Unhomed and Unstrung:
Reflections on Hospitality in J.M. Coetzee’s *Slow Man*

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Abstract

This essay is concerned with the workings of hospitality towards the other in J.M. Coetzee’s novel Slow Man. The reading proposed here is that the bicycle accident which befalls protagonist Paul Rayment on the novel’s first page, costing him his leg and a large portion of his previous vitality, renders him momentarily “unstrung,” understood here as a state of passive openness to the unknown, of absolute responsiveness or hospitality towards the other. The other is here defined as that which is—more or less—ungraspable in the self, in another being or in an unexpected event. A key argument put forward is that the accident also accentuates Paul Rayment’s enduring sense of unhomedness, his alienation in relation to body, language and self. The desire for home or belonging with other people brings about deliberate acts of hospitality on his part, as he tries to find a home for himself by inviting others in. The essay examines how these two strands of ideas—being unhomed and being unstrung—intersect in moments of hospitality in Slow Man, and reflects on how hospitality can and cannot succeed in creating a home for the subject. Theories of hospitality by Jacques Derrida, Derek Attridge and Mike Marais are discussed and serve as inspiration to the reading.

**Keywords:** hospitality, Coetzee, Slow Man, Derrida, Attridge, Marais
Revolving around the character Paul Rayment and his frustrations in relation to his unhomed self, J.M Coetzee’s novel *Slow Man* displays a strong ethical inclination towards the at once liberating and “homing” implications of hospitality towards the other. Hospitality is here understood both in its absolute sense, as a non-intentional responsiveness or openness to the other; “the other” in turn defined as that which is—more or less—ungraspable in the self, in another being or in an unexpected event; and in its more conventional, everyday sense—the exercise of welcoming, openness and generosity towards another person. And, in taking us through the often enigmatic workings of hospitality, *Slow Man* offers us glimpses of both its complications and possibilities.

Set in modern day Australia, far from the more or less explicit apartheid or post-apartheid backdrops of earlier Coetzee novels such as *Waiting for the Barbarians, Age of Iron* or *Disgrace*, *Slow Man* offers no obvious sociopolitical dualism separating black from white, civilized from barbarian or the like. The novel’s characters are essentially equal in the otherness of their varying origins, and display the cosmopolitan variations of any metropolis of our time; some are men, some women; some are young, some old; some are recent arrivals, some more rooted in the host country. This lack of clear cut distinctions between self and other in what we might call the “postcolonial” sense complicates or at least blurs the workings of hospitality, but at the same time widens the application of the concept and its ambiguities.

In my reading, I will focus on hospitality—the tangible everyday kind as well as the more abstract responsiveness towards the other—on the thematic level in *Slow Man*. After sixty-something Paul Rayment is injured following a bicycle accident, resulting in the amputation (against his will) of his leg, we are led through a plethora of events where hospitality is exercised—or not—both on his part and on that of other
characters. The predicament Paul Rayment finds himself in also invites a discussion on the notion of being unhomed, which to my mind is closely linked to how hospitality operates in the novel. However, before entering into my reading of the thematic manifestations of hospitality in \textit{Slow Man}, I would like to briefly mention the idea of hospitality towards the literary work itself, so lucidly developed by Derek Attridge, which has served as my starting point in the process of writing this essay. In \textit{The Singularity of Literature}, Attridge convincingly makes the point that certain literary works invite—or even demand of—the reader to be responsive to that which is other in the text, that which “exceeds the limits of rational accounting” (3):

To respond to the demand of the literary work as the demand of the other is to attend to it as a unique event whose happening is a call, a challenge, an obligation: understand how little you understand me, translate my untranslatability, learn me by heart and thus learn the otherness that inhabits the heart. (Attridge, \textit{Singularity} 131)

As all Coetzee’s novels, \textit{Slow Man} is unquestionably a literary work that makes such demands on its reader. We are drawn towards the ungraspable nature of the novel in a manner not unlike how one of its characters, the writer Elizabeth Costello, describes her curiosity in the enigmatic Paul Rayment: “This is how I have built my life: by following up intuitions including those I cannot at first make sense of. Above all those I cannot at first make sense of” (85). Towards the end of the novel, Paul Rayment reflects on the otherness of Elizabeth Costello’s interest in him:

