
Gift/Exchange in J. M. Coetzee's *Slow Man*

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ABSTRACT

While most literary critics overlook J. M. Coetzee's use of the gift as a trope in *Slow Man* (2005), this study examines the aporia of gift-giving and -receiving in the novel. The logic of the gift, particularly addressed by Jacques Derrida, inspires a close reading of this work. Using gift theories as the background, I investigate the concrete occurrences of gifts and discuss the different facets of gift-giving and gift-exchange in the text. Subsequently, I explore the more abstract aspects of the gift by relating it to love and life. Tracking the entangled relationship between gift, love, and life, I contend that the writer Elizabeth Costello functions as a catalyst that makes Paul Rayment reflect on the essence of the gift and also on his life. The novel indicates that gifts should be given out of love, i.e., an absolute love without reciprocation, while inviting a consideration of how to judge the act of giving.

KEYWORDS J. M. Coetzee, *Slow Man*, gift, exchange, love, Jacques Derrida

Introduction

Nobel Laureate J. M. Coetzee's 2005 novel *Slow Man* revolves around the trope of the gift. It was his first book after he emigrated to Australia and received the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature (Silvani 135). The title of the novel, "Slow Man," refers to the protagonist Paul Rayment, a divorced and retired photographer in his sixties with no children, no relatives, and few friends. The novel begins with a bicycle accident in which Paul loses his right leg. After undergoing the amputation of his leg, Paul becomes despondent and alienates himself from the people around him until he meets Marijana Jokić, his Croatian nurse and a married woman with three children. Later, Paul falls in love with her and becomes heavily involved in her family affairs.¹ He not only voluntarily sponsors Marijana's son so that he can attend an exclusive private school but also pays for the item that her daughter is suspected of stealing, in order to prevent her from being accused of shoplifting by a shopkeeper. Intending to be a godfather to Marijana's children, Paul "gives generously" to her family. While Paul continues this gift-giving relationship with Marijana, Elizabeth Costello—a well-known Australian writer who is trying to write Paul into her book—mysteriously appears at his door, intrudes into his life, and eventually stirs up his mind.² Elizabeth interferes in the relationship between Paul and Marijana and seeks to direct Paul's life. Paul, through most of *Slow Man*, is enthusiastic about being a giver, which seems to be part of his nature. The novel describes this as: "Giving always bucks him [Paul] up, he knows that about himself. Spurs him to give more" (*Slow Man* 92).³

The trope of the gift in *Slow Man* is crucial. However, surprisingly, it has received little critical attention thus far. Two major lines of research on *Slow Man* concern its metafictionality and ethical engagement with disability and care. They will be reviewed in the following to elucidate the directions of existent scholarship on the novel, identify the novel's main themes, and pinpoint and supplement what

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¹ Barry Magid points out that Coetzee's *Slow Man* in some way parallels "the real-life story of Thomas Merton"—the author of a spiritual autobiography called *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948)—because Merton, a writer and a monk, also falls for a nurse toward the end of his life, like Paul in the novel (32). See Magid's article "Desire and the Self."

² Elizabeth Costello is a recurring character in Coetzee's oeuvre. Richard Alan Northover examines the figure of Elizabeth Costello in Coetzee's works, particularly in *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and *Slow Man*, arguing that Elizabeth is a Socratic figure. For more details, see Northover.

³ *Slow Man* is hereafter abbreviated in parenthetical citations as SM.

may be lacking in the current body of research.

The first major line of existent scholarly inquiry focuses on the novel's metafictional dimensions, considering Coetzee's writing techniques or the novel's references, allusions, and intertextual relations to other texts. An exemplary piece in this vein is Zoë Wicomb's "*Slow Man* and the Real: A Lesson in Reading and Writing," which explores "the relationship between representation and the real" and points out different "levels of the real" to address the complicated bonds between the characters as well as between the author and the narrator (8). As she suggests, "substitution" is a crucial recurring concept in the novel, engaging with various layers of reality and serving as a device to present or re-present the real. For instance, Elizabeth Costello, a writer in the novel, substitutes for Coetzee, an author of the novel; Drago, doctoring Paul's Fauchery photographs, uses digital techniques to make substitutes for the original by inserting into the photos the faces of Croatian immigrants, embodied by Drago's family members, among the early Australian settlers;⁴ the prosthesis that Paul refuses is an artificial leg that serves as a substitute for a real one; Marianna, a blind woman, is expected to function as a substitute for Marijana to fulfill Paul's passion. The varied substitutions blur the clear-cut line "between the thing and its representation" and destabilize the relationship between reality and fiction (Wicomb 14). Near the end of the novel, Elizabeth, when cast out by Paul, loses her authorship, which reminds us of another level of reality; that is, she is in fact merely a "fictional character" authored by Coetzee, instead of an omnipotent and "omniscient author" (Wicomb 18). Paul gradually becomes aware, while being written into a book by Elizabeth, an author-like figure, that he himself can also write and later declines her proposal.⁵ Through the concept of substitution, Coetzee's articulation of reality in *Slow Man* is "renewable," "substitutable," and "supplementary," rather than immutable, irreplaceable, and nonreciprocal (Wicomb 20).

C. Kenneth Pellow comments that *Slow Man* is "highly intertextual and intratextual" (528).⁶ In terms of intratextuality, the novel correlates its characters to

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⁴ Discussing the Fauchery photographs in *Slow Man* in great detail, Amel Benia, Abdullah Dagamseh, and Fadia Suyoufie reflect on photography's "potential" and "manipulative power" (146). See their article 155-69.

⁵ When it comes to the relationship between Elizabeth and Paul as writer and character, Stephen Mulhall interprets it differently. He perceptively reads *Slow Man* as a "study of an author's experience of creative frustration" (246). Elizabeth wants to write Paul into her fiction, yet he is "a recalcitrant character," reluctant to act according to her dictate, and even rejects her offer for them to live together at the novel's end (246). At this point, it suggests "the failure of an initially promising artistic inspiration" for a writer (246).

