J. M. Coetzee's Australian Realism

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Abstract The essay investigates the implications for J. M. Coetzee's poetics of his shift from an agonistic if in his case highly mediated settler tradition within South African writing, which is part of his literary and imaginative inheritance, towards a self-consciously acquired Australian mode of realist writing, which however is equally mediated, that came with his move to that country in the early 2000s. The essay will further consider how his knowing engagement with the genre or subgenre of settler realism manifests in both his imaginative geographies as a mode at once of disconnection from and of affiliation to what for want of a better word might be called the nation. What does Coetzee's shift between two established subgenres in post/colonial literature, the farm novel or *plaasroman* of South Africa, in his case refracted through a postmodern lens, and Australian realism, equally postmodern and mediated, equally agonistic, tell us about the ways in which the narrative burden of settler history, of which Coetzee is doubly aware, is inflected in his work? The analysis will be sharpened by reading this work alongside the contemporaneous representation of the matter of Australia by two of Coetzee's prominent contemporaries, Peter Carey and Tim Winton: in particular Carey's post-2000 novels *My Life as a Fake* (2003) and *Theft* (2006), and Winton's 2004 *Dirt Music* and his 2008 *Breath*.

Key words J. M. Coetzee; settler realism; mediation

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This essay sets out to investigate the implications for J. M. Coetzee's poetics of his shift from an agonistic if in his case highly mediated settler tradition within South African writing, which is part of his literary and imaginative inheritance, towards a self-consciously acquired Australian mode of realist writing, equally mediated, that came with his move to that country in the early 2000s. The larger question which this investigation will raise, by implication if not always directly, is how a shift of national location within the international republic of letters might impinge on a settler or colonial tradition within postcolonial poetics; or whether it is rather the case that such a strand or tradition operates in cross-border, transnational ways, freely making itself available to writers from different postcolonial domains. [1]

I. Coetzee and the Real

A significant number of the postcolonial novelists and poets who have engaged also in postcolonial literary criticism, often *à propos* of their own practice, Derek Walcott,

Salman Rushdie, Seamus Heaney and J. M. Coetzee among them, have commented on the relationship that is reflected in their poetics between their generic and formal choices as writers, and their sense of history[2], especially national history. In Rushdie's case, for example, the mode of postmodernist magic realism which he developed most famously in *Midnight's Children* (1981), was knowingly composed in order to cut across the oppressive linearity and rationality implied by colonial European historiography, as well as the tradition of nationalist triumphalism which in part emerged from it.[3] Yet even his "critical mimicry of national fiction", as Tim Brennan was among the first to point out, involved a simultaneous if paradoxical longing for overarching narrative continuity—a continuity which in turn signified, though obliquely, a longing for national "form" (Brennan 100).

Taking as a starting point South African-born J. M. Coetzee's representation of his new land Australia, that is, of his Australia as an imaginative prospect, a complex of territorial and national memory, this essay will consider how his engagement with the genre or subgenre of settler realism, both knowing and critical, manifests in both his imaginative geographies as a mode at once of disconnection from and of affiliation to what for want of a better word in his case might be called the nation. What does Coetzee's shift between two established subgenres in post/colonial literature, the farm novel or *plaasroman* of South Africa, in his case refracted through a postmodern lens, and Australian realism, equally postmodern and mediated, equally agonistic, tell us about the ways in which the narrative burden of settler history, of which Coetzee is doubly aware, is inflected in his work? The analysis will be sharpened by reading this work alongside the contemporaneous representation of the matter of Australia by two of Coetzee's prominent contemporaries, Peter Carey and Tim Winton: in particular Carey's post-2000 novels *My Life as a Fake* (2003) and *Theft* (2006), and Winton's 2004 *Dirt Music* and his 2008 *Breath*. The comparative perspective will help to demonstrate how in Coetzee allusions to certain genres and forms have produced, or have made an attempt at producing, even if in a jobbing or perfunctory way, a recognizably Australian world. Whereas in the cases of both Carey and Winton the relationship of land and voice, of (Australian) context and language, is taken as definitive for their writing (as Carey demonstrates, for example, with his ventriloquism of folk hero Ned Kelly's voice in his 2000 *True History of the Kelly Gang*), the question is how the relationship operates in the post-2000 Australian Coetzee.

