Translating and Transforming J.M. Coetzee’s *Slow Man* from Novel to Opera: an Ambling, Doubling, and Trippling Pursuit of the Opera’s Cinematographic Beginning

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Abstract:

J.M. Coetzee’s *Slow Man: a Novel* interests itself in early (and so mostly French) instances of photography. In some ways the Coetzee text operates as though it were itself a verbal instantiation of this early photography (as later slowly but also not so slowly understood by early theorists of culture like Walter Benjamin and major poets like Paul Valéry, for instance): the product of machinery in one sense, the result of a finely tuned Coetzee assembly line subject to multiple acts of inspection (procedure resulting in twenty-five textual versions this time), but also the product of that which in photography exceeds mechanics, that which frees photography from bondage to documentary verisimilitude.

For Paul Rayment, the eponymous Slow Man and sometime migrant from France, the camera has always seemed “more a metaphysical than a mechanical device.” For Benjamin, photography can give access to an optical unconscious. For his part, Valéry came to believe that—by taking on much of the historical burden of verisimilitude—photography helped literature pursue its true paths, one being “the perfecting of language that constructs or expounds abstract thought,” and another being literary exploration of “all the variety of poetic patterns and resonances.” In order to express abstract thought, writes Valéry, “we avail ourselves of a whole visual [and auditory] rhetoric.”

Thinking thus in the concrete abstract, and doubling as some kind of migrant in another country his own, early—South African—childhood interest in the photographically visual, Coetzee, at this time already an Oldish, and therefore, Slowish Man, collaboratively recreates—by thematically and structurally re-doubling Samuel Beckett—the *Slow Man* novel as an opera for doubled actor-voices and dancers, supplemented especially in the beginning with cinematography by Wojciech Puś and—principal collaborative doubling—with the magnificent score of Belgian composer Nicholas Lens. In order to pay concrete attention to the abstract thought shaping the opera’s translation of *Slow Man* into new meanings, and by proceeding through a practice that pursues Nietzsche’s “slow reading,” this article follows in some detail the cinematography that begins a migration of images towards new, enriched, and revisited meaning in the opera. Along the way, references will be made to the most deeply engrained of Coetzee’s writerly antecedents, Samuel Beckett, and to work from Coetzee’s fellow artist and countryman, William Kentridge.

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tripping adj.

1901 *Field* 9 Mar. 322/1  The [South African] Boer never rides his horse at the trot, but at a quick walk or canter, [at] a step peculiar to the country and called “tripping”, or, as we should style it, ambling.

—*Oxford English Dictionary* (OED)
In a clear sense, all reading is translation, just as all translation is criticism.

—J.M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*

I think of myself as an artist making drawings, even when the charcoal is replaced by an ink word. […] The pen is a loaded weapon.

—William Kentridge, *Six Drawing Lessons*

cartouche, n.

I. = French *cartouche* fem.

I. Mil.

A roll or case of paper, parchment, etc., containing the charge of powder and shot for a gun or pistol; a cartridge.

—*OED*

collodion, n.

A solution of gun-cotton in ether, forming a colourless gummy liquid, which dries rapidly in the air, owing to evaporation of the ether; used in photography for covering plates with a thin film, and in surgery for coating wounds, burns, etc.

—*OED*

The South African Nobel laureate and luminary J.M. Coetzee, who now lives in Australia, is and is not a Boer, is and is not some sort of migrant guerilla-soldier, -artist, and -gardener. During the turn of the century Anglo-Boer War (1889-1902), which Rudyard Kipling famously called a dress-rehearsal for Armageddon, the two combatant sides extensively deployed horses (used for combat, especially by the Boers) and bicycles (mostly for dispatch and reconnaissance, though the British used bicycles in combat [Fig. 1 and Fig. 2]). As an avid cyclist, Coetzee is more at home on a bicycle than on a horse; but he does acknowledge as the Afrikaners’ “finest hour” their mostly horse-mounted anti-imperialist guerilla efforts during the Anglo-Boer War (*Good Story* 109), one result of which—as my first epigraph suggests—is to have made the tripping gait of the Boer...
horse or boer-perd more widely noticed across the Anglophone world. And something of the guerilla boer-perd’s gait, peculiar and distinctive, reveals itself everywhere in Coetzee’s peculiar, distinctive, and singular writing, although Slow Man, his tenth or thirteenth novel (it all depends how one gaits the list, how one distinguishes between fiction and non-fiction), ‘in fact’ begins—and ends—with a bicycle and tricycle rather than with a horse.

Slow Man begins when Paul Rayment, its first and thus primary protagonist, is hit by a car while riding his bicycle along a road in his adopted Australian hometown of Adelaide. The collision becomes a serious matter—comes to constitute a death or near-death experience—though Rayment regains on-site consciousness of the explosive event long enough to register “on a rose-pink screen that trembles like water each time he blinks and is therefore quite likely his own inner eyelid” (Coetzee 3) the sight and sound of a typewriter reproducing letters from its keyboard, by way of its cartouche (cartridge, or ribbon). Rayment sees and hears—“clack clack clack”—the familiar “Q-W-E-R-T-Y” mixed up with other letters that together more or less spell out the opposite of seriousness: Frivolity or Frivol. Frivol is a noun used to designate a light-hearted event, especially a literary or cinematographic production; it is also a verb meaning to trifle, to behave frivolously, to trivil away money or time in the sense of spending either foolishly. In the hospital thereafter, unconscious during it all, Rayment has a leg amputated and will later stubbornly refuse an artificial limb, preferring the relative authenticity, for him, of crutches over a prosthetic body-supplement. Slow Man begins, then, with an explosive collision registered on the inside of a watery screen: a closed eyelid blindly shocked into seeing some part of the end.