⁶ Coetzee's writing, frequently labeled as postmodern, is a "rewriting of key texts of the South African and the Western Canon," including his novel *Slow Man* (Horn 60). Many critics have discussed the novel's intertextual references and allusions. For instance, Pellow studies *Slow Man*'s relationship with Joseph Conrad's story "The Secret Sharer." Matthijs Baarspul and Paul Franssen analyze the episode in which Paul has a tryst with

those in Coetzee's own works, such as in *Foe* (1986) and the eponymous novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). As Pellow points out, Susan Barton, the female protagonist in *Foe*, goes "in search of an author"; Elizabeth Costello, a well-known Australian novelist in *Slow Man*, which reverses the Pirandellian quest, goes "in search of a character" (530). The reincarnation of Elizabeth, who plays the role of a writer as she does in Coetzee's previous work, *Elizabeth Costello*, draws the critics' attention to the relationships between author, writer, and character in the novel.⁷

The concept of "doubleness"—referring to different pairs of doubles or alter egos—is helpful in explaining the interwoven author-writer-character relationship in *Slow Man* (Pellow 545). As Jens Martin Gurr comments, the novel "is precisely the metafictional blurring of the *alter ego* fictions—both Costello and Rayment function as Coetzee's doubles" (109). Elizabeth is invented by Coetzee as an alter ego (Banville 32; Gurr 101); she is a figure that plays with "fictions of authorship" and appears almost to become his "mouthpiece," though the latter is a role that Coetzee is careful not to make his invented figures fall into (Gurr 101).⁸ Paul is Coetzee's alter ego as well; in *Slow Man*, set in 2000, Paul is sixty years old, just like Coetzee, also of the same age in 2000 (Gurr 107). Paul is living in Adelaide, a city in Australia where Coetzee has also lived since 2002 (Dooley 259). The novel begins with Paul's cycling accident; Coetzee is said to be "a keen cyclist" (Currie 169). Besides these affinities between Paul and Coetzee, more importantly, the theme of the "search for self," as Pellow asserts, renders *Slow Man* "almost a continuation of Coetzee's 'autrebiography' project in . . . *Youth* (2002)" (529).⁹ Furthermore, Paul and Elizabeth are a pair of doubles, made for each other. Elizabeth, for Paul, is "more alter ego than companion" (Mehigan 192). She seeks to develop "a self" for Paul and meanwhile "refine" her own self (Pellow 529).

Marianna and examine its allusion to the bed-trick scene in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. Jens Martin Gurr explains how Platonic notions are relevant to *Slow Man*. James Aubrey deals with the novel's intertextual links to *Don Quixote*. Taking into account the existential questions explored in *Slow Man*, Peter Horn argues that the novel points to French texts written by Montaigne, Rousseau, and Diderot.

⁷ Many critics have tackled the question of authorship that Coetzee addresses in *Slow Man*. For further discussions on the analysis of the relationship between author, writer, and character in the novel, see Dancycyger 236-50 and Pawlicki 135-41.

⁸ Heather Walton reflects on the association between Coetzee and Costello. She argues that the former, as a male author, "imagines himself as a woman" to "explore imagination" "as a faculty of perception" (288). For more discussions on the device of a man writing and speaking as a woman in the case of Costello, see Walton 287-91.

⁹ Coetzee's term "autre-biography" opens a dialogue and a threshold between autobiography and fiction. When interviewed by David Attwell, Coetzee claims that "all autobiography is *autre-biography*" (Coetzee, "All Autobiography" 216). *Autre-biography*, as Attwell notes, adopts the "third-person mode of address," speaking in the third person instead of in the first (216). "*Autre*" literally means "other"; *autre-biography* can be translated as a "biography of the other, biography of the self as another," denoting "othering oneself through one's writing" (Danta xvii).

While the first major line of research explores metafictional dimensions and narratology in *Slow Man*, the second major line, particularly in more recent criticisms since 2011, shifts its focus to ethical dimensions concerning the issues of the disabled aging body from the perspectives of disability and care. As Katharina Zilles observes, *Slow Man* is a “narrative of aging corporeality” in which the protagonist Paul’s old and aging body, likely overlapping with disability, challenges and even lessens his masculinity (211). Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, which investigates the fear that the Other might contaminate and threaten the boundaries of the Self, Zilles contends that “aging being an inescapable process, the apprehension of becoming Other oneself is always part of the abjection of old age” (214). Paul’s “age-related otherness” compounds his “otherness induced by his disability” (219). In addition to his old age, Paul’s amputation dwarfs his “masculine self-identity” and more intensely alienates him from his body, which is represented as “abject” (225). The conflation of impairment and aging limits his body’s mobility; his immobility confines his body and causes his failure to “cross spatial boundaries” (225).

Another critic, Alice Hall, also discusses the issue of disability in the novel and further relates it to life writing. Associating *Slow Man* with the disability autobiography, Hall argues that in Coetzee’s writing “disability” is used as a metaphor—“a problematic metaphor for social disqualification, colonial guilt, and personal isolation” (“Autre-biography” 54). Metaphorically, Paul’s disabled body reflects his inability to “tell his own story” (59), thus rendering his language and identity endangered and his life experiences “unspoken and overlooked” (64).¹⁰ Whereas Hall interprets the protagonist, Paul, as a disabled subject in a more pessimistic fashion, Kai-su Wu argues that, in the course of the novel, this disabled subject strives positively toward his own subjectivity, which appears attained when he rejects Elizabeth’s invitation at the end of the story. Because of this, *Slow Man*, as Wu notes, is significant in Coetzee’s career, differing from his previous works in which the disabled tend to fall into the role of objects incapable of articulating subjectivity the way Friday in *Foe* is.

Some critics extend the discussion of the protagonist’s incapacitated body to the issue of care in *Slow Man*.¹¹ Shadi Neimneh and Nazmi Al-Shalabi bring bodily

¹⁰ For more discussions on aging and disability in *Slow Man* by Alice Hall, see her *Disability and Modern Fiction* 104-09, 120-30, and 136-44.

¹¹ Some critics connect the issue of the body or care to other topics. Jae Eun Yoo interrogates the interrelationship between the body and the protagonist’s internal translation. Arne De Boever provides a biopolitical reading of *Slow Man* by drawing on Foucault’s theory of governmentality and biopolitics. Benjamin Lewis Robinson points out a close similarity between care and fiction in the novel.

disability into dialogue with the ethics of care, arguing that the novel makes “a distinction between cure and care” (37). Whereas cure refers to a kind of “mechanical care” that aims to heal a body, care refers to “loving care” that tends to “touch the soul” (37). Marijana’s care for Paul includes “personal touch,” such as “exercises and massage for a damaged body,” and thus is distinguished from the “cures of mechanical medicine,” represented by the nursing system at the hospital and the welfare system, both of which carry “[i]ndifference, the opposite of care” for Paul (37). What Paul needs is not cure but care, yet, as Neimneh and Al-Shalabi note, he “conflates love with care in his relationship with Marijana” (38). Pieter Vermeulen, too, comments that “Paul transforms care, and the provider of this care—his nurse Marijana—into objects of desire” (668). Although Elizabeth says to Paul that care is “not love” but “a service” (*SM* 154), he not only demands more care but also intends to offer care in return for Marijana and her family. *Slow Man* indicates the interplay between the disabled body discourse and the ethics of care, addressing the “nuanced meanings” of care (Neimneh and Al-Shalabi 35).¹²