Almost at random she has lighted on him, as a bee might alight on a flower or a wasp on a worm; and somehow, in ways so obscure, so labyrinthine that the mind baulks at exploring them, the need to be loved and the storytelling, that is to say the mess of papers on the table, are connected. (238)

In my reading of \textit{Slow Man}, I have attempted to be attentive or hospitable to such “labyrinthine” connections between the need for other people—the need for a home, even—and the manner in which the novel brings up hospitality on so many different levels\(^1\).

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\(^1\) Addressed by several critics, the reader’s disorientation in relation to \textit{Slow Man} is often attributed to the novel’s metafictional nature; its “intimations of other levels of reality” forming a “narrative conundrum with . . . multiple reflections that converge and collapse on the reader” (Wicomb 8, 21); its “misdirecting readers . . . in the not unimportant matter of just whose story this is” (Pellow 529); “Paul’s and the reader’s desire for clarity . . . constantly deferred by the narrative. . . . \textit{Slow Man} . . . teasingly [pushing] against textuality itself” (Kossew 69). It has even been suggested that the “feeling of disorientation that is prominent for the reader of \textit{Slow Man} . . . mirrors a migrant perspective” in the ambiguity of its metafictional borders (Vold 48). My contention here is that the complexities of hospitality add a significant layer to the elusiveness of this novel.
The concept of hospitality in relation to Coetzee’s literary oeuvre is highly topical in recent criticism, not only in the compelling work of Derek Attridge but also in that of Mike Marais\(^2\). These scholars are in turn inspired by their respective readings of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, both of whom cannot be left unmentioned in an essay on hospitality. While my hope here is not to directly apply existing theoretical frameworks, but rather to try to through my own reading grasp a trace of Coetzee’s perceptions of hospitality as they appear in *Slow Man*, it seems more than appropriate to recognise and briefly touch on the rich critical theory on hospitality that has inspired and informed this reading.

**Theories of Hospitality: Derrida, Attridge, Marais**

A natural and inspiring point of entry to the concept of hospitality is Jacques Derrida, who, drawing on Emmanuel Levinas’ influential thinking on the subject’s responsibility towards the unknown Other, sets down hospitality as a—or even *the*—central concept in ethics. In his reflections on hospitality, Derrida illuminates and develops what he refers to as Levinas’ “immense treatise of hospitality” (Derrida, *Adieu* 21). Central to the Levinasian ethics of hospitality is that the welcome of the other is always preceded by the welcome by the other:

> Intentionality, attention to speech, welcome of the face, hospitality—all these are the same, but the same as the welcoming of the other, there where the other withdraws from the theme. This movement without movement effaces itself in the welcoming of the other, and since it opens itself to the infinity of the other, an infinity that, as other, in some sense precedes it, the welcoming of the other (objective genitive) will already be a response: the *yes to* the other will already be responding to the welcoming of the other (subjective genitive), to the *yes of* the other. (Derrida, *Adieu* 22-3)

Resonating with Levinas’ idea that the other’s welcome or appeal is always already there, is what Derrida refers to as the “implacable law of hospitality,” where the shared etymology of the words host and guest (both derived from the Indo-European root *ghos-ti*) is reflected in the slippage between the two:

> . . . the *hôte* who receives (the host), the one who welcomes the invited or received *hôte* (the guest), the welcoming *hôte* who considers himself the owner of the place, is in truth a *hôte* received in his own home. . . .

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\(^2\) The theme of hospitality recurs in different guises in several of Coetzee’s novels, for example in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Foe*, *Age of Iron*, *Master of Petersburg*, *Disgrace* and *Diary of a Bad Year*. See e.g. Lopez, who discusses how Coetzee’s concern with hospitality is “lexically signalled” in *Disgrace*, or Rose and Wang on the rhetoric of hospitality in *Diary of a Bad Year*. 