Slow Man ends when Rayment, suffused by shame and ungracious thoughts, reluctantly accepts an alternate prosthesis to the one he has since the beginning refused. Towards the end of the novel he is presented with a recumbent tricycle he will be able to pedal by hand. The tricycle has been custom-made for him by family members of Marijana Jokić, his sometime nurse, originally from Croatia and the object of Rayment’s desire. Courtesy of free indirect style, we learn that “He has never ridden one before, but he dislikes recumbents instinctively, as he dislikes prostheses, as he dislikes all fakes” (255). Rayment’s initials are painted on the tricycle tubing. PR Express, the lettering reads; this, explains Rayment to Ljuba, the youngest Jokić child, will identify the rider as “‘Paul Rayment the rocket man’” who “can go very fast,” to which Ljuba responds, “‘You aren’t Rocket Man, you’re Slow Man!’” (258)—whence comes the novel’s title, which derives from other sources also. Some of these sources are unsurprisingly lodged in autobiographical circumstance: Coetzee’s biographer J.C. Kannemeyer writes, for instance, of a bicycling accident in which Coetzee broke a collar bone about a year before he began writing the novel, becoming for several months a slow writer forced to manipulate and play his computer keyboard with only one hand (583). According to Coetzee, whom Kannemeyer proceeds to record in this regard, the title supplements “the primary meaning of slow (as in to ride slowly)”; additionally, slow connotes: “slow as in ‘slow on the uptake,’ ‘slow to get the message,’ not very perceptive,” and, “the virtuous side of slowness,” as in Nietzsche’s insistence on being a philologist in the older sense of this term, which is to say “‘a teacher of slow reading’” (584).

Yet another inference synecdochically gestating in the title Slow Man, one mentioned neither by Coetzee nor his biographer, is a sense towards which I have from the beginning quite slowly been moving, albeit with some syntactical delay. The inference sounds itself into being as a thematic resonance slowly coming to animate a passion other than cycling that also links Coetzee to Rayment: their shared
interest in the originally slow processes of photography. Photography is itself always figuratively prosthetic, a material procedure of capturing a record by productive means ineluctably tied to a dialectic of loss and survival. To be clear: like a prosthesis, a photograph axiomatically bears witness to that moment which has now been lost, and so, simultaneously, to that which—perhaps terribly—has survived. Since childhood, J.M. Coetzee has been interested in photography, the cinema, and photographic processes (he developed and printed his own pictures as a young photographer). Paul Rayment, who “tends to trust pictures more than he trusts words” (Coetzee 64), also once practiced photography, but the arrival and spread of colour made him abandon the practice in favour of collecting “first-generation photographs” (48), including some by Antoine Fauchery, whose albumen prints Rayment finds particularly compelling (175). Rayment’s passion for saving photographic incunabula (“most of them last [and unique] survivors”), a passion fueled by “fidelity to the photographs themselves” (65), encourages the reader to see that the titular “slowness” of the novel resonates also with the slow chemical processes of early photography: Rayment prefers the photographic slowness of old, a slowness thematically and ontologically embedded and embodied in the novel itself. Slow Man thus takes a special interest in early, mostly French, instances of photography: magical machine drawing made possible by typically slow chemicals. The novel operates as though it were itself a verbal instantiation of early photography as understood by Walter Benjamin or Paul Valéry: not only as the potentially explosive product of machinery and chemicals in one sense, the result of a finely tuned Coetzee assembly line subject to multiple acts of inspection (procedure resulting in twenty-five textual versions this time), but also a product analogous to that which in photography exceeds mechanisms and chemistry, that which frees the arts in general—and potentially photography itself—from bondage to documentary verisimilitude.

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A novel’s title is never a name, but always a more or less graphic element that exceeds discursive reportage to make some abstract thing—an idea—quite concretely visible instead.²

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A slow reading of Slow Man gradually and retrospectively reveals those thematics synecdochically embedded in its title and linked, for example, to the hybridization of Paul Rayment’s name. In Anglophone Australia, Rayment’s printed name visually resembles “payment” whereas in his native France it aurally resembles “vraiment” (really, truly, actually, indeed [192]), which is indeed how it sounds in the opera; these name-words, especially the latter, connect to French verisimilitude, a now obsolete word that the French, leaving “verisimilitude” to the English, currently render as vraisemblance. These name-words thus end up linking Rayment and his novel to ideas about photography contemplated by Walter Benjamin and Paul Valéry—to mention only two more names—though the thinking certainly goes all the way back to Platonic reflection on shadow inscription or skiaographia, one of the first names given to the photographic process by the inventor of the calotype process and photographic negative, William Henry Fox Talbot, English counterpart and contemporary of Louis Daguerre of daguerreotype fame. In the end, “photography”—that is, “light-writing” from Greek via French—won the battle of names.