Although there have been many insightful readings of *Slow Man*, the ethics of the gift in this work has been overlooked by most critics, except for a few like Justin Neuman, who briefly talks about “the gift of sex” in his review of the novel (104). *Slow Man*, in which the characters are caught in a web of giving-and-receiving relationships, evokes the ethical aspect of the gift. Gift-giving and -receiving in this novel, I contend, must be studied because it functions as the novel’s central theme. In this essay, I examine the aporia of gift-giving and -receiving in *Slow Man* from an ethical perspective, with reference to the logic of the gift, particularly as analyzed by Jacques Derrida. I argue that Coetzee’s use of the trope of the gift and the relationship between giving and receiving in this novel indicate a disjunction between the protagonist Paul Rayment’s gift and the kind of gift that the novel attempts to articulate. In the first part of the essay, I deal with the topic of the gift by raising the issue of gift/exchange and the ethical ramifications that gifting entails with respect to Marcel Mauss’s notion of the reciprocal gift and Derrida’s concept of the pure gift. Using their gift theories as context, I explore the concrete

¹² In addition to the two major lines of research, other lines explored by the critics in *Slow Man* are mentioned below but are not limited to these. For discussions on the ethics of hospitality in *Slow Man*, see López 272-83; Mike Marais’s “A Slow Story?” and “Coming into Being.” For an analysis of the metaphor of following in the novel, see Marais’s “The Trope of Following.” For an exploration of Jan Wilm’s so-called “slow philosophy” in Coetzee’s work, see Wilm. For a consideration of how Marianna, the blind woman in the story, embodies the figure of the hysteric, see Gilbert. For a reading of the ethics of being (un)interesting in *Slow Man*, see Smith. For a consideration of melancholia in the novel, see Geertsema. For an examination of how photographs in the novel raise questions about the mutability of historical records, see Powers. For a treatment of *Slow Man* as an Australian novel, see Maria Takolander’s “Coetzee’s Haunting of Australian Literature” and “*Slow Man* Overboard.” For a reflection on the novel’s engagement with world literature, see Vold.

occurrences of gifts and study the different facets of gift-giving and gift-exchange embodied in the novel. In the latter part of the essay, I explore the more abstract aspects of the gift by relating it to love and life. In view of the complicated relationship between gift, love, and life, I argue that the writer Elizabeth functions as a catalyst that makes Paul reflect on the essence of the gift and also on his life.

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The Aporia of the Gift

“Gift” is an ambivalent word because of its double meaning. According to etymology, one of the sources of the word “gift” is the Proto-Indo-European base, *ghabh*, which means “to give or receive” (Harper, “Gift”). In this sense, a gift is not only about giving but also about receiving. It also raises the question of whose property a gift is and who has the right to hold it. Owing to its elusive and seemingly self-contradictory characteristics, which contain aspects of “to give” and “to receive,” the gift is one of the controversial terms within the field of ethics. As Alan D. Schrift observes, since the publication of Mauss’s *The Gift* in 1924, the issues of gift, exchange, and reciprocation have been widely discussed in the field of anthropology even though they were not major themes in other fields at that time (1). Nevertheless, the gift has become a widely-discussed issue in diverse fields over the last few decades.¹³

Commenting on Mauss’s gift theory, Derrida redefines the meaning of the gift and interrogates the ethical aspects of gift-giving. In *The Gift*, Mauss analyzes the embedded meanings of gifts in archaic societies. With respect to gifts being a part of the economic system, he contends that gifts, though presented in a “voluntary form,” are, in fact, “strictly compulsory” (Mauss 5). That is, all forms of gifts involve the expectation of exchanges because exchanges are treated as “acts of politeness” (5).¹⁴ However, Derrida refutes Mauss’s idea of gifts, suggesting that Mauss fails to distinguish “gift” from “gift-exchange.” Derrida argues: “It [a gift] must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange, by the movement of circulation of the circle in the form of return to the point of departure” (*Given Time* 7). For Derrida, Mauss’s gift can never be genuine because it is reciprocal and obligatory.

¹³ Mauss’s discussion of the gift elicits many responses from later scholars, including Georges Bataille, Pierre Bourdieu, Hélène Cixous, Derrida, Lewis Hyde, and Emmanuel Levinas.

¹⁴ In one of Mauss’s examples, if one tribe declines the gift or receives the other tribe’s gift without giving the other tribe a counter-gift, it could lead to warfare between the two sides, as this suggests that the receiver’s side refuses to discharge its obligations, and thus the contract between the two is broken.

Derrida, while rejecting Mauss's definition of the gift and reorienting our understanding of it, highlights the aporia of the gift. "Aporia"—the word, which originates from Aristotle—is a critical concept in Derrida's philosophical system and his approach to the notion of the gift. Derrida describes aporia as "the difficult or the impracticable, here the impossible, passage, the refused, denied, or prohibited passage, indeed the nonpassage . . ." (*Aporias* 8). Succinctly put, an aporia is a nonpassage, an impasse that involves unsolvable difficulties, doubts, and contradictions. The paradoxical character of aporia is reflected and embodied in Derrida's gift. Derrida treats the nature of the gift as aporetic and argues that the gift is the "very figure of the impossible" (*Given Time* 7). While Mauss's contractual gift is exchanged and circulated in the economic circle, Derrida's free and unconditional gift, or as he calls it, "a pure gift," is not bound by this circle (*Glas* 243). As Derrida asserts, "If the figure of the circle is essential to economics, the gift must remain *aneconomic*" (*Given Time* 7). If we follow Mauss's line of thinking, the gift must occur within the economic circle. In contrast, the gift that Derrida proposes is a pure gift, with "no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt" (*Given Time* 12). Since the pure gift cannot be materialized in the economic circle, Derrida comments that "the gift is the impossible" (*Given Time* 7).

Derrida not only observes the literal function of the gift between the giver and the recipient but also points out their psychological aspect. For Derrida, the gift is "precisely what must not present itself" and "must not be given as something, nor by someone"; its nature is "non-dialectizable," resisting the economic circulation (*Taste* 34). He provides a strict definition of the gift and narrows it down by saying, "For there to be gift, it is necessary that the gift not even appear, that it not be perceived or received as gift" (*Given Time* 16). The gift can be a gift on the condition that it is not regarded as a gift by either the giver or the receiver. In other words, if either side in the gift-giving relationship recognizes the gift, the gift turns out to be an exchange, which annuls it. Gift and exchange are incompatible. It is the impossibility of exchange that constitutes the aporetic nature of the gift.

Inspired by Derrida's gift theory, I consider the intersection between the novel's engagement with the idea of the gift and the aporia of gift-giving that Paul undergoes as a result of his contact with the Jokić family. Paul's unconditional giving is not challenged until Marijana's son, Drago, takes one of his precious photographs. This event invokes the theme of giving/theft and creates a divide between the two. To some degree, it echoes an earlier episode, in which Blanka is suspected of stealing some item from a store. In fact, Paul is just as unsure as us readers whether Blanka is innocent because our understanding of this event is based only on Marijana's explanation. In Drago's case, the act of taking the photograph shows

the blurred line between receiving and stealing. How are the two different since both are acts of taking? Whether it is an act of receiving or stealing depends on the giver's viewpoint. When Paul realizes that Drago has taken his picture, he visits Marijana with Elizabeth and asks that his photograph be returned. Although Paul does not use the word "thief" to refer to Drago, Marijana is irritated by his implication that "[her] son is thief" (SM 244). In a later conversation, Marijana tells Elizabeth, "Mr Rayment offer us money. You know that? He offer to take me away from nursing. He offer us all new life. He offer Drago new school, fancy school in Canberra. Offer to pay. Now he say we steal from him" (246). Paul corrects Marijana, saying that he never used the word "steal," and says that "[n]ow [he] would like the original back" (246). In the conversation between Paul and Marijana that follows, they debate what the so-called "original" is and how to define theft. Although Drago takes Paul's photograph, he does not sell it; instead, he scans it and uploads it onto the Internet. While Marijana argues that his picture, like other images, is free and imitative, Paul stresses that his picture is the original, and therefore, he wants it back. This episode, in which they have different views on the original, suggests that the issue of giving/theft is related to the question of who can claim property. The giver dominates the gift-giving relationship, for s/he defines and decides when to give, how to give, and in what way the gift can be taken.