For the purposes of my critique, realism will be taken as one generic mode amongst others within postcolonial writing (as within other bodies of writing), often though not exclusively bound up with the telling of national stories, the "national longing for form" (Brennan 79 – 117). However, it will also be understood that, despite realism's pretensions to reflect reality, *qua* mode it announces itself as just as unreliable and constructed as other modes, as Coetzee is well aware. In terms of Zizek's definition of the Real, to which I will return, the Real is as inaccessible to realism as is, say, magical realism, in spite of its claims otherwise. This is thinking with which Coetzee has always been fully involved. Realism—or indeed post-realism or ironic realism—is also culturally and historically inflected in different contexts, which involves the writer who moves between regions, and between traditions, in a

differential shift of generic approaches. No matter how self-reflexive the writer about their engagement with realism, to espouse realism in Australia is ultimately different from doing so in South Africa, not least because the writer in this case, Coetzee, is self-consciously approaching the country and its writerly traditions from without.

The decision to adopt the identity of Australian writer before he physically settled in Australia, through his alter ego *Elizabeth Costello*, represented a testing millennial challenge for the writer J. M. Coetzee. Across the greater part of his career, from *In the Heart of the Country* (1976) onwards, Coetzee tended to write at a distance from region and vernacular, and certainly from any form of national affiliation (Coetzee, *White Writing* 7 – 8; *Elizabeth Costello* 199 – 200). His was a famously stripped-down, standardized yet global English voice, that assumed a broadly secular, humanist position. In becoming an Australia-located writer, the demand to write Australia as an Australian, to "make up" Australia, as Costello says, would have seemed to Coetzee a tall imaginative order, equivalent to the assertion of a particularly "strong opinion" with respect to national allegiance (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 12).

Yet, this essay submits, Coetzee has perceptibly grasped this challenge, though, as is to be expected, he has done so in subtle, incremental, often less than obvious (even partially unconvinced) ways, though arguably with a greater directness of reference, a kind of post-fictional reportage, than he has shown with respect to the imagining of South Africa. If in novels like *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), as in *White Writing* (1988), Coetzee was concerned with the "imaginative schemas" through which the arid South African hinterland could be represented, his Australia, I suggest, is similarly conceived as a land of the mind, a space relayed through intellectual schemas. Paradoxically, however, the reality of this new country is in relative terms the more strongly registered and perceived than the imaginary construct of South Africa in Coetzee's oeuvre generally has been, in part by way of diaristic and autobiographical devices. Yet this is a paradox that reduces in magnitude if it is remembered that Coetzee has always been preoccupied with the poetics of the real, including the codes through which realism is at once established and undermined. In fiction after fiction, wherever set, he involves his reader in scrutinizing the operation of these codes of, as Costello has it, "embodying" afresh (Attridge 102; Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 9). The difference is that in Australia, a country acquired by conscious adoption rather than through the accident of birth, he has been more noticeably concerned not only to establish the country fictionally as a space, but also to realize it as an actual, recognizable location.

For Coetzee, one of the more important elements of his relationship to Australia, his interest in embracing Australia intellectually, is how that relationship is brought into the consciousness of his novels, from *Elizabeth Costello* onwards, in notational, realist-seeming ways, though also with a certain sense of correctness and obligation, the politeness of the naturalized citizen. Up until its fictionalized yet realistically conceived Dulgannon frogs episode, Australia insinuates itself into *Elizabeth Costello*, for example, either in the form of journalistic outline or sketchy reportage, or as a metonymic visual shorthand, where single precisely conceived images or scenes are made to designate a wider social world. "So real", opines *Elizabeth Costello* meta-textually

of Marijuana's domestic interior in *Slow Man*, which is described via the shorthand referents of white leather furniture, lurid abstract painting, and ceiling fan (Coetzee, *Slow Man* 241 – 2). What this sharply defined, "real-life" interest in Australia signifies, it seems, is that in writing Australia Coetzee has kicked away the more abstract meta-fictional schemas that in South Africa underwrote his visual imagination, and has resorted to a referential vocabulary that at least superficially has a less mediated relationship to the world that is being described.