For Rayment, the camera has always seemed “more a metaphysical than a mechanical device” (65). For Walter Benjamin, photography can give access to an “optical unconscious” (203). Paul Valéry believed that by taking on much of the historical bur-

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den of verisimilitude, photography helped art (especially literary art) pursue its true paths, one being “the perfecting of language that constructs or expounds abstract thought,” and another being literary exploration of “all the variety of poetic patterns and resonances” (193). Pursuing the expression of abstract thought, Valéry further adds, “we avail ourselves of a whole visual [and, I would add, auditory] rhetoric” (197). Valéry has little doubt that literature constitutes an engagement with abstract thought, and that the arts assist one another in this engagement. Likewise, Coetzee—literary heir to a narrative line inherited from Gustave Flaubert via James Joyce and Samuel Beckett—has little doubt that the years he “devoted” to Beckett “was time well spent”: “What one can learn from Beckett’s prose is a lesson one level more abstract than one can get from verse” (“Homage” 6). Thus thinking in the concrete abstract, and doubling or tripling as some kind of migrant in Australia his own, early, South African and part-Boer childhood interest in the visual, the photographic, and the cinematic, Coetzee collaboratively recreates the Slow Man novel as a narratively condensed opera that leaves much headroom for music.

Already himself at this time an oldish or at least older (and hence slower, perhaps wiser) man, Coetzee opens the transformative operation to assistance from the other arts by thematically and structurally re-doubling Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot into an opera for doubled actor-voices and dancers, supplemented with cinematography by Wojciech Puś, and—this is the principal collaborative doubling—with the tripling score written for three principal voices by Belgian composer Nicholas Lens, who initially approached Coetzee about a possible collaboration on the basis of having been moved by the operatics of and in Coetzee’s Disgrace (Semenowicz 49). Indeed, the Slow Man opera can be said to have translated into mixed media, integrally including film, what Disgrace had already achieved in a single and singularly resonant textual exercise of narrative, performance, and musical phrasing.4

The Slow Man opera is astutely based on a narrow selection from the novel’s generous supply of material: the operatic performance limits itself to a single and singular but relatively minor episode in the novel, an episode now operatically recreated by a paired on-stage cast pared down to three singing characters and their dancing and/or cinematographic doubles: Paul Rayment, the novel’s first protagonist, Elizabeth Costello, the novel’s co-protagonist, familiar to readers from prior Coetzee narratives, and the blind Marijana, who is supported by an offstage female choir. As a result of this narrowed focus, the entire Jokić family is excluded from the opera except insofar as traces of Marijana Jokić nominally remain to buttress or to haunt the now central presence of an operatic and blind Marijana. This Marijana is named Marianna in the novel, where Rayment thinks: “He [Rayment] says Marianna, she [Marianna] says Marianna, but it is not the same name. His Marianna is still coloured by Marija” (105). The libretto is mostly taken verbatim from the novel, and accentuates the novel’s photo-resonance through its initial reliance on allusive cinematographic narrative in support of music and libretto. Lens and Coetzee’s operatic Slow Man doubles, re-doubles, and triplingly triples musico-visual gestures in its narrative concentration and structural simplification. As so often happens in Coetzee’s thought and writing, the opera again puts to work the prescience of Samuel Beckett: not only by drawing on Beckett as a writer close to Coetzee’s heart, but also in its collaborative audio-visual constitution. The opera is marked by and from its opening cinematographic frames, and by its structural skeleton, as a performative audio-visual event in collaborative pursuit of Beckett, and in pursuit of a novel itself shaped by Beckett as antecedent. (At their linguistic core, all Coetzee works are so shaped.) Beyond its
title, the “inside” of Coetzee’s novel begins—I repeat—with an external collision or explosive coming-together internally recorded by the clacking of a typewriter on “a rose-pink screen that trembles like water each time he blinks and is therefore quite likely his own inner eyelid”: “clack clack clack” goes the typewriter as lid collides with lid in a watery eye blink of opening and closing (3). Something analogous—albeit it in a scene first seen from the outside—explodes into being in the opening of Samuel Beckett’s only film, which begins with a closed eye (Fig. 3): strange seascape of wrinkled skin from the opening frames of a film for whose production Beckett crossed the Atlantic waters—his first and only such trip—in order to be on set for the filming.

The closed Beckettian eye opens out of its blink to a transformative explosion of awakening; but this is clearly neither a comfortable nor a comforting state (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5).

Following the computer-generated typewriting script of Slow Man: A Novel, and behaving in its genesis as if it were descended from Beckett’s Film, Lens and Coetzee’s Slow Man opera opens by Lens music and by camera lens to the image of a seeing eye cinematographically complicitous in its relationship to that which it sees: in this instance a cityscape seen from the sea by an eye—and of course by a first-person pronominal “I”—in the process of arriving by sea to a new land, an eye and an I who together register the silhouette of an abstractly unfamiliar urban-landscape-city at the bottom of the projection screen and inversely mirrored at the top of the screen (Fig. 6).

This movingly beautiful and literally moving set of frames clearly signifies and viscerally feels as though it were a view participating in reciprocal exchange between inside and outside: between a projecting and viewing eye (in which cityscapes constitute lower and upper eyelids) and the sea and sky beyond the eye, which in turn seem to see what the eye

![Fig. 3: Early still shot of closed eyelid from Beckett’s Film.](image1)

![Fig. 4: Film, in which the protagonist, played by Buster Keaton (Fig. 5), is doubled or “sundered” into two ostensibly separate instances of the same being: “object (O) and eye (E), the former in flight, the latter in pursuit” (Beckett 11); as happens also in a fugue. “It will not be clear until the end of film,” continues Beckett, “that pursuing perceiver is not extraneous, but self.”](image2)

![Fig. 5: Buster Keaton in Film.](image3)
sees from its watery migrant home. We see the eye see and see what the eye sees, though on this occasion we see with both our eyes what only one eye sees on screen. Shut first one eyelid, then quickly the other—no need for a patch of the sort Keaton wears in *Film*—and the already moving onscreen image moves again to the right or to the left, migrating from one place to another.