The complexity of the gift-giving relationship results from the fact that both economic and non-economic features are simultaneously embodied in the gift. Although Paul stresses that he wants nothing from the Jokić family when he promises to pay Drago's tuition, Miroslav Jokić (Marijana's husband) initially refuses to receive Paul's financial support. Miroslav's first refusal results from the aporia of the gift. The gift has an ambivalent, double-faced dimension that can be observed from its usage in different languages. It is referred to as a "present" in English but means "poison" in German; therefore, the gift serves both as a remedy and as a poison (Derrida, *Dissemination* 131). In this regard, gift-giving is not completely out of good intentions but could be out of viciousness. On the one hand, Paul's gift, in this case, is a remedy for the Jokić family because it helps Drago receive higher education. On the other hand, the gift is also a poison because the Jokić family, being the receivers, will owe Paul a personal favor once they accept the gift. In a Maussian sense, a gift is never free because the giver expects a counter-gift. If the receiver does not reciprocate with a counter-gift, s/he fails to meet reciprocal obligations. It is also considered inappropriate for the recipient to refuse the giver's gift, since the refusal implies that the receiver wants to discontinue a relationship with the giver. Because of this, Miroslav finally negotiates an agreement with Paul that they "make a trust fund for Drago," so that it is not so "personal like" (SM 147).

It is worth noting that although Paul insists that his assistance of the Jokić family is philanthropic, his generosity toward Marijana and her children is not as altruistic as it appears. When Marijana is caring for Paul, his former lover, Margaret, visits him. After her visit, during which she inquires about his sexual life, Paul has “a series of day-dreams about women,” which suggests that his sexual desire has been aroused (*SM* 39). As the novel progresses, Paul feels an erotic attraction toward Marijana. He relies on her more and more and develops a kind of transference relationship with her, as described in the story: “What does he [Paul] want of the woman [Marijana]? He wants her to smile again, certainly, to smile on him. He wants to win a place in her heart, however tiny. Does he want to become her lover too? Yes, he does, in a sense, fervently” (72). Paul wants not only a woman but also children, especially “the son he does not have [that] is the one he truly misses” (44). Paul intends to win a place in the hearts of Marijana’s children, and so makes every effort to deal with Drago’s and Blanka’s problems, which, in both cases, are solved by money. He pays for Drago’s tuition and the item that Blanka is suspected of stealing. Later, he even asks to be their godfather.

Paul’s gift is problematic because of the discrepancy between the surface meaning of the gift that Paul asserts and its symbolic implications. Although Paul emphasizes that he wants nothing in return for paying Drago’s tuition, his intention is questioned. In his letter to Marijana, Paul defends himself by saying, “If I offer to take care of Drago’s education, it is solely as a way of repaying that debt” (*SM* 166). Here, Paul justifies his gift as a counter-gift and asserts that he wants to support Drago’s education to express his gratitude toward Marijana. Nonetheless, Paul’s generosity is dubious. In another letter to Miroslav, Paul makes a proposal: “In return for a substantial loan of indefinite term, to cover the education of Drago and perhaps other of your children, can you find a place in your hearth and in your home, in your heart and home, for a godfather?” (224). He also mentions that he “want[s] nothing in return, nothing tangible, beyond perhaps a key to the back door. . . . [He] ask[s] merely to hover . . .” (224). Now that Paul has opened his home to the Jokić family, he asks the Jokićs to open their home to him as well. Therefore, the money he gives to the Jokić family is not entirely free, since his demand to be the children’s godfather is, in fact, a kind of “return” for his generosity. Hence, Paul’s counter-gift, rather than a gift with no demands, is contractual and reciprocal.

Given Paul’s counter-gift, it should be discussed in the context of time, as the difference between gift and exchange involves the question of time. In *Given Time*, noticing the importance of time in gifting, Derrida says, “For there to be gift event . . . something must come about or happen, in an instant, in an instant that

no doubt does not belong to the economy of time. . . . For there to be forgetting in this sense, there must be gift. The gift would also be the *condition* of forgetting” (17). In other words, the gift must be accompanied with the giver’s oblivion because the prerequisite of gift-giving is forgetting. For Derrida, once the giver and the recipient are conscious of the gift as a gift, it ceases to be a genuine gift, because once it is recognized as a gift *per se*, it becomes circulated in the economic circle. Thus, in order to be outside the economic circle, the gift must be forgotten by the giver and the receiver.

In one scene, Paul ends his letter to Marijana by urging her to receive his “gift”: “Will you and Miroslav please reconsider, and do me the honour of *accepting a gift* that comes, as they say in English, *with no strings attached*” (SM 166; emphasis added). Although, at the end of his letter to Marijana, Paul stresses that his provision of Drago’s education fees is a gift “with no strings attached,” his offer is not a pure gift but an exchange for the position of a godfather in the Jokić family. In this case, Paul does not forget his gift; instead, he reminds Marijana that his offer is a gift and expects her to receive it. Therefore, Paul’s self-proclaimed gift is not a gift but an exchange circulated in the economic circle.

Paul not only voluntarily sponsors Marijana’s children to deal with their financial problems but also absolves their debt obligations. Ostensibly, he asks for nothing from the counter-gift; however, the requital that Paul expects is not a kind of possession understood in a monetary sense but in a symbolic one. The symbolic value should not be mistakenly regarded as non-profit, non-interest, and non-material in the gift economy because its essence is still economically oriented. Embedding his real intentions within the gift, Paul appears to give generously to Marijana and her children. However, in doing so, he intends to make up for his lack of a wife and children and to build a family. Paul stresses the symbolic nature of his gift in one of his letters to Miroslav: “It is not just money that I offer. I offer certain intangibles too, human intangibles, by which I mean principally love” (SM 224). This letter reveals his desire to have a family. Paul is concerned more with his counter-gift’s symbolic meaning than with its literal value. He attributes his offer of help to love, but his offer expects requited love and calls for possession. Paul’s counter-gift, which blurs the line between economy and non-economy, is still wrapped within interest exchanges.