There are two interlocking forces at work in this matrix of representation, this revised poetics of the real. First, Coetzee appears to be concerned that South African imaginative structures not simply be adapted to provide imaginative scaffolding for his Australian existence. This interest ties to his decision openly to take on Australian citizenship, publicly to profess Australianness, to seek a full-hearted commitment. But he is also concerned with how the reality or context of the Australian nation might "really" be evoked in his work. Taking this a stage further, he is concerned with the quality of the real in Australia and hence also with how it is experienced and evoked. For him, realism is a contingent mode; it cannot simply be accessed regardless of a writer's location; it must be adapted, translated, and remade to suit the context it is being used to address. This interest in grappling with the real in Australia, relates to other interests that have grown in prominence in his more recent, Australian-phase work—the interest in living from the heart, in the full-blooded body, and not only through the simulacra of the literary, to cite from Elizabeth Costello's eighth lesson (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 193 – 226). Significantly, understanding "real-life" through the medium of the body is something that is important to Australian writing more broadly also, as is palpable, for example, in Winton's harsh West Australian realism, in which the human is repeatedly reduced to pre-verbal, "forked creature" states of being.

The concern to grapple with the real is arguably central in South African white writing, too, but there, at least in Coetzee's account, reality perhaps is even less amenable to representation. More so than his Australia, Coetzee's South Africa is overwritten by rival dream topographies and imported, inauthentic languages. It is, in his view, striated by race, by the historical struggle of white writing with black presence, more intensively so than his Australia appears to be, his reference to the Tasmanians in *Elizabeth Costello* notwithstanding. As *White Writing* has it: "The [South African] poet scans the landscape with his hermeneutic gaze, but it remains trackless, refuses to emerge into meaningfulness as a landscape of signs" (Coetzee, *White Writing* 9).

In short, Coetzee in Australia, when compared to his writing in and of South Africa, is interested not just in the operations of embodied realism, as that is a perennial concern, but is interested also in the quality of reality, even in the quality of the real, and hence of its boundaries and breaking points, as these pertain in Australia, as well as more universally. As a symptom of this preoccupation, *Diary of a Bad Year*, the more candid second section especially, is overwritten with words signifying the real or the true: "really," "truth," "truly," "authority effect," as well as "love," the "truth" of "the heart," the "thing itself," "love itself," and the "in-

disputable certainty" invoked by a realist writer like Tolstoy (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 234 – 5, 119, 126, 196, 198, 149 – 51, 185).

Pressing the point, Coetzee's interest in the representation of the real in Australia is not so much conveyed as reinforced, from *Slow Man* on, through appropriate, as if bespoke, media: the relative realism of the first part of *Slow Man*, at least up until its self-reflexive chiasmus; the essayistic and diaristic commentaries of *Diary of a Bad Year*, its as if "real" hypotextual underpinnings. Of course, "for all his experimentation", as Derek Attridge writes, Coetzee "has always drawn on the stubborn power of realism, on the vivid representation of a world, external and internal, into which the reader is invited" (Attridge 201). It is an observation that relates directly to *Slow Man* where, in spite of the questions about novelistic convention raised through the introduction of *Elizabeth Costello* as writer-character, the novel is unequivocal in finding that the power of communicating the impact of the real is of primary importance to fiction. What then makes up this real to Coetzee? What form does it take? Drawing on Lacan, Slavoj Zizek in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* and, especially, *Violence*, as in other work, provocatively suggests that the desert of the real is that which exceeds the reality effects of language even though language is ceaselessly preoccupied with it. The real for Zizek, and by extension also for Coetzee, is that which cannot be produced by, or contained within, verbal artifice, yet, paradoxically, can only be approached through it.

Coetzee's writing the Australian real, or, at least, the reality of Australia, however obliquely so, is, this essay further submits, an interestingly engaged act, perhaps an Australian and not a transnational act, for so nationally disaffected a writer. How the nation is embodied and secured through myth and metaphor has of course been a widespread issue in postcolonial or new national literatures, as also in postcolonial criticism, across several decades. But, whereas Coetzee as a South African writer assumed a circumspect critical position in relation to that process of imaginative embodiment, in Australia his stance is seemingly less objectifying, less concerned to negative what lies before him. Although his coolly rational narrative personae do not go so far as to seek that close intercalation of land, language and being that Tim Winton's Breath, for example, yearns towards, Coetzee himself appears to be aware that in literature Australian reality conventionally comes into being through certain figures, a national imaginary, and he visibly adopts a less than distant though always already translated position in relation to these. Paul Rayment says of himself: "I can pass among Australians. I cannot pass among the French. That, as far as I am concerned, is all there is to it, to the national-identity business: where one passes and where one does not." (Coetzee, *Slow Man* 197) In Australia, Coetzee wishes for his imagination, for his constructions of Australian reality, to pass as something resembling the real thing—which, interestingly for him, means to pass as a realism that is as mediated as ever before.