This sort of sight is defamiliarized sight, more or less unexceptionally artistic insight, and, as such, a privileged sight for artists generally and particularly speaking: witness the witness born by Coetzee’s fellow artist and countryman William Kentridge, who, like Coetzee (and like Nicholas Lens, for that matter) has risen to become a global phenomenon in the art world, but who—unlike Coetzee—has not left South Africa to live elsewhere in any definitive sense, has not himself migrated in such a way despite the literal and figurative migrations depicted in much of his work, much of which works by way of the filming into animation or migration of charcoal drawings that lead the eye here and there on a journey. In an iconic drawing from the film *History of the Main Complaint* (1996), for instance, Kentridge fixes for less than a second this familiarly defamiliarized sight whereby we see the largely autobiographical Kentridge-male see what he sees even as, in the second or less, we also see a mirror image of him seeing it (Fig. 7) and are hereby reminded that, except in a mirror and then only imperfectly, we never exactly see ourselves seeing what we see. Excerpts from this magnificent early Kentridge film, on which Coetzee has astutely written ("History"), can be seen in a short U.S. Public Broadcasting Service *Art: 21 sequence*, accompanied by the sound, here and there, of some Kentridge commentary.

![Fig. 6: Nicholas Lens and John M. Coetzee, Slow Man (2012).](image)

![Fig. 7: Drawing from History of the Main Complaint, 1996. Charcoal and pastel on paper.](image)
Then—but now looking back and again listening to the Lens and Coetzee opera in its musicocinematographic prelude—the opening eyelid slowly closes in a dilatory blink, and becomes a whirlpool of water that subsequently gives birth—Push! Push!—to the synecdochic title: *Slow Man* (Fig. 8). Titles are always synecdoches.

With the not so delayed and not so slow arrival of the title by dilatory blink, the opera has truly begun and will continue to be driven—for a while still—not only by its already-playing music, but also by more cinematography projected onto the prosenium screen after early cinematic onset of labour, parergon to eventual performance on stage: onset of labour, that is to say, from the very beginning.

The opening and closing eye, and the cityscape it sees and briefly allows us to see (Fig. 9), has vaguely promised to resemble a view of Adelaide from the ocean (as an arriving migrant might perhaps with perhaps watery eye see it): complex and abstract promise wrought of and wrung from the seeming overlap of photographic image, verisimilitude, and truth; and from a desire to have the spectral mean, signify, and portend.

An audience member in the opera house—you, he, or I—might well want to see and thus to make some such meaning: after all, she almost certainly knows that the operatic production is connected by title to the novel, *Slow Man*, by J.M. Coetzee, and that J.M. and John M. Coetzee, librettist of the opera, are indeed the same person (albeit with a common South African surname). She probably knows *Slow Man* to be Coetzee’s first post-Nobel novel, his first “entirely” Australian novel, his possibly no-turning-back-now migrant effort, his first novel since definitively migrating from South Africa to South Australia. Such an audience member (that would be most of us) might well want the scene to mean something;
to mean something like: distant silhouette of Adelaide as it could possibly be seen by a watery eye crossing the oceans from Africa to Australia (Fig. 10), even as she, he, and we know that this is, in fact, unlikely to (“really”) be the case. Nevertheless, we register the opening as being pregnant with meanings in whose birth we want to assist.

And we probably want these images to mean at their abstract circumference of quite violent dilation and dilatation something concerning translation, migration, and transformation. Or, perhaps something more concrete: one who knows the Adelaide seacoast well—I do not—might want to see in the tall structure at the middle of the eyelid a resemblance to the silhouette of the Adelaide Brighton Cement factory (a concrete association if ever there were one), which, I am told, sticks out like a sore thumb when seen from the sea (Fig. 12). Those who know Mont Saint-Michel in Normandy might have other ideas.

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*Slow Man* the novel is replete with European migrants, among whom the originally French Paul Raymond is only the most central migrant and immediately one of the most immobile. As previously insinuated, *Slow Man* is also the novel of Coetzee’s emigration to Australia. Coetzee is politically and in economic terms neither a refugee nor an exile; he is not even a migrant in the twenty-first-century and currently crisis-ridden sense of that term. As a writer, thinker, and academic, however, Coetzee has long practiced a kind of migrancy into exile, making writing his refuge and home no matter where he finds himself. Writing is for Coetzee a home in which—alongside Theodor Adorno and others (James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, say)—he has come to know that “it is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home” (Adorno 39). Much more could here be said about migrancy, exile, and music, though Adorno and Edward Said, in particular, have generously and movingly said their say, for which I thank them, returning as I do so to Said’s reminder that “exiles are aware of at least two” homes, and that “this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal” (186).