Coetzee complicates the logic of the gift and the interrelationship between giving and receiving, rendering the roles of giver and receiver fluid rather than fixed. Toward the end of the novel, Paul’s role appears to shift from giving to being given, from giver to receiver. When Paul and Elizabeth are about to leave Marijana’s dwelling after looking for the original Fauchery photographs in vain, Paul is invited

to see the recumbent bicycle modified by Drago with the help of his father. Elizabeth comments that the bicycle is a “splendid gift” and also a “right gift” (SM 254, 262). If it is a gift as Elizabeth says, then what kind of a gift is it? As the novel describes it: Paul “dislikes recumbents instinctively, as he dislikes prostheses, as he dislikes all fakes” (255); he “will never put it to use” (256). On the surface, Paul calls the bicycle a “magnificent gift” (254), yet he holds a reserved and ambivalent attitude toward it. He accepts the gift perhaps just because “it is expected of him, and since it is the right thing to do” (254). It seems that out of hesitation about whether he will use the gift or not, he asks Marijana if he should go cycling again; after receiving her affirmative response, Paul simply answers that he will “give it a whirl” and subsequently shifts the point to his gratitude for the Jokić family (257). The recumbent bicycle is a nominal gift. In this scene, the main giver, represented by Drago, is absent, and the gift is not fully guaranteed to be used by the receiver, Paul. The gift here, as Benjamin Lewis Robinson concludes, “exhibits a frivolous generosity that gives without substantively changing anything, that just gives just care” (415); or, in Neimneh and Al-Shalabi’s words, the bicycle suggests “reciprocated care” (39). The bicycle is endowed with a reciprocal nature. At this point, in a Derridean sense, it is not a gift because if the repaired bicycle is a counter-gift that Drago (or the Jokić family) uses to thank Paul for his financial support and shows care in return, hence a thing that is circulated within the economic circle. Therefore, the bicycle *per se* is not a gift but an exchange between the Jokić family and Paul.

The Gift of Love

The issue of the gift is intertwined with that of love in *Slow Man*. The novel is about how to give love, receive love, and return love to another; it revolves around the theme of love, which serves as an important issue that the protagonist deals with. Love, whether literally or metaphorically, appears many times in the novel and functions as an important life lesson for Paul in his gift-giving relationship with others. As the novel develops, we, as readers, along with Paul, consider and reconsider what constitutes love. “As the narrative unfolds,” Terry Eagleton says, “we are invited to reflect on whether there can really be a disinterested love” (1917). The novel does not focus on Paul’s pain but on the process of his recovery, in which he learns how to give love.

The characters’ names betray the roles that they undertake in *Slow Man* and, most importantly, have figurative or biblical associations with love that echo the themes in the narrative. After losing his leg, Paul becomes estranged from others

until he meets Marijana. While working in Paul's house as his nurse, Marijana sometimes brings her youngest daughter, called "Ljuba, Ljubica," with her (*SM* 30). "He [Paul] likes the name, approves of it" because it is associated with the Russian word, "lyubov," which means "love" (30). As the name indicates, the vocabulary of love is brought into Paul's life. Thereafter, he begins his relationship with other people and wishes for requited love. This change in Paul contributes to "the narrative of Paul Rayment's *Bildung*" (Marais, "Coming" 285). Both names, Marijana and Marianna, are originally related to the name "Mary." Mary, associated with the virgin mother of Jesus, was originally an Egyptian name, perhaps derived from the root *mr* or *mry*, meaning "love" or "beloved" (Shane 245). Marijana is a combination of Mari (Mary) and Jana (Jane), while Marianna is a combination of Mari (Mary) and Anna. Both names, Jane and Anna, are originally related to God's grace (Shane 55, 177). Moreover, Paul's first nurse is called Sheena, and this name is also etymologically relevant to God's grace (Shane 315).¹⁵

Coetzee's choice of names is not accidental but intentional. Elizabeth is characterized by astonishment, complexity, elusiveness, and mystery; she is the wholly other who suddenly intrudes into Paul's life and participates with him in his process of developing love. With respect to their names and backgrounds, Elizabeth and Paul are associated with God and St. Paul. In Hebrew "El" signifies God (Haneke 17), and Elizabeth, translated from Hebrew, means the "oath of God" (Osborn 237). Pellow observes the connection between God and Elizabeth in *Slow Man*. As Pellow notes, "Almost from the moment when Costello enters his life, Rayment, in his mind, makes metaphorical and exclamatory associations between her and God" (539). Meanwhile, several passages in the novel link Rayment to St. Paul. Like St. Paul, Paul Rayment is a foreigner.¹⁶ Although he has been naturalized in Australia for many years, he is still deeply conscious of himself as an outsider. When Elizabeth mentions that Paul has a foreign accent, Paul admits it and says, "I speak English like a foreigner because I am a foreigner. I am a foreigner by nature and have been a foreigner all my life" (*SM* 231). At one point during his

¹⁵ In addition, the names of other characters also reveal their characteristics in the novel. For instance, Wayne, whose name means "wagon maker," is the boy who hits Paul while driving a car (Hayes 167). Margaret, whose name means "pearl," is Paul's former intimate friend, his first visitor after his leg is amputated (Shane 238). Miroslav, whose name means "glory of peace," is a prestigious person, according to Marijana (Shane 533).

¹⁶ Coetzee also puns on Paul's last name. In a conversation between Elizabeth and Paul, she jests about his generosity by saying that Paul's surname "Rayment" rhymes with "payment" (*SM* 192). This emphasizes the fact that Paul is eager to pay Drago's expensive tuition fees. However, he subsequently corrects her, saying that his surname rhymes with the French word *vraiment*, which means "truly" in English (192). Paul then briefly mentions his immigrant experience in France and Australia and considers whether he has a "true home" (192). Moreover, Sue Kossew reminds us that Rayment sounds like "raiment," which connotes "dress, clothing or costume" and that the name addresses an issue concerning "the text as performance" (64).

conversation with Marijana, he even says that he is probably “a Jew” (168). When Marijana massages Paul’s thigh muscles, a phrase (“There shall be no more man and woman, but . . .”), which he believes to be St. Paul’s words, comes to his mind and makes him think about his relationship with Marijana (33; ellipsis in orig.). He asks himself, “But what—what shall we be when we are beyond man and woman?” (33). From St. Paul’s words, he further contemplates “love.” As mentioned in the novel, “St Paul his namesake, his name-saint, explaining what the afterlife will be like, when all shall love all with a pure love, as God loves, only not as fiercely, as consumingly” (33).