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The *hôte* as host is a guest. . . . The one who welcomes is first welcomed in his own home. The one who invites is invited by the one whom he invites. (Derrida, *Adieu* 41-2)

Derrida reminds us that Levinas, in his discourse on the subject’s infinite responsibility for the other—“The word *I* means *here I am*; answering for everything and everyone”—arrives at the idea of the subject not only as a host, but as a hostage of the other (Derrida, *Adieu* 55).

A central aspect of Derrida’s contribution to Levinas’ ethics of hospitality is his reflection as to whether or not it can be translated into a law or politics of hospitality. Derrida’s conclusion is pessimistic; in *Of Hospitality*, he suggests that unconditional hospitality to the other is an impossible ideal when put into practice. Unconditional—or absolute—hospitality, requires opening up one’s home and giving place to “the absolute, unknown, anonymous other,” asking neither reciprocity nor “even their names” in return (Derrida, *Hospitality* 25). Against this single overriding law of unconditional hospitality, Derrida sets the laws of traditional everyday hospitality as we know it, defined by culture and society—founded on the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions and reinforced by Kant’s notion of “universal hospitality”. These laws of hospitality are conditional and reciprocal in their focus on the rights and duties individuals have towards each other.

The two—unconditional and conditional hospitality—are according to Derrida, mutually exclusive yet interdependent, hence the aporia, the difficulty or undecidability of the concept as it dismantles itself. For, if the law of unconditional hospitality to be truly absolute needs to rest on a fundamental graciousness and not on any obligations towards the other, this renders it essentially ineffective, “a law without imperative, without order and without duty” (Derrida, *Hospitality* 83). But if unconditional hospitality does require laws, these laws, although “guided, given inspiration, given aspiration, required, even, by the law of unconditional hospitality” necessarily introduce conditionality, leaving unconditional hospitality ultimately unattainable (79). Let us see in some examples how the concept of hospitality turns on itself.

Unconditional hospitality, Derrida says, requires openness to the wholly surprising, to the stranger on our doorstep about whom we know nothing and of whom we ask nothing:

Let us say yes to *who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any *identification*, whether or not it has
to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female. (Derrida, *Hospitality* 77)

Yet, in keeping with traditional laws of hospitality, there is a drive to interrogate the other as part of the welcome, to ask “who are you” as a friendly gesture or perhaps to bridge the distance. According to Derrida’s aporia, however, the very question does violence to the other, in its attempt to reduce difference to the same, thus ruling out absolute hospitality. Language—and Derrida designates the mother tongue as “the home that never leaves us,” although, he adds, it only works when parting from us—then, simultaneously enables and rules out hospitality (*Hospitality* 89, 91).

Unconditional hospitality is asymmetrical; there can be no expectation of reciprocity. This too, in Derrida’s argument, is an impossibility, for even the invitation, even the word “welcome,” creates a debt. And although unconditional hospitality by definition cannot be ruled by imperatives, Derrida points out that a law of hospitality is needed to distinguish the guest from the parasite; for the guest is a guest rather than a parasite only by virtue of the law that delimits his right to a welcome.

Yet another aspect of Derrida’s aporia is how hospitality presupposes borders, “a rigorous delimitation of thresholds or frontiers: between the familial and the non-familial, between the foreign and the non-foreign . . .” (*Hospitality* 47-9). Only when there is mastery over one’s home, or by extension, over the self, can hospitality be exercised. The inherent paradox here is that when offering unconditional hospitality, the host relinquishes his control over both his home and his self, the host becoming hostage and the stranger becoming host. Not only that, but, referring back to the elaboration earlier on hôte as simultaneously host/guest, the host is already hostage of the guest; he is a host only by virtue of the guest that invites him in his own home. It is, says Derrida, as if “the stranger could save the master and liberate the power of his host” (*Hospitality* 123). And this, perhaps, is how we can understand Derrida’s avowal that there “is no house or interior without a door or windows” (*Hospitality* 61). In other words, there can be no “at home” without hospitality.