Thinking neither of exile nor of migrancy on the particular occasion of an interview, Lens inclines towards the “universal” truth of music: voice “cannot lie” he says, albeit immediately he qualifies: “At least I can hear the difference when singers lie” (Semenowicz 52). Not saying more, myself, about exile, and music (or ‘universality’) for now, I amble onwards. In the beginning, especially, of the operatic *Slow Man*, the images move, migrate, and sing—migrant images moving, translating, and transforming from prior text to another kind of singing performance and critical epistemology—as they move, glide, and hobble over proscenium projections and,
later, as real bodies wobble, glide, and dance across solid stage.

William Kentridge regularly invites us to see migration—often terrible, forced, and terribly violent migration—in his work (Fig. 13 and inset image).

We see migration—or better yet, we perhaps by some hermeneutic act of violence want to see migration—in the opening gestures of the Lens-Coetzee opera; and we more or less benignly want to see Adelaide in the sea-land-scape crafted by Wojciech Puś. These are acts and desires fueled by our innate compulsion to make meaning (for better or for worse—and Coetzee knows, by apprehension shared with Elizabeth Costello in “The Problem of Evil,” that it can be for worse).

This is the kind of desire and capacity for making that so interests Kentridge, who regularly comments on the compulsion we mostly share to create meaningful concatenations from, say, scraps of loosely contiguous paper, in which we might begin to see a migration, more or less terrible, or perhaps a horse (Fig. 14 and Fig. 15) or, under some circumstances, a bicycle. As heirs to Beckett, Coetzee and Kentridge (who once was prevented from staging a puppet adaptation of Waiting for Godot [“Crocodile’s Mouth” 133]) know that the sense and nonsense we make is and is not actually there. “It takes an effort, a willful blindness,” writes Kentridge,

to keep the images as black torn sheets of paper. To be more accurate, to see them only as torn sheets of paper. We see them as both, we are not fooled. The horse and the paper are both here. This is an unwilling suspension of disbelief. [...] move the pieces of paper, adjust them, and the horse rears up in front of you. (Six Drawing Lessons 18)

We see the torn shreds of paper and we see a horse; see an eyelid and a cityscape; see Adelaide and not-Adelaide, all at some level nowadays a labour of pixels, tiny electronic moles: yes-no (ja-ne as the Boers and others say in Afrikaans). The framing operatic image is and is not a representation of Adelaide...
seen from the sea as a migrant might see it. The footage is, in fact—and as a matter of verisimilitude—some sort of copy of Venice; but that hardly matters, because the ambiguous image-sequence transforms and translates Venice and not-Venice into migratory shards of meaning that coalesce around the idea of migration, where much is unknown, ambiguous, but often sharply ambiguous, always potentially hostile or dangerous, as Kentridge’s *Shower Man* (Fig. 13) horrifically shows in its (deceptively soft, probably mohair-woven) depiction of a man displayed against the backdrop of a map of France over which he inexorably moves eastward on a wheeled office chair connected to what can only be a deadly shower spraying Zyklon B. We see this horror by making sense of the image, and we variously feel the violent and painfully-mixed feelings of the meanings we have made.

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The operatic title shot, in all its richly indefinite, potential, and provisional semantics, is followed by a cinematographic sequence in which we see the anonymous and not so anonymous seascape give way to the winding darkness of a master shot, slowly and oxymoronically hurtling down a country road; were it a Boer horse, a *boer-perd*, one might say of this master shot that it were tripping. It is not a Boer horse, but a sequence jerky enough to have been shot from horseback, or, more reasonably now, from a vehicle traversing a bumpy road. Car lights or impossibly bright bicycle lights skitter down a narrow road at night (most of us know of the bicycle accident from the novel, though our eyes tell us that this cannot be a bicycle: the light is too bright and too widely angled to have been produced by bicycle dynamo or battery).
The road is so narrow it is difficult to say whether the surely not horse-drawn vehicle (car, improbable bicycle) is driving or cycling on the left-hand side of the road, or on the right: it could be the left. (Where am I? one asks oneself. Is this Australia [left-hand side of the road] or somewhere in Europe—Poland, perhaps [right-hand side of the road]?) In actual fact—fact gleaned from correspondence with the film-maker, Wojciech Puś—this is Portugal (right hand side of the road), made provisionally visible to us in a blurry set of images captured on black-and-white infrared film in deliberately rough fashion. But, still, the road is too narrow to tell for sure: all we know with some confidence is that we know ourselves to be moving, and that images are migrating. Who, however, is driving? Provisionality in this context—again I follow Kentridge on provisionality in art—is linked to transformation, translation, and to the migration of images. The fingerprint or trace left by migration is not literal, but conceptual, and yet still material (more material than just digital: and more obviously vulnerable, therefore, to physical damage, to catastrophic collision).

The vehicle lights now and then illuminate reflective surfaces—road signs—while periodic street and other lights seem to flash, brightening and dimming like lambent owl eyes (Fig. 16) as we move past at indeterminate speed until the vehicle slows before the stone pillars of a gateway (Fig. 17), which will soon give way to a naked, unidentifiable, and blemished human body part up close (Fig. 18), really close up (it could be a knee, but the anatomy is all wrong), and to a close-up portrait-projection of Mark Doss, the bass-baritone singing the part of Paul Rayment: “Who did this?” Rayment meanwhile sings, echoing

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Fig. 16: Road from *Slow Man* master shot.
Fig. 17: Stone gateway.
Fig. 18: Unidentifiable body part.
Fig. 19: Mark Doss singing the part of Paul Rayment, doubled on-screen (in pain).
a phrase familiar from the novel, while his magnified face on screen remains silent and mostly static, slowly opening and closing its mouth and eyes, slowly blinking and gasping, presumably in pain (Fig. 19).