Coetzee draws an analogy between Elizabeth/Paul and God/St. Paul. Like St. Paul, Paul Rayment is summoned by Elizabeth—a wholly other, serving as a counterpart for God. The first contact between Elizabeth and Paul was via telephone. Having never seen her before or knowing nothing about this stranger, Paul knows this wholly other only through her voice. On the entryphone, Elizabeth says, “Mr. Rayment?” (SM 79). In this scene, Paul, as if hearing a voice coming from God, represented by Elizabeth, finds that he cannot reject it, but instead responds to it. After entering the house and engaging in a brief conversation with Paul, she asks him, “Will you give me your hand?” (80). Coetzee, at this point, seems to pun on the meaning of “hand.” In one sense, Elizabeth literally asks Paul’s help in terms of a place to stay and finish her book; in another sense, she asks for Paul’s hand in marriage (the pun seems like a premonition of the fact that, toward the end of the novel, Elizabeth proposes to Paul). Here, considering the parallel between God/St. Paul and Elizabeth/Paul, as well as the theme of love, God’s universal love for humanity is transformed into a romantic affection on an earthly level, evident in Elizabeth’s emotions toward Paul.

Paul’s amputation, or his loss, becomes a metaphor, a trope for the lack. This lack motivates him to search for something to fill it—that is, metaphorically, love. Nevertheless, *Slow Man*, as Mike Marais comments, “does not present itself as Paul Rayment’s growth to love, but as a *literary* representation of such a development” (“Coming” 285). Paul’s growth is not only referred to in terms of the physical, but also in a psychological sense. In a meeting arranged by Elizabeth, Paul says to Marianna, “She [Elizabeth] is of the opinion that until I have crossed a certain threshold I am caught in limbo, unable to grow. That is the hypothesis she is testing out in my case” (SM 112). Her opinion implies that the threshold on which Paul is caught refers to his (in)ability to love. Paul’s growth toward love is retarded and develops slowly, as indicated by the word “slow” in the novel’s title.

Paul initially plays the role of a giver who offers Elizabeth a place to stay, whereas Elizabeth is a receiver who intends to take stories from Paul. Nonetheless,

as the novel proceeds, the roles they play are destabilized. That is, they exchange their giver/receiver roles with each other. Elizabeth becomes a mentor who “gives” Paul lessons about love. As indicated in the story, she is “trying to teach [Paul]” (SM 159). Paul even wonders whether the Jokić affair is perhaps “nothing in the end but a complicated rite of passage through which Elizabeth Costello has been sent to guide him” (191). Indeed, on some occasions, Paul requires and follows Elizabeth’s suggestions because she can see through him. To deal with Paul’s sexual needs and desire to have a partner, Elizabeth arranges a rendezvous between Paul and Marianna. Afterward, Elizabeth suggests that Paul forget about Marijana and live with Marianna because Marianna, a blind woman, is a good match for him. In this case, Elizabeth appears to be a cure for Paul because she helps solve the problem of Paul’s sexual desire by introducing a prospective female partner to him.

If we agree that Elizabeth plays the role of God in guiding Paul, the importance of this interlude (Paul’s sex with Marianna) is that she wants Paul to reflect on whether his feelings for Marijana are out of desire or love. The similar pronunciation of both names, Marijana and Marianna, renders them counterparts to each other. Marijana is pronounced like “Marijuana,” a type of psychoactive drug. Like a gift that can be a cure or a poison, this drug is used medically to reduce the patient’s pain, but it might also cause side effects that can lead to death if heavily abused. Marijana is like a drug in the sense that she has a dual function for Paul’s recovery. Whether she is a cure or a poison depends on how many “doses” Paul takes. Paul, in the end, rejects Elizabeth’s advice. Instead of continuing to date Marianna, he pursues Marijana because he does not want a substitute for Marijana, just as he does not like prostheses.

Is the sex between Paul and Marianna a gift? Neuman comments that “the gift of sex constitutes a rejected form of charity in *Slow Man*” (104). The sex here is far from a gift but an exchange for which Paul pays cash. Later, Elizabeth still recommends that Paul choose Marianna as his mate, reasoning that while Paul likes to give and Marianna is a woman who is easily satisfied with any small gifts, they are a perfect match. As Elizabeth says to Paul, “[A] discreet woman friend like Marianna, someone who in return for favours granted would now and again consent to accept a nice little present” (SM 152). Her words describe the relationship between Paul and Marianna in the context of the economic circle; such a relationship is based on exchange and accordingly disguises the essence of love.

It is Elizabeth who can discern the symbolic meanings embedded within the gift. Paul believes that his love for Marijana is absolute because he expresses his love for her by giving her what she needs. As he confesses to Marijana, “I love you. That is all. I love you and I want to give you something. Let me” (SM 76). However,

Elizabeth thinks that Paul merely wraps his love for Marijana in the form of a gift. When Paul, having fallen in love with Marijana, decides to pay her son's tuition, Elizabeth says to him, "You [Paul] want to give. But being loved comes at a price, unless we are utterly without conscience. Marijana will not pay that price" (86). Elizabeth's words point out the aporia of the gift-giving and -receiving relationship between Paul and Marijana. She reminds Paul that even if he gives his generosity, hospitality, and love to Marijana absolutely, Marijana will not receive his gift (Drago's tuition), as long as his self-perceived giving is not a gift without any demands but an exchange of his love for Marijana's love toward him. Moreover, at this point, given the caregiver-patient relationship, Paul appears to intermingle care with love in his rapport with Marijana (Neimneh and Al-Shalabi 38). As a caregiver, Marijana provides Paul with care—a kind of "commodified care" that sells care, labor, and service as commodities (Phillips 375). In fact, Paul is Marijana's employer who pays money to hire her to take care of him; Marijana's care for Paul is what he pays for. Overlooking this fact, intentionally or unintentionally, Paul demands more care from Marijana than a service worker is supposed to do, and in return, he gives care to Marijana and her children. In this sense, the relationship between Paul and Marijana is an economic one rather than a romantic one that Paul intends to develop.

Paul's absolute giving is problematic because he does not consider the receiver's standpoint. In the gift-giving relationship, Paul only thinks of the giver's side without taking the receiver into consideration. Disagreeing with Elizabeth's comment that he desires Marijana, Paul retorts, "It is absurd to suggest that I am trying to buy his [Drago's] mother" (*SM* 152); to which Elizabeth replies, "Absurd? We should ask Marijana about that. She might have a different view" (152). By implication, Elizabeth suggests that Marijana, as a receiver, is aware that Paul's gift is not a pure gift in a Derridean sense but rather more like Mauss's reciprocal gift, circulated in the economy (where the receiver is obliged to requite the giver's gift with a counter-gift). Therefore, Elizabeth says that "Marijana will not pay that price" because once Marijana receives Paul's gift, she has to fulfill her reciprocal obligation to him (86).

Indeed, Marijana does not pay the price. Although Paul continuously justifies his gift-giving, and later, the Jokić family even receives his offer, Paul, as a giver, is still unable to be requited with the equivalent counter-gift that he expects. As the novel says at one point, "He had been hoping to receive from Marijana a little more of what he pays her to provide, perhaps even another session of bodycare; but evidently that will not be forthcoming" (*SM* 189). The novel mentions several instances when Paul is physically attracted to Marijana, especially her legs (134, 144,

149, 244). Although Paul denies his physical attraction toward her and says that he demands nothing from her, Marijana can sense the discrepancy between his intent and words. One time, after slipping in the bathroom, Paul calls Marijana to come to his house and takes this opportunity to declare his love for her. He says to her that he “make[s] no demands, neither now nor in the future,” yet she retorts: “No demand? You think I know nothing about men? Men is always demand” (211). In the dialogue that follows, Paul reasserts his love for her, but Marijana responds indifferently, saying “Time to go” (213). If, with respect to gift economy, there are always losses or gains in the process of gift-exchange, then in this case, it is no surprise that the gift is returned with loss rather than with gain because the recipients do not always reciprocate.