Moving next to Derek Attridge, already mentioned in the introduction, he is inspired by Derrida in his concern with hospitality both on a literary level and on a thematic level. Hospitality towards the literary work itself, Attridge suggests, consists in conducting a literal reading; “one that is grounded in the experience of reading as
an event,” where the text “comes into being only in the process of understanding and responding” that the reader goes through (J.M. Coetzee 39). Attridge opposes the literal reading to an allegorical reading, where the reader takes elements of the literary work to represent either wider or more specific meaning, trying to divine the supposed “significance” of the text.

On the thematic level, Attridge offers an inspiring reading of Coetzee’s Master of Petersburg in his essay “Expecting the Unexpected,” arguing that most of this novel “occurs in the time before the advent of the arrivant” (J.M. Coetzee 121):

The new arrivant: this word can, indeed, mean the neutrality of that which arrives, but also the singularity of who arrives, he or she who comes, coming to be where he or she was not expected, where one was awaiting him or her without waiting for him or her, without expecting it, without knowing what or whom to expect, what or whom I am waiting for—and such is hospitality itself, hospitality toward the event. (Derrida in Aporias, translated in Attridge, J.M. Coetzee 121)

Hospitality, as Attridge reads Derrida, is to welcome this unexpected event of arrival, “the arrivant, the other that arrives on your doorstep, . . . to be willing to remake your familiar world without setting any prior limits on how far you are willing to go” (J.M. Coetzee 121). And it is the unexpected event, Attridge puts it to us, that brings otherness into being.

Attridge points out that the distinction between hospitality towards the otherness of a literary work and towards the otherness of another being, is not as clear-cut as it might first seem. In both cases, responding to “the other”—defined as a relation “between me, as the same, and that which, in its uniqueness, is heterogeneous to me and interrupts my sameness”—is about being responsive to the singularity of that which cannot fully be apprehended within one’s existing frame of reference—about being open to change. And in so doing, Attridge suggests, we can “render that otherness apprehensible” (Singularity 33). In the final reflections towards the end of this essay, I will return to these valuable observations, which to me seem highly pertinent in relation to both the thematics and the reader’s experience of Slow Man.

Finally, Mike Marais, inspired by thinkers such as Levinas and Blanchot, provides a compelling perspective on hospitality in Coetzee’s literary oeuvre. In his Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee, Marais relates the notion of hospitality to writerly inspiration; “to be a secretary of the invisible is precisely to become a home for the other and then try to make for it a home of language, the text” (xvi). The other, however, according to Marais, is
ungraspable and “can never be accommodated or known”; this position—which he also takes to be that of Coetzee—he opposes to Attridge’s idea that hospitality can bring the other into the realm of the familiar (Marais xii). He further relates “the recurrent quest for the lost child [in Coetzee’s fiction] to the metaphor of following the invisible,” where the child is a metaphor for the invisible (Marais xiv). “The writer writes in order to render visible what is invisible,” is the argument, but, alas, “to render visible the invisible is to destroy the invisible;” the writer’s enterprise is thus condemned to failure (xiv).

In the specific context of the thematics of Slow Man, Marais discusses how Elizabeth Costello’s following of Paul Rayment “is both an act of obedience and a tyranny, pursuit or persecution” (Marais 205). She must follow her writerly inspiration, yet at the same time she must passively wait for it; an “erosion,” Marais suggests, “of the apparent opposition between following and not-following” (205).

Marais also offers an interesting discussion on how Slow Man is unable to thematise the unconditional hospitality (of Coetzee’s) that has enabled its writing; the reader is thus charged with “the responsibility of presenting what Costello has failed to present, what Rayment has failed to present, and, indeed, what Coetzee has failed to present owing to the insufficiency of language” (216). In this way, the reader “becomes a secretary of the invisible” (217). However, Marais intriguingly concludes, with the impossibility inherent in this infinite responsibility, “Slow Man . . . seeks to drive the reader mad” (218). And while my reflections at the end of this essay will follow a slightly different route than those of Marais, this aspect of his conclusion seems to me an appropriate bridge to the close reading that follows.