And then, in daylight this time, arrives a segment of vertiginously spinning film footage that recreates through metonymic disorientation—this is surely pain, “the real thing” of which Rayment sings—the violent moment of impact when the car hits Rayment on his bicycle, or the after-effect of this impact: world turned upside down, spinning around. A little later—“Who did this to me?”—we see a stuttering, shuddering, shaking image of Rayment lying on the side of the road, bicycle in the background. Now the environment is more urban. “But the pills confuse my mind; they bring terror to my dreams” sings the embodied Rayment, while still other more and less out-of-focus images of trees and vegetation follow and migrate to a country road—not the same one as before—upon which falls light snow becoming fog/smoke, uncontained crematorium flames, and falling water; the latter later comes to resemble prodigious tears (Fig. 20).

This snow-water-fire, water or tear sequence resonates with the violence of the opening shots of Alain Resnais’s Hiroshima mon amour (1959), where—in accordance with Marguerite Duras’s screenplay—the film slowly brings into being what, little by little, slowly become recognizable as pairs of naked arms and shoulders “in an embrace, and as if drenched with ashes, rain, dew, or sweat, whichever is preferred [comme on veut]” (15). Accompanied by the contrapuntal sounds of Doss/Rayment returning again and again to the “terror” of his dreams, the cinematography bringing us to this terrifying point is itself saturated with what in a different context (a letter to director Francis Gerard about a screenplay for another of his novels) Coetzee enumerates as “the standard cinematic signs of nightmares: graininess, slow motion, loss of depth of field, unnatural colours (reds and browns, or even B&W)” (qtd. in Wittenberg 13). This ensemble of incrementally terrifying scenes and signs ushers in another and even deeper terror: Rayment is alone. No family: “The door to the future is closed and locked,” he magnificently sings in rough, almost coarse tones. He is “unstrung,” to borrow a
trop from Homer and from the novel that the opera translates. Alone, crippled, and childless, he is unstrung, unmanned, outmoded. In the novel, he thinks of himself as “a half-man, an after-man, like an after-image” (33-34); in the opera, he thinks in song of self-immolation “by some purely mental act,” if only mental act alone would suffice to get the job done (cf. the novel 12-13). The screen image of Mark Doss singing the part of Paul Rayment is replaced by close-up shots of Elizabeth Costello’s vividly-painted mouth (another nod to Beckett, this time to Not I [Fig. 21]). We see Costello on a balcony, a second story balcony, by the looks of it. Her embodied singing self, Lani Poulson, will enter on the forestage balcony, house left, opposite Mark Doss, and introduce herself in song. “You came to me” she comes to disingenuously sing of and to Rayment and Doss. The phrase is repeated from the novel, where it occurs several times, and where as a result Rayment gets “tired of being told he came to this woman” (89). Onscreen in the opera, Costello’s mouth and eyes close and open, repeating Rayment’s projected facial gestures from earlier.9

The balcony scene becomes a field of wildflowers (“Push! Push!”) sings Costello, as if commanding flowers to emerge in the same imperious way she will soon seek to extract something [a story?] from Rayment. In the novel, Rayment wonders to himself “Push? Push what? Push! is what you say to a woman in labour” (83). Then the field becomes a balcony again. Costello leaves the balcony and goes inside (Fig. 23 and Fig. 24). We see close-up images of her hands gesticulating (close-ups give us expressions singers cannot, and even if they could, those expressions would always stay invisible to us from so far; we are eavesdroppers, yes, but not exactly under the eaves—not that close to the subjects we overhear). We see expressions and gestures on the screen that we would not ordinarily be able to see: we see Costello smiling and wiping her eyes, wiping away tears, perhaps, in the aural presence (grazioso e religioso) of the beguilingly gentle and astonishingly beautiful aria her physical counterpart is singing below, from the body:10 “Do you think you are the only man who, in

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9. The field becomes a balcony again.

10. “Do you think you are the only man who, in...
the autumn of his years, the late autumn, looks for true love?"

On the screen, the projected image of Costello in the apartment slowly turns upside down and rights itself—as has happened before (translation, violence, transformation). Shortly before the revolution is complete, Costello looks at her electronic tablet device on which we see a city, from above, if above still means anything. Which city? We hardly know anymore that we now know on what side of the road people drive their vehicles in this city, but we do: they drive on the left—graphic evidence supplied by Costello’s tablet makes it unequivocally so. This, it turns out, is a Google Maps satellite rendition of Adelaide, the city that has adopted both J.M. Coetzee and Paul Rayment, insofar as cities adopt anyone at all. We see a Google-simulation of this city. Then Costello walks to the balcony, and—this time—we seem to see what she sees; we almost see her see Rayment lying dead or half-dead on the side of the road.