Paul apparently uses gift-giving as a means to build a friendship with the Jokić family and to cultivate a loving relationship with Marijana; yet, it is also gift-giving that blights the friendship and love. The word “friendship,” in fact, is etymologically related to “love” (Harper, “Friendship”). When Aristotle deals with the ethics of friendship, he also discusses friendship in the light of love. Aristotle thinks that “as for friendship, it is advisable to love rather than to be loved” (Derrida, *The Politics* 7); therefore, a friend refers to the one who loves, instead of the one being loved. For him, the act of loving and that of being loved are two incompatible experiences; the former is always “better” and thus should be prioritized (11). However, Derrida challenges Aristotle’s notion of friendship that “consists in loving” rather than in being loved (8). Questioning the primacy of loving (activity) over being loved (passivity) as well as the clear divide between the two, Derrida coins the French term *aimance*, translated as “lovence” in English. He points out: “Beyond all ulterior frontiers between love and friendship, but also between the passive and active voices, between the loving and the being-loved, what is at stake is ‘lovence’ [*aimance*]” (7). Derrida further explains that the term is essential “for the naming of a third or first voice, the so-called middle voice, on the near or far side of loving (friendship or love), of activity or passivity, decision or passion” (25). Deviating from Aristotle’s view, Derrida proposes the concept of lovence to challenge an “intrinsic hierarchy” between loving and being loved, and explores another possible way to consider friendship and love (11). In other words, Derrida’s ethics of friendship does not depend merely on the act of loving but on a kind of in-betweenness that involves both loving and being loved, being active and being passive.

In *Slow Man*, Paul intends to form a friendship with the Jokić family by presenting himself as a “friend of the family” in front of others (SM 171). Nonetheless, no friendship exists between Paul and Marijana’s family because of the lack of lovence, in Derrida’s terms. Paul not only fails to develop a love relationship with

Marijana but also fails to establish a father-children relationship with her children. After learning that Drago has had a fight with his father, Paul invites Drago to stay with him at his place. He seemingly expects that they will have a father-son interaction, and Marijana supposes that they will “make friend[s]” (183). However, Drago spends most of time outside—coming home late, bringing his friends to stay overnight, and making noise—which upsets Paul. Instead of experiencing a sense of growing “intimacy” with Drago, Paul feels that “Drago is pushing him away” (180). In his contact with the Jokić family, Paul, seeking to play the role of a giver, acts as the one who makes the decision to love. In a sense, Paul is in the active position (giving/loving), while Marijana and her children are in the passive position (being given/being loved). Since their positions are fixed and hierarchical, the “middle voice” is muffled, and the friendship or love between them fails.

The Gift of Life

The fictional character of Elizabeth appears not only in *Slow Man* but also in Coetzee’s previous works, including *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), both of which focus more on her academic thoughts and life as a writer. In *Elizabeth Costello*, she is an Australian woman, born in 1928, with two marriages and two children. More importantly, she is a prestigious writer, frequently invited to deliver speeches, as well as a vegetarian concerned with animal rights and issues. She appears to be dependent because while traveling all over the world to make speeches, she relies on her son to deal with everyday trivialities; sometimes she even seems somewhat diffident, particularly when challenged by her audience. In contrast, in *Slow Man*, although Elizabeth returns as a female writer, she is presented as a rather more independent and confident figure, partly because she comes and goes alone, and partly because she plays a dominant role in the relationships between the protagonist Paul and other characters in the novel.

Elizabeth and Paul are likely to be made for each other. As Elizabeth says to Paul, “You [Paul] were sent to me, I was sent to you” (*SM* 161). Neuman also notes: “Paul Rayment and Elizabeth Costello are bound to one another, a character and a writer in search of a plot, like Pirandello’s characters in search of an author. . . . [T]he novel increasingly scrutinizes the metafictional relationship between author and character, novelist and novel” (105). Here, I would like to extend Neuman’s comment into the discussion of how the appearance of Elizabeth leads to the convergence of the three themes—gift, writing, and life.

In this context, Derrida’s discussion of *pharmakon* can be helpful in interpreting Elizabeth’s role and her writing as a gift for Paul because the word is related to

gift and writing. Derrida often relates his discussions of the gift to his concept of *pharmakon* while commenting on Mauss's theory of the gift (Schrift 21). As mentioned earlier, the gift is double-faced in the sense that it is a present as well as a poison. Likewise, Derrida claims that the term *pharmakon* also has an ambivalent character, for it is both a "remedy" and a "poison" (*Dissemination* 98). Derrida develops his thinking of *pharmakon* based on Plato's *Phaedrus*. In Plato's text, an Egyptian god of writing named Thoth (or Theuth) wants to give the King a remedy (in Greek, *pharmakon*) that can help improve memory. However, the King refuses to receive Thoth's gift, arguing that "this invention will produce forgetfulness" (qtd. in *Dissemination* 102). Derrida emphasizes the ambiguity of *pharmakon*, which generates conflicting oppositions: "good/evil, true/false, essence/appearance, inside/outside, etc." (103). He further explains that these oppositions only provide a tentative way for us to comprehend it because they cannot fully express the complexity of *pharmakon*. It is worth noting the analogy between giving and writing. The nature of writing, like that of the gift, is also double-faced; it can be both a cure (to retain memory) and a poison (to lose memory).

The giver is to the receiver what the writer is to the character. Since the writer gives the character life, the writer plays the role of a giver while the character is a receiver. In *Slow Man*, the relationship between Elizabeth/Paul is not only giver/receiver but also writer/character. In one sense, Elizabeth is a writer who attempts to write Paul into her book and therefore, a giver who gives her character Paul life. As the novel advances, her demand for Paul's life story becomes a means to control his life. For Paul, Elizabeth is occasionally a threatening figure because of her omnipresence and omniscience. Even Elizabeth herself admits that she is "[a] bit of a viper" by nature (*SM* 235). In *Elizabeth Costello*, her son John also describes her as "cruel, in a way that women can be but men seldom have the heart for" (5). She seemingly can trace Paul's personal history and predict his future. Moreover, Paul is often haunted by her gaze. For instance, in the scene in which Paul is preparing to have sex with Marianna, he feels that Elizabeth is "observing" and "watching" them although there is no one else in the room (*SM* 111, 112).