Several ironies straightaway encroach upon these observations. An obvious one is that, as Australian literary history shows, *White Writing* in Australia has long been as preoccupied with the elusiveness of the Australian real, as South African *White Writing* has been with its alienation from southern African land. It has been as concerned

with the impenetrability of the landscape to European names, with the unavailability of reciprocity between poet and space, with the violence of founding societies and identities upon the alien land[4]. Marcus Clarke writing about the poetry of his nineteenth-century compatriot Adam Lindsay Gordon famously regretted the lack of a perceptual framework, a "language of the barren and the uncouth", through which to interpret "the hieroglyphs of haggard gum trees, blown into odd shapes" (Clarke 50 – 2). From this anxiety over inadequate signification and flawed simulacra, as is well known, emerges Australia's fascination with hoaxes and the ersatz. The "peculiar susceptibility of the Australian literary establishment to fraudulence and fakery", stands to reason when the hunger is for an unobtainable authenticity, in relation to which confections and imitations, "beautiful lies", produce a temporary prophylaxis or passing relief (Huggan 101). The propensity to produce fakes, opines hoaxer Christopher Chubb in Carey's *My Life as a Fake*, is driven by "the terror of being out of date", the tyranny of distance from the place where authenticity resides (Carey, *My Life as a Fake* 29). In his later Theft, talented provincials self-consciously act out the life-styles of famous cosmopolitans. The pivot that both novels turn around is the paradox that the faker understands nothing so closely, and hates nothing so much as a lie. Coetzee's photograph collector Paul Rayment, too, despises fakes and prostheses (Coetzee, *Slow Man* 255).

Another, related irony is that Coetzee has himself in *White Writing* powerfully theorized the condition of colonial anomie, what he describes as the colonial's uneasy, never entirely successful imaginative appropriation of the resistant so-called settled land. At any number of points in *White Writing*, and almost continuously in its Introduction, it could be the nineteenth-century poet in Australia, too, that he is addressing. The intellectual schemas of dystopic South Africa apply equally to Australia's similarly wide, brown land, as can be illustrated with the following adapted quotation from *White Writing*, in which "South Africa" has been replaced with the word "Australia": "In the words he throws out to the landscape, in the echoes he listens for, he is seeking a dialogue with [Australia], a reciprocity with [Australia], that will allow him an identity better than that of visitor, stranger, transient" (Coetzee, *White Writing* 8). Elsewhere he describes the "self-defeating process of naming [Australia] by defining it as non-Europe – self-defeating because in each particular in which [Australia] is identified to be non-European, it remains Europe, not [Australia], that is named" (Coetzee, *White Writing* 164). As in South Africa, so in Australia, the white writer is enclosed within the hermeneutic circle imposed by the foreign, imported tropes through which he attempts to think his allegedly new, "empty" land.

That South Africa and Australia were, for all their differences, white settler colonies within the British Empire, goes some way towards explaining these strong parallels. So, too, does the fact that in imaginative terms they formed part of the dystopian colonial south, as it was constructed in triangulated contrast with the enlightened north on the one hand, and the brave new world of America on the other[5]. This dystopic southernness, too, Coetzee analyses in *White Writing*; and its intriguing intellectual resistances are aspects that may have informed and subtended his interest in immigrating to Australia in the first place. Commenting on contemporary Australia's

pitiless treatment of asylum-seekers, JC in *Diary of a Bad Year* explicitly observes of the country's unpromising mythographic condition: "Australia was never a promised land, a new world, an island paradise offering its bounty to the new arrival. … Life in the Antipodes was meant to be a punishment." (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 112)

The point these intersecting ironies are making is that the enigma of Coetzee's arrival in Australia, this "land of whiteness", as a (white) writer, he had to a significant degree scripted in advance (Coetzee, *Slow Man* 13). He had in broad strokes, as if by design, mapped its imaginative topography, its hermeneutic non-visibility, beforehand. The déjà vu of the process, the inevitable always-already, must have been palpable to him, almost too obvious, possibly even laughable, full of the repeats and predictable prat-falls of situation comedy. Or as her sister Blanche tells *Elizabeth Costello*, when referring to the introduction of false humanist ideals to Africa: "It is not just in Zululand that it happened. It happened in Australia too. It happened all over the colonized world, just not in so neat a form." (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 141) With its imaginative topoi prescribed in advance, Australia to a Coetzee interested in the limitations of representing the real, entailed in some ways as difficult a case as did Zululand. The ennui of the always-already, of that which cannot be said because too many attempts have already been made to say it, gives an interesting gloss to the language through which Coetzee refers to Australia in the line-up of his writing from *Elizabeth Costello* through to *Diary of a Bad Year*.