*Push—Push—Push.* (“You must push the mortal envelope” Costello sings in the opera; “Push the mortal envelope” she says to Rayment in the novel [83].) The framing prelude-envelope is being pushed open. Something new is about to be born: as usual, through a process modelled on and resulting in repetition more than resemblance. But there will be resemblance also, even though and perhaps even because the camera has helped free art from obeisance to verisimilitude; Valéry pointed this out (along with others, some of whom have previously been mentioned). Thinking from within the generation of intellectuals after Valéry, Maurice Blanchot—whose abstractly enigmatic writing makes him both Valéry’s heir and an antecedent to post-structuralism—capitalizes on the complicity between death and life, reminding us that resemblance is one of the transformative properties of art that, as such, belongs to art itself: “Resemblance is not a means of imitating life but of making it inaccessible, of establishing it in a double that is permanent and escapes from life.” “Living figures,” Blanchot continues, are without resemblance. One must wait for the cadaverous appearance, the idealization by death and the eternalization of the end for a being to take on the great beauty that is its own resemblance, the truth of itself in a reflection. A portrait—one came to perceive this little by little—does not resemble because it makes itself similar to a face; rather, the resemblance only begins and only exists with the portrait and in it alone; resemblance is the work of the portrait, its glory or its disgrace; resemblance is tied to the condition of a work, expressing the fact that the face is not there, that it is absent... (32)

“Do you think you are the only man” rings for ears, true again; the projected image shows Lani Poulson, singing from down below the part of Elizabeth Costello, in close-up on the screen, mouth open, slowly closing, but mostly opening, opening and partially closing, blinking—the mirror image of
Mark Doss’s earlier projections. She (Costello) is coming for him (Rayment), her story-prey, who lies defenseless on the ground; she is circling open-mouthed to swoop from her balcony onto his story, to ingest that story and make it part of her body. Her mouth closes, and her living body sings: “How did you feel as you tumbled through the air?”—“Tell me everything, justify yourself to me,” while projected images migrate to show an insect stuck on its back like Kafka’s Gregor Samsa, struggling with legs flailing this way and that to right itself from a sticky plate (Fig. 25). The insect—trapping plate that we come to appropriate as a photographic plate we would of course turn into a collodion wet plate, part of a photographic process that slowly came in the 1850s to replace the daguerreotype, earlier marvel that, in the words of its inventor, “is not merely an instrument which serves to draw Nature; on the contrary it is a chemical and physical process which gives her the power to reproduce herself” (Daguerre 13). Using the language of reproduction also, Lady Elizabeth Eastlake hails the new collodion, which she thinks superior to the albumen process so admired by Paul Rayment in the Slow Man novel:

![Insect trapped on a plate.](image-url)

Costello, an internal viewer, is about to appropriate Rayment’s story—to make it hers, part of her body; as external viewers, or spectators at least more removed than she, we are about to appropriate this cinematographic image as something other than the hardly exceptional sight of an insect struggling on a sticky plate (Fig. 25).
Gun-cotton—partly a French, partly a German discovery—is but a child in the annals of chemical science; and collodion, which is a solution of this compound in ether and alcohol, is its offspring. Its first great use was, as is well known, in the service of surgery; its second in that of photography. (51)

Collodion is a syrupy solution of cellulose nitrate (gun-cotton) in a mixture of alcohol and ether to which an insect might well be attracted, and in which it will certainly get trapped, risking a slow death (all death is slow), while the alcohol and ether quite rapidly evaporate.

The insect finally manages to turn itself upright and leaves the plate, though this hardly guarantees escape (“Push—Push—Push”: “tell me everything”). The projection screen retracts up into the proscenium and the opera ‘proper,’ so to speak, begins with Rayment responding to Costello from the stage, singing “I felt sad” (Fig. 26 and Fig. 27). The opera has truly begun (has begun again, for the second

Fig. 26: Proscenium screen opening to reveal stage beyond.

Fig. 27: Paul Rayment doubled on stage.
The prosenium projection screen is opening up a new and renewed space, a womb or cavity, a cartouche—in its grammatically feminine forms—ready to be reloaded with new munitions, ink, or mail, preparing for its next confinement, labour, and parturition: its next volley of missives.

This polysemantic and gendered word, cartouche, is semantically figured in its feminine form (it has a masculine form also) as a miniature coffin of paper: first and foremost as a roll or case, originally of paper or parchment that contains a charge of powder and shot for a potentially deadly weapon of some explosive sort—what we nowadays call a cartridge. (And, in French, also a carton of cigarettes.) A dangerous box in the first instance, but the box figures also by extension other cartridges more or less dangerous, perhaps even benign: cartridges of ink, say, or magnetic tape cartridges delivering music or computer software, or those cartridges at work in the pneumatic mail delivery systems that once upon a time facilitated invoice, receipt, and payment exchanges in large department stores, and that persist still as the means of exchanging paper and money in the drive-through teller lanes of banks and some other places of business. It is precisely this commercial instance that in the novel Rayment thinks of in his quite considerable retreat from digital photography, mobile phones, and the Internet. He finds his thoughts going “back to his childhood, to Ballarat in the days before the spread of [old-fashioned] telephones” (239); back to a time long before the advent of mobile telephones capable of taking pictures (which were beginning to emerge in 2000 when the narrative action takes place). He thinks of a time when people still wrote letters (“who writes letters nowadays?”):

A memory comes back: a childhood visit to Paris, to the Galeries Lafayette, watching scraps of paper being screwed into cartouches and shot from one department to another along pneumatic tubes. [...] What happened to them, all those silvery cartouches? Melted down, probably, for shell casings or guided missiles. (223)

I stress the combative and military associations of the word cartouche at this point—its participation in a semantic network of authority bolstered by force with recourse to cruelty and other potentially malignant motivations—in order to suggest that the operatic reloading (of the novel) and its initial, largely cinematographic volley sharpens by concentration the characterization of Elizabeth Costello as a dangerous figure who, to some considerable degree, figures the dangers and risks of novel-writing and art-making.