This theme of authorship is frequently seen in Coetzee's work. As David Attwell observes, *Slow Man* reminds us of Coetzee's *Foe*, in which Foe seeks to dominate the discourse and competes against Susan Barton's narrative, particularly as to her daughter's role (16). Elizabeth as a writer seems to have a mystical power to "write" Paul's life, including his memory, and even "rewrites" his relationship with others. For example, when Elizabeth introduces Marianna to Paul, she not only strongly urges him to meet her but also claims that he and Marianna are familiar with each other. Although Paul says that he saw the woman only once at the

hospital, Elizabeth asserts that when he was a young photographer, he may have photographed Marianna but has forgotten about it. Paul cannot help but acknowledge the possibility of having met Marianna in such circumstances. Elizabeth appears to baffle Paul with her language, making him uncertain about his memory. By exerting her power of writing, Elizabeth seems to create a story about how they have known each other and makes Paul believe that he is acquainted with Marianna. Additionally, after arranging their date, Elizabeth frequently reminds Paul of Marianna and advises him to forget Marijana. In this episode, Elizabeth blurs the line between truth and falsity, essence and appearance, memory and forgetfulness. If Elizabeth's writing aims to control Paul, then it becomes reduced to a poisonous gift.

Toward the end of the novel, Elizabeth proposes that Paul live with her for the rest of their lives, "like [in a] marriage" (*SM* 232). She says to Paul that if they live together, she can "give [him] language lessons" (231), cook for him, and provide him with a house to live in; or that the two of them can travel without having to worry about money. It is at this point that Elizabeth materializes herself as a gift to Paul. Etymologically, the word "gift" in Old English refers to "bride-price, marriage gift (by the groom), [and] dowry" (Harper, "Gift"). Her verbal promises to Paul sound like her dowry, which entices Paul to marry her. Here, Elizabeth is rendered as a gift to Paul.

However, Paul eventually refuses Elizabeth's proposal. What is at stake here is not Paul's final decision, but the function of the role played by Elizabeth throughout the novel. As mentioned previously, the gift etymologically has two meanings: a present (or a remedy) and a poison. This ambivalent nature of the gift, I think, is embodied in the character of Elizabeth. She gives Paul advice, whether he needs it or not, while also manipulating the direction of his life. To Paul, Elizabeth is a cure as well as a poison. Based on the writer-character relationship between Paul and Elizabeth, we may speculate that Paul's rejection is due to his refusal to be a character under Elizabeth's pen. While Elizabeth manages to write and direct Paul's life, Paul wants to be himself because he feels that Elizabeth treats him "like a puppet" (*SM* 117). Therefore, although Paul needs Elizabeth's advice, he still wants to get rid of her. He appeals to her, saying, "Drop me, I beseech you, let me get on with my life" (117). From the perspective of the giving-and-receiving relationship, the roles of giver/receiver between Paul/Elizabeth are not fixed. In one sense, as mentioned earlier, Elizabeth gives her character a life while Paul acts as a character whose life is given by the writer. In another sense, it is Elizabeth who asks Paul to give her his life story; therefore, in this context, she is a receiver while Paul is a giver. Paul's rejection shows that he refuses to give his life to Elizabeth.

Coda

If we agree that Elizabeth is a mentor who enlightens Paul, then her proposal is meant to make him reflect on what love is. Although Elizabeth, on most occasions, dominates Paul's way of thinking, she once says to Paul, "[T]his is your story, not mine. The moment you decide to take charge, I will fade away. You will hear no more from me; it will be as if I had never existed" (*SM* 100). In this case, Elizabeth duplicates the relationship between Paul and her, much like the gift-giving relationship between Paul and Marijana. Paul always intends to gift Marijana, but his giving is not a genuine gift because he demands returned love, and once he asks for counter-gifts, his assumed love for Marijana becomes an exchange. This is perhaps what Elizabeth wants to teach Paul. At the end of the novel, Paul has something of an epiphany and suddenly becomes aware of the lesson that he has learned from Elizabeth. He realizes that, as in the case of his relationship with Marijana, Elizabeth's proposal is not a genuine gift or love, but instead, an exchange for his life: "In the clear late-afternoon light he can see every detail, every hair, every vein. He examines her, then he examines his heart. 'No,' he says at last, 'this is not love. This is something else. Something less'" (263). Paul finally decides to say farewell to Elizabeth as a gesture of denying her the prerogative to control the rest of his life.

The aporia of gift-giving occurs, in my opinion, because we can know neither the whole truth nor the other's intention. While dealing with gifts and forgiveness, Derrida discusses Charles Baudelaire's story, "Counterfeit Money," in which the narrator's friend gives a counterfeit coin to a poor man, so that the narrator "will never forgive him the ineptitude of his calculation" (qtd. in Derrida, *Given Time* 32). While the narrator is worried that the beggar will be put into jail for using the fake coin, and therefore blames his friend for his craftiness, Derrida questions whether the narrator has the right to morally judge his friend. He argues, "It is at the moment he [the narrator] looks his friend in the eyes, . . . that the narrator sees, *believes* he sees the truth of what the other had wanted to do, his 'aim.' But perhaps this moment marks the very blindness out of which arises the speculative discourse of the narrator" (Derrida, *Given Time* 163). Derrida means that the narrator might misunderstand his friend; since he is unable to know his friend's real intention, he should not judge him. Derrida further explains that "[t]he place of the narrator is the place of credulity itself. It is also the place from which the moral judgment is proffered. And this judgment is without appeal" (163). Derrida reminds us that if we evaluate the friend's gift only from the narrator's point of view, we can easily be misled, for his viewpoint might not be the truth.

Gift/Exchange in
J. M. Coetzee's
Slow Man

Based on Derrida's view, I would like to ask, can we, as readers, judge Paul's giving? Is it possible that we are conspiring against Paul with the narrator or other characters, like Elizabeth? Is the narrator or Elizabeth reliable? Coetzee seems to leave these questions open, allowing for a flexible reading through the interwoven narratives of narrator, writer, and character. Both the narrator and Elizabeth remark that Paul's generosity toward the Jokić family stems from his desire to win over Marijana. In chapter eleven, the narrator says, "He [Paul] is like a woman who, having never borne a child, having grown too old for it, now hungers suddenly and urgently for motherhood. Hungry enough to steal another's child: it is as mad as that" (*SM* 73). Elizabeth also judges Paul's intention: "You [Paul] are trying to get into Mrs J's pants. Also to seduce Mr J's children away from him and make them your own, one, two and even three" (95). If we are to be fair, we should also take Paul's words into consideration. In a conversation, Paul tells Elizabeth that he went to bed with his assistant when he was young. He tells Elizabeth about his perspective on love, "And I learned a lesson from it [his sex with his assistant]: that love need not be reciprocated as long as there is enough of it in the room. . . . If you love deeply enough, it is not necessary to be loved back" (200-01). If Paul's words come from his heart, then the narrator's and Elizabeth's moral judgments on Paul appear to be biased. In this regard, *Slow Man* not only seems to tell us that gift-giving should be out of an absolute love without reciprocation but also invites us to consider the question of how to judge the act of giving when we know neither the truth nor the giver's intention.

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