In those places where Australia is designated in *Elizabeth Costello*, a functional, even minimalist referential language is deployed—not so much stripped-down, as Coetzee's language in *Disgrace* and elsewhere has been described, than less-than-literary, ennuyé, perfunctory. It is a language that is, as it were, impatient with the task of description yet concerned with it even so, out of a sense of writerly duty to context. So *Elizabeth Costello* refers, in passing, merely to the "Irish-Catholic Melbourne of her childhood", assuming that this code is sufficient to invoke an entire context (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 179, 125). Though Elizabeth resists Australia's being described as the "far edge" (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 15), in the novel it is still something of a place apart, separated from the rest of the world, as often described, and from the international cross-border realm of the novel, of Elizabeth Costello's transnational peregrinations. Interestingly, none of the lessons is set in Australia. She has led, Elizabeth reflects, "an antipodean life, removed from the worst of history," "quiet," "protected" (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 215; Huggan 66).

In *Slow Man*, the language of minimalist denotation in respect of Australia persists, and is spun out in the form of the thin strand of scene setting running through the novel. The vocabulary designating South Australia is dominated by street names, basic topographical features, and the urban commonplaces of Adelaide. "He will never stride up Black Hill again, never pedal off to the market to do his shopping, much less come swooping on his bicycle down the curves of Montacute." "Years ago he used to cycle through Munno Para on the way to Gawler. Then it was just a few houses dotted around a filling station, with bare scrub behind" (Coetzee, *Slow Man* 25, 241, 151). Magill Road, repeatedly cited, is built up not only as a metonym for

Paul's accident, but also, following on, as a sign of the real, the intrusion of the inconceivable real into the world of the everyday[6].

The language of sere reportage insinuates itself also into the quasi-academic prose of the essays that make up *Diary of a Bad Year*, in particular into the uppermost strand of the first part, "Strong Opinions", JC's jaded pronouncements on public life. Here Australia, specifically Sydney, post-2001, post-Iraq War, is a land of compromised liberal idealism, reduced moral decency, and withering national pride; incorporated into the global economy, yet also marginal to it, increasingly given to exhibiting "the bullying, authoritarian, militaristic strain" to which "western political life" has become susceptible (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 120). Australia is thus in several ways a perfect backdrop and foil for protagonist JC's exposition of his "pessimistic anarchistic quietism" as against the "hurly-burly of politics" (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 203, 171). Impelled by his interest in speaking a greater truth about public affairs to 'ordinary people' than that supplied by politicians, JC's *ansichten* for the book *Strong Opinions* have shifted him from being a novelist given to dispensing lessons, to being "a pedant who dabbles in fiction" (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 125 – 6, 191). Even so, throughout the novel it is the evocation of the real in the manner especially of Tolstoy—how it is done, why it is important, how it is trammeled, what its absolute conditions are—that motivates the narrative, as the real of the emotions also does Anya's story (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 192).

II. Reality Effects

Yet Coetzee is not merely concerned with incorporating contemporary Australia, or the mediated real in Australia, into his writing by referencing it, marking its presence or here-ness in denotative terms. He is also, as this section enlarges, concerned to induce even more powerful reality effects than those supplied as part of his vocabulary, by seeming to engage with some of Australia's foundational stories—and by doing so in informed, pre-emptive ways, as well as with his habitual cool correctness. In other words, even before he fully arrived in Australia, and then ever more intensively afterwards, Coetzee participated as if presciently—if still ironically— in its defining intellectual and poetical schemas.

To illustrate, the following paragraphs outline four of the foundational stories to which Coetzee has arguably responded, two of which are closely interlinked, all of which would merit further expansion. There naturally will be others. Analyzed in any number of cultural historical studies, these stories concern the maimed white hero; the fake or forgery; the made-up monster figure who becomes a type of doppelganger; and the tale of new immigration[7].