Here again is William Kentridge, transcribed from the brief autobiographical commentary with which he supplements for release segments of History of the Main Complaint—(for access to an audio version of this record, see page 7):

every artist [uses] other people’s pain—as well as their own—as raw material, so there is ... certainly an appropriation of other people’s distress in the activity of being a writer or an artist; but there’s also something in the activity of ... contemplating, depicting, and spending the time with [that distress], which, I hope—as an artist—redeems the activity from [being] one of simply exploitation and abuse.

The characterization of Costello as a dangerous figure is by no means absent from the novel, but has been brought to the foreground by the collaborative opening-gloss of the opera, in which film and music announce with quite brutal clarity a critical translation of what is to come next, contrapuntally anticipating even the ending toward which the operatic beginning leaps, an ending made more gentle in its conclusions by the violence of its beginning. While I agree with Lens when in interview he identifies Rayment as a sympathetic figure, I am less inclined than Lens to see the Costello-Rayment relationship as more or less benignly coercive, despite the cruelty
Costello displays (which display Lens acknowledges of her). For Lens, Rayment “agrees to become a character in the book Costello is going to write” and “voluntarily becomes her puppet”—all this as a response to the (fictional) fact of his accident (Semenowicz 51). The operatic beginning shows me a Costello more or less blindly driven by her clearly voracious appetite for story and story-appropriation, whatever the cost: even if, and perhaps precisely because, she is clearly as much appalled as she is titillated by what she sees from her balcony.

If not evil, Costello is at the very least very dangerous, the kind of dangerous person she recognizes herself to be in Coetzee’s “The Problem of Evil.” Serious writers and other image-makers of consequence might regularly find themselves struggling on their backs with the sticky problem of evil, a struggle which they might thus also pass on to share with readers and audiences pursuing artistic anything-but-frivols. So, who drives the car? In the novel the answer is straightforward enough: “Wayne something-or-other, Bright or Blight” (20). But the musical and thematic effects this play of names puts into performance is not especially straightforward, as the opera again shows. In the opera, the driver is not identified. Perhaps, yes-no, in the opera at least, it is Costello who drives the car; a car with bright lights that comes to blight Rayment’s life and cycling days; Costello perhaps blindly drives the car, eyes closed, albeit not literally so, not so as a matter of verisimilitude.

Notes

1. Coetzee’s voluntary migrations from South Africa to England and then to the United States, his forced, departure from the United States in 1971, and his misgivings about the U.S. Immigration system are well known and well documented: see, for instance, Kannemeyer 193 ff., and Auster and Coetzee 74 ff.

2. My thanks to Ivan Vladislavić, without whose A Labour of Moles, I might never have come to know that one of the collective nouns designating a group of moles is a “labour.” I exploit the yes-no expression in “Fugal Musemathematics Track Two.”

3. I comment at greater length on this property of the title in “Titular Space.”

4. The record of a sustained interest in cinematography is confirmed by Coetzee’s memoir-fictions, Boyhood (45), and Youth, in which directors of particular interest to a young Coetzee are named: Antonioni, Bergman, Godard, and Pasolini (48, 128, 154); and Satyajit Ray, in whose Apu Trilogy it is “the music above all that grips him” (93). Elsewhere commenting on the import of film and photography to his work, Coetzee again mentions Godard (whose aim was “to liberate the sound track from the image”) and points also to films by Chris Marker and by Andrzej Munk that use voice-over alongside images to powerful effect and affect (Doubling 60).

5. I thank Nicholas Lens and John Coetzee for permission to quote phrases from the libretto and for an aria excerpt, and the directors of the Malta Festival of Poznań for permission to reproduce stills. The extract from William Kentridge, Shadow Procession, is reproduced by permission from the DVD published together with William Kentridge, Five Themes, as is the extract from Making a Horse. Stills from Beckett’s Film appear courtesy of Milestone Film & Video.

6. More on this horror in my “I am not Me” and “Breaking Silence.”
Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year*, “was trained to sing from the depths of her thorax (from her lungs, from her ‘heart’), bearing the head high,” although—given the circumstances unfolding—it is by no means certain that the operatic Costello is in good faith at this moment practicing “a mode of singing” that conveys “moral nobility” (131).

11. In published correspondence with Paul Auster, Coetzee wonders about contemporary fiction from which (contra the demands of verisimilitude) “twenty-first-century tools of communication like the mobile phone are absent” (*Here* 219). Raymond has an old, out-of-date computer without a modem. Having worked as a programmer in his younger days, Coetzee is no stranger to computers. While Coetzee initially used to write his drafts out by hand (often in exercise books like those Beckett used for *Watt* [Doubling 51]), he later began increasingly to prepare manuscripts by computer printout. *Slow Man* appears to be the first set of fiction drafts produced primarily by these latter means (Attwell xx-xxi).

**Works Cited**


———. *Film: Complete Scenario / Illustrations / Production Shots*. Grove, 1969.


Film. Directed by Alan Schneider, Performance by Buster Keaton, Milestone, 1965.

*Hiroshima Mon Amour*. Directed by Alain Resnais, Pathé, 1959.


Translating and Transforming Slow Man


———. “‘I am not Me, the Horse is not Mine, William Kentridge & J.M. Coetzee; or, Machines, Death, and Performance as Prelude to Reading Slow Man.’ *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 58, no. 4, 2016, pp. 392-421.