**Hospitality in Slow Man – Close Reading**

The moment when Paul Rayment is hit by young Wayne Blight’s car while going down Magill Road on his pushbike is the starting point of two key themes that will wind their way throughout Slow Man and, in their intersections, shape the novel’s, at least to my mind, most interesting contributions to the concept of hospitality. This is the moment that determines that—although he is not yet aware of it—Paul Rayment, already unhomed in self and language and soon a stranger in his body as well, will become more acutely so, and, as a consequence, more aware of his need for “home”.

And this is also the moment when, for the first time, we witness Paul Rayment in a state of complete responsiveness to the unknown.

It seems to me that it is this sense of unhomedness, this heightened desire for home or belonging with other people, that brings about Paul Rayment’s deliberate—and often excessive and unsuccessful—acts of hospitality; in inviting others in, he hopes to establish a figurative home for himself; to feel at home, as it were. However, it is not by virtue of these deliberate acts, but above all as an effect of his state of “letting go” or responsiveness towards the unexpected that Paul Rayment’s being “at home” in his self and with other people seems to be ultimately—albeit momentarily—enabled.

In the following, I will reflect on the notion of being unhomed, shown on so many levels in Coetzee’s rendering of Paul Rayment. I will then discuss how, through various deliberate acts of hospitality, the latter attempts to gain proximity to the sense of “home” that he lacks. Interwoven with this argument, I will attempt an account of what I would qualify as the most striking instances of unintentional hospitality in Slow Man; moments which come and go; glimpses of absolute responsiveness on the part of Paul Rayment in relation to the other, as manifested both in unexpected events and in other fellow human beings. These are situations where he, without anticipating it, is confronted with—and momentarily goes along with, is unconditionally hospitable towards—events which must reasonably be alien to him. The first moment of the accident, where he feels “obediently slack,” is one such instance; the first appearance of Elizabeth Costello in his apartment, where he like a sleep-walker makes all the traditional gestures of hospitality despite her unannounced visit and inexplicable conduct, another (1).

Throughout, I will reflect on how these two strands of ideas—being unhomed and being open to the unexpected—intersect in the novel. I propose that Rayment’s self-conscious and premeditated efforts at hospitality fail to “home” him where there is a lack of an authentic belonging. Instead, it is in the instances of absolute responsiveness, coinciding with a sense of, sometimes unexpected, “we-ness”, that he feels, if perhaps only transitorily, more at home in body, language and self3. In Slow Man, the notion of Paul Rayment’s unhomedness in relation to body, language and self, coincides to some extent with David Attwell’s point—using Slow Man as an example—that Coetzee’s fiction often displays a “tripartite architecture” where the subject is alienated in relation to body, history and language (“Coetzee’s Estrangements” 3).

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3 The notion of Paul Rayment’s unhomedness in relation to body, language and self, coincides to some extent with David Attwell’s point—using Slow Man as an example—that Coetzee’s fiction often displays a “tripartite architecture” where the subject is alienated in relation to body, history and language (“Coetzee’s Estrangements” 3).
Man, thus, “homedness” is not found in extending hospitality to the stranger as other, but, instead, in receiving the sameness that might be found in the stranger.

And, with the manifestations of such moments of hospitality, of letting the other in, I argue that, despite its fundamental elusiveness—and, indeed, despite Paul Rayment himself—there is a sense of ethical progression in this novel.

A central notion that will transpire from the reading is the significance attributed to the child as a figure of absolute responsiveness. Drago and Ljuba, with their “angelic” qualities, seem to at once embody and inspire an openness to the other, with an effortlessness unavailable to the ageing Rayment and Costello. I also suggest that Rayment’s awakened yearning for a child, which I read as the centre of his unhomedness, can be understood not only as his longing for the home in time that a familial belonging can provide, but also as his mourning the loss of an original hospitality to the other.