Dead White Males. Australian literature is famously well-populated with flawed, maimed and dying white heroes, double-sided figures who express a colonial nostalgia for Europe, yet also signify a desire to regenerate as Australian through their suffering and dying (Huggan 88 – 9). (The dead white male tale is closely bound up with the denial of the Aboriginal presence.) Paul Rayment of *Slow Man* unmistakably belongs to this category of maimed heroes-manqué, and bears various characteristic features: a sense of homelessness and hollowness; an interest in the elusiveness of

truth; a tendency to procrastinate; an acceptance of Australia as a place of residence that is comfortable but not a true home. Though *Slow Man* Paul resists getting a move on, to his creator Elizabeth Costello's frustration, he recalls the delusional explorer-figure Voss of Patrick White's mythopoeic 1957 novel (name-checked in Coetzee's *Dusklands*), as he does the damaged sub-heroes of Tim Winton's work, like Luther Fox of *Dirt Music*. Not least among the features he shares with these others is his wound, his severed leg with its "angry colour and swollen look"; there is also his overweening pride, and his sense of living a borrowed life, which he holds in common in particular with Fox, that is, of living through other people and other people's children (Coetzee, *Slow Man* 35; Winton, *Dirt Music* 380 – 1). Yet, as any reader of Coetzee knows, Rayment also shows certain resemblances with other of Coetzee's childless male characters—the magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Michael K, even perhaps Friday in *Foe*.

Fraudulence, Real Fakes, Monster Figures. As is evident from Carey's *My Life as a Fake* and Theft, Australian culture's preoccupation with copies of the real is one side of the same coin as its fascination for copies becoming real, and for creations coming back to dog their creators with often fatal effects (Huggan 101). As also in his *True History of the Kelly Gang*, Carey has made a career of remaking his country's definitive stories, so the prevalence of the fraud, the copy and the doppelganger monster in his later work is perhaps predictable. Yet it is also, for all that, an interesting sign of his continuing interest in writing under the banner of Australia, despite his two-decade stay in New York. In *My Life as a Fake* the so-called fake, the Ern Malley equivalent, Bob McCorkle, turns out to be a real person. The novel turns on the conceit that the hoax in fact coincides with the life and work of a real man and poet who then proceeds to haunt and overwhelm the life of his creator, Christopher Chubb, in true *Frankensteinian* fashion. So McCorkle not only steals his child and brings her up as his own, but also succeeds in writing more innovative and accomplished poetry than Chubb's, though, gallingly to Chubb, in the manner of the mocking modernist pastiche he first initiated. *Theft* represents a further development of this to-Carey-fascinating theme of true frauds and fraudulent truths. The tale of Butcher Bones with its recreation of a lost Jacques Liebowitz, which is eventually passed off as an original, is narrated by the twin voices of Butcher and his "damaged" brother Hugh, another monstrous figure. Hugh, who is in many ways as involved in the making of the artist's art, and his life, as the artist is, functions in the novel as an imperfect copy of his brother, though he bears a clear eye for the grey area separating truth from fake.

To introduce Coetzee to the theme, he, too, has always had an interest in what differentiates the real thing from the copy. What is particularly interesting about *Slow Man*, his first fully Australian novel, is that he feels obliged overtly to assert his interest in "fictional truths and truthful fictions" (Attridge 199). In a novel preoccupied with how Rayment's life becomes Elizabeth Costello's creation, and she, as his creator, his doppelganger, he if anything over-determines our reading by stamping the novel with the sign of the fake, in the near-homonymic Fauchery forgery incident. When Rayment allows Drako Jokiĉ to make free with his photograph collection, Drako

abuses his hospitality, though largely benignly, by making amusing photo-shopped copies of Paul's precious prints, and replacing the real thing with the fakes. Intriguingly, as the fakes replace the faces in the photos with family members's faces, the fakes come to bear the features of the surrounding reality.

The Tale of New Immigration. Post-Second World War immigration to Australia (as against nineteenth-century immigration), that development of which the Jokic family's move from Croatia via Germany to South Australia forms a small part, has for decades involved the country ever more deeply in networks of transnational connection and cross-ocean contact (Huggan 111, 113). From Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage* (1983), through Yasmine Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies* (1994), to Christos Tsiolkas's *Dead Europe* (2005), novels by Australian writers of immigrant background have repeatedly dealt in and critically reflected upon such connections. As far back as *Illywhacker* (1988), and vividly in recent work, Peter Carey, too, traces and retraces the pathways of travel, commerce and migration that connect Australia to Asia, in particular Malaya in *Fake*, and to the United States in *Theft*. Even within the more circumscribed geographical domain of Tim Winton's work, characters disappear from their native West Australia on surfing or sailing holidays to Indonesia. And Coetzee, himself a white immigrant to Australia, is visibly concerned in his post-2003 fiction with light, white, or less visible migration, most obviously so in *Slow Man*.

