings: "Two a penny, Mr Rayment, stories like that are two a penny. You will have to make a stronger case for yourself" (82).

Her growing frustration with the character's passiveness is further voiced in a provocative statement: "Think how well you started. What could be better calculated to engage one's attention than the incident on Magill Road. [...] What a sad decline ever since! Slower and slower, till by now you are almost at a halt. [...] But be of good heart" (100).

All is not lost yet, it seems. Even towards the end of the novel, in a sarcastic representation of "authorial labour", Costello still urges Paul to "Push!" (204). Acting as "a midwife who assists in the birth of the text", she does not give up her hopes on him and presses him to assume the role assigned to him (Wicomb 2010: 217). She asserts, "I cannot advise, that must come from you. [...] Until you choose to act, I must wait upon you" (136). Nonetheless, her authority does not extend any further than this and at some point she will have to surrender. Incapable of prompting any significant twist in the novel's plot, she accepts limitations of her position as the narrative's 'mover' and settles for the role of the writer in its most restricted meaning, of the one who records, who writes down. Such an assumption is only strengthened by the fact that when, right after entering the narrative, Costello recites the opening lines of the novel, she substitutes the word 'tumbles' for the word 'flies' used in the opening chapter (81, 1). As Kossev has insightfully pointed out, this can only imply that Costello's authorship itself is continuously overwritten by another authorial voice, the one of J.M. Coetzee (69). It can of course be claimed that a reader familiar with Coetzee's previous works should not be surprised by the concept of shared authorship between J.M. Coetzee and Elizabeth Costello. For, in his previous writings, Costello indeed enjoyed the status of Coetzee's alter ego. To the readers of Coetzee's previous book, *Elizabeth Costello*, the eponymous heroine is introduced as a widely acclaimed Australian novelist touring the world with a series of invited lectures that bear a striking resemblance to some of Coetzee's genuine publications.

As we learn to recognise the diminished status of Costello's authorship of the text we are reading, we must simultaneously acknowledge a shift in the power relationships between the writer (Costello) and her main protagonist (Paul). As more and more ambiguities about the role assigned to the two figures emerge, a clear distinction between their respective narratorial functions gets blurred. Indeed, it is on a number of occasions that the plot implies the equal status enjoyed by the writer and his character. When introducing herself during her visit at Paul's house, Costello asks the man to give her his hand. Eccentric as her request may seem, she quickly explains herself, saying that she just wanted to make "sure that [their] two bodies would not just pass through each other" (81). The remark clearly suggests that the two figures can be viewed as each other's alter egos. The gradual acknowledgment of a number of similarities that the two share: the age, their loneliness, their difficult position in the presence of yet another authorial voice, further contributes to the growth of a special bond between the two characters. Their paths seem to be eternally intertwined. Towards the end of the novel, Costello declares: "For me alone Paul Rayment was born and I for him. His is the power of leading, mine of following; his of acting, mine of writing" (233).

The true nature of the writer/character relationship as exhibited in *Slow Man* may be complicated, but it is undoubtedly underscored by a system of powerful correlations, in which both of them prove to be equally influential figures. In some respects, the protagonist's authority might even prove to be of a greater significance to the novel's narrative. For, the character's power to lead, invoked by Costello, may equally be exhibited in his right to "withhold his story, to be a slow man" (Kosew 2009: 66). This seems to be the case of *Slow Man*, where Paul's continuous refusal to act turns out to be a powerful instrument threatening to bring the novel's narrative to a close. Indeed, we cannot help the impression that Paul's immobility, his lack of emotional commitment, of genuine involvement, this condition of being "caught in limbo, unable to grow" not only permeates many areas of his life, but also extends over the novel's narrative, putting not only his existence, but also the book's action on hold (112). As already indicated, the only thing that stays within the writer's power is his ability to follow the cues, which will, in turn, have to be provided by the protagonist. Towards the end of the novel, it becomes blatantly obvious that no such thing can be expected from Paul. In all respects an anti-hero, physically incapacitated, he will refuse to use a bike tailored to his needs and offered to him by the Jokić family. Standing no chances of winning Marijana's heart, he will turn down companionship offered by Elizabeth Costello. Unwilling to make any concessions, unable to come to terms with his predicament, he will refuse to commit himself to any course of action, he will remain Slow Man. Can it therefore be the case that Paul Rayment's role in the novel was not at all to 'push' its action, to live a life worth a tale, 'become major', but rather, to quote after Dancygier, "to facilitate an expression of the authorial view of authorship" (244)? Could *Slow Man* be written with a sheer intention to expose the creative doctrine of the actual author, J.M. Coetzee?

In view of Coetzee's widely acknowledged preference for ambivalence, his continuous exploration of double meanings and frequent employment of metafictional techniques aimed at unsettling the readers' received assumptions about fact and fiction, it seems to be a plausible motivation. After all, the concept of authorship which emerges out of *Slow Man* is the one of a "blend" of correlated agencies involved in the processes of producing fiction. As Barbara Dancygier observes, Coetzee redefines the concept of authorship, redistributing the power of creating fictional narratives between the author, J.M. Coetzee, the writer - the author's literary persona, his alter ego, Elizabeth Costello and the char-

acter, Paul Rayment (249). The protagonist that comes forth in such an imaginative operation seems to be simultaneously pre-authored, by J.M. Coetzee, co-authored, by Costello, as well as self-authored, through his independent actions. Authorial responsibility is therefore shared and the narrative that emerges out of such a creative process is “by its very nature an intersubjective construct” (Dancygier 2010: 250).

Not only a tale of a failed novel, thematising the writer’s fiasco to bring his character into being, but also a manifesto of the actual author, J.M. Coetzee’s writing credo, *Slow Man* appears to be ‘a novel about novels’ par excellence.

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