From the vantage point of Paul Rayment as narrative consciousness, *Slow Man* is a story about the white immigrant experience, about how a respect for long cultural traditions and European antiquity translates in a context where an awareness of history appears less deeply embedded. Their immigrant background is what he feels he has in common with Marijana Jokiĉ and her family, a feeling animated by the belief that this experience, though begun abroad (France in his case), can be grafted on to the Australian national imaginary, as one of its legitimate, tributary stories. The first serious conversation he has with Marijana, conducted while she is dusting his books, deals with Australia's "zero history" as seen from the new immigrant point of view, with the importance of "showing Australia has history too" (Coetzee, *Slow Man* 49). *Diary of a Bad Year* maintains this immigrant awareness in so far as JC refers several times to his former identity as a South African writer, and comments on Australia in his ansichten as a 'man outside' (to quote Carey quoting Max Harris of the Ern Malley affair (Carey, *My Life as a Fake* 268)). Diary, too, is in this respect a tale told by an immigrant or, more accurately, two immigrants. JC's young friend Anya, who supplies the underlying narrative strand, though she is comfortably at home in Australia, if not in her relationship with white Australian male Alan, identifies herself as "just the little Filipina" (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 70).

The purpose of this Cook's tour of Australia's imaginative topography and its coverage by Coetzee, was to elaborate the earlier assertion that he approached the country with many of the definitive preoccupations of its *White Writing* readymade, as if carried in his own portable myth-kitty. Even if, given his settler writer background, some of these seemingly borrowed definitive stories were not consciously preemptive, they nonetheless have the appearance in his Australian fiction of the ready-

made, the as-if-by-design, as is self-reflexively underlined in *Slow Man's* made-to-measure Fauchery forgery. Indeed, the anticipatory quality of the country's definitive literary tropes in Coetzee is, this essay submits, crucial for an understanding of his revised post-2000 poetics, of how he came to an involved, though always still intellectualized engagement with Australia in his work. He was concerned to cite these conventions, I suggest, in order to declare his interest as a writer from outside in the generic matter of Australia, whether realist or not. And he did so in a way that bears only a limited resemblance to his evocation of generic Cape space, which is at once everywhere and nowhere in his South African fiction. Even if generic, his Australian topographical and cultural references are noticeably denotative and directed, if at the same time translated and self-reflexive.

Unlike in Coetzee's South African situation, where he maintained a legendary reticence about questions of national belonging, no Australian writer worthy of the name since the 1960s has deigned not to talk about Australia in their work, to take up positions vis-à-vis Australian history, culture or geography. To write Australia, to engage with its iconic stories and embellish its myths, to engage knowingly in its troubled past, is the mark of the Australian writer. This would apply even to those well-known literary exports of Australia, the works of Thomas Keneally and Clive James. The tug of the real is something that Tim Winton characteristically evokes, as in the earth humming with the impact of the sea in Breath, or in Pikelet's first-person narrative voice loaded with Australian vernacular (Winton, *Breath* 9). In Breath the boys Pikelet and Loonie spend their days as boy surfers in quest of the dangerous "flickering" moments riding giant waves that will both define and deform the rest of their lives (Winton, *Breath* 95). But the tug of the real is something that even postmodernist master Carey registers, as in *My Life as a Fake*.

In his Australian fiction, I suggest, Coetzee is concerned to reference the standard Australian representational conventions, the commonplace reality effects, in order to announce, first, that he subscribes as a writer of this place, as an adopted Australian writer. He seeks to do justice to Australia as it is most typically and elusively defined, as hard, sere reality, yet he also seeks to do so in ways that are deliberately knowing, and paradoxically distancing. Beginning to write Australia, first in *Elizabeth Costello*, then in *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee laid out the basic "intellectual schemas" in order to register an allegiance, yet at the same time to move beyond it. Though these schemas conventionally signify aspects of reality in Australia, they also signal their own artifice. They point to the real, yet mask it at the same time, which is why they were useful to Coetzee theoretically and in terms of his poetics as he attempted to engage the Australian real. However it may be that the citation of the standard tropes ultimately worked not so much as a recognition preparatory to an underwriting of an Australia, but as a recognition that was at the same time an admission of defeat. No matter his mastery of the tropes, the writer signaled that the real here as in South Africa continued to defy him. So it is significant that Coetzee's 2009 *Summertime*, the final volume in his part-autobiographical trilogy *Scenes from Provincial Life*, returns to South Africa as setting. Australia in the novel has no significant place.

Although on one level Coetzee has appeared to embrace Australian reality effects in order to embrace Australia in his work, on another level his involvement is chiefly by way of a philosophical meditation on the real, as is evident from two key scenes, which I outline in closing. Coetzee evidently knows what makes Australian *White Writing*. Indeed, he knows it so well that he ostentatiously communicates his interest to his readers. The opening of *Slow Man* is unequivocal on the tug of the real, on cutting life to the quick: Coetzee begins, Paul Rayment begins, in medias res, with a seemingly intransitive action, a man flying through the air, the cause of the accident at this point non-specific. And the novel wishes from that moment of its opening to retrieve its impact, to relive its reality-effects, though throughout these must remain tantalizingly out of reach. From *Slow Man* to *Diary of a Bad Year* the trajectory is clear. Coetzee is involved in rounding up the various circus animals of the colonial dystopia, the haunt of dying white males, both in Australia, and beyond Australia. He exhibits these creatures, demonstrates that he understands them, but finally distances himself from them as being no more adequate to writing Australia than tropes from other settler traditions might be.

The first sign of this distancing comes in the form of the Dulgannon frogs episode in *Elizabeth Costello's* eighth lesson, where she presents to those at the portals to the next life a demonstration of what, ultimately, is meaningful to her. Speaking as a writer, she wants to prove to her judges not her beliefs, as she feels as a writer she lacks these, but the process of believing, the seeking of the meaningful (Attridge 201). Her illustration of the frogs that lie buried, as if dead, in the dry river-bed and revive in the wet season, she presents at the end of a series of meditations across the novel on questions of suffering, humanness, value, the writer's life. So it is offered as a final submission, more a last breath than a climax, not so much an afterthought as an after-belief—something that becomes particularly poignant when it is remembered, as Melinda Harvey has noted, that the Dulgannon River in the state of Victoria does not in fact exist (Harvey). The frogs story, Elizabeth is concerned to emphasize, is not an allegory. Rather, it is an illustration of existence, of life, and hence, I would venture to add, of reality; of that which continues, eluding and resisting language, of that which is "whether or nor I believe in them", as Elizabeth says, and whether or not the Dulgannon River exists also (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 217, 219). What most fixes her mind about the frogs is not only their separateness, but how they appear to bear meaning, given their particular ability to revive after hibernation, to reaccept "returning life". "She thinks of the frog beneath the earth, spread out as if flying, as if parachuting through the darkness" (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 219).

"Spread out as if flying"—it is an anticipation. The most eloquent sign of Coetzee's desire to acknowledge the Australian real is that *Slow Man*, his first fully Australian novel, opens with the hit of the real of Paul's accident. This pure event is my second closing scene. In the first paragraph, "he," the narrative consciousness, is rendered the object of 'the blow,' administered by—Wayne Blight, Magill Road, the physical world, a quantity of light? What has happened is something that has "befallen" him. In a later stream of thought: it is "[a]n accident, something that

befalls one," which brings only pain, "the real thing," and exposure (Coetzee, *Slow Man* 5, 4, 12). The accident becomes, as Costello says, a bringing to life for Paul, not as a flying creature but as "a lump of all too solid flesh" (Coetzee, *Slow Man* 159, 198). The blow, the light, the pain, and Magill Road, the hard Australian earth that is the medium of the dead-alive frogs—all these, severally and together, underwrite Paul's reality—a reality that inevitably lapses into language, into standard signifying practices, the very moment after he strikes the ground.

【Notes】

1. I use the term "international" republic of letters rather than Casanova's "world republic" to signal a distance from the concentric, metropole-centred model on which her work is predicated. See Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 2004.
2. See Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays*; Chris Healy, *From the Ruins of Colonialism*; Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*.
3. See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought in the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*?
4. See Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*; *Living in a New Country*.
5. The historical and imaginative links between these southern colonial spaces were explored in Darian-Smith, Gunner and Nuttall (1993), in which Coetzee's formulations featured prominently. See also Christopher Miller's *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985)
6. On the novel's multiple metafictional turns, see Sue Kossew, "Border Crossings" (2009): 60 –7.
7. Reference is to the cultural historical and literary studies of, amongst others, Paul Carter, Andrew Hassan, Chris Healy, Graham Huggan, Kay Schaffer, and Richard White.

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