A discussion of hospitality needs to take the notion of home as its starting-point. According to common sense, hospitality would seem to presume the mastery of a home, figurative or literal, to offer the guest. Yet, paradoxically, the exercise of hospitality on the part of Paul Rayment seems to stem from his very lack of a home, his sense of unhomedness that so permeates the novel. Thus, before looking at Paul Rayment’s displays of hospitality and how they can be seen to be brought on by his desire to be homed, it seems worthwhile to reflect for a moment on the different ways in which Paul Rayment appears to be unhomed.

Most palpably, we learn from Paul Rayment’s reflections during his hospitalization that the accident has rendered him physically other to himself: He is estranged from—and inhospitable towards—his new physical being, not to mention the possibility of the “appearance” of a prosthesis, which he wants nothing to do with:

Certainly this thing, which now for the first time he inspects under the sheet, this monstrous object swathed in white and attached to his hip, comes straight out of the land of dreams. And what about the other thing, the thing that the young man with the madly flashing glasses spoke of with such enthusiasm—when will that make its appearance?

(9)

4 With this claim I depart from critics such as Marais, who argues that Slow Man “goes nowhere and announces that this is so” (193); Dancygier who states that, in the last scene, Paul Rayment has “not got anywhere and will not” (246), and Wicomb who says that, finally, “[Paul] will not be transformed or redeemed” (22).
Quite simply, he has been unhomed—and trapped—in his body. The stump he thinks of as “an unwanted child”; the prosthesis, which could potentially restore some of the mobility he has lost, is equally unwelcome (58). In fact, the thought of the prosthesis evokes in him the figure of a parasite, a childhood tale of a woman stuck by a sewing-needle, a “tiny metallic weapon cruising up her arm,” eventually reaching and piercing the heart (55).

With his “truncated old body,” he has “entered the zone of humiliation; it is his new home; he will never leave it; best to shut up, best to accept” (61). “[T]his unlovely new body of his” has seemingly robbed him both of erotic confidence—“If he ever goes to bed with a woman again, he will make sure it is in the dark”—and, in more general terms, of his quality of life (38). For of course, the amputation has not only changed his perception of his body, it has incapacitated him:

Well, he may still live to be ninety, but if that happens it will not be by choice. He has lost the freedom of movement and it would be foolish to think it will ever be restored to him, with or without artificial limbs. He will never stride up Black Hill again, never pedal off to the market to do his shopping, much less come swooping on his bicycle down the curves of Montacute. The universe has contracted to this flat and the block or two around, and it will not expand again. (25)

As for “this flat,” his actual home, it is surrounded by ambivalence and the setting for another form of unhomedness. On the one hand, from the horizon of his hospital bed, the flat seems to represent a sanctuary to return to, a place where he can “recover himself:”

. . . more urgent than the lurking question of what exactly it was that happened on Magill Road to blast him into this dead place, is the need to find his way home, shut the door behind him, sit down in familiar surroundings, recover himself. (4)

We get the impression that, in Paul Rayment’s pre-accident existence, he carefully monitored the borders to his private life, the apartment somber—a “Bavarian funeral parlour” in Elizabeth Costello’s words—and out of touch with the world outside; the computer without a modem (227). Clearly, these boundaries are destabilised with the accident. His physical incapacitation deprives him of the mastery of his home, with a stream of interchangeable nurses (and later Elizabeth Costello and Drago) letting themselves in and out of his apartment at will and beyond his control:

When the ambulancemen bring him home, Sheena is ready and waiting. It is she who reorganises his bedroom for him, supervises the cleaning woman, instructs the handyman where to install rails, and generally takes over. (23)
Yet, while this invasion, this loss of control, is apparently disagreeable to Paul Rayment, the fact remains that the flat is a home that he has, in a sense, never quite mastered, living on in the previous owner’s furniture as he does. Thus failing to make his mark, it is no wonder that he has, as he explains to Drago “been overtaken by time, by history. This flat, and everything in it, has been overtaken” (179). In fact, it would seem that his unhomedness is, or at least has been, a central part of his identity; he seems to have lived by the credo that he doesn’t need a home:

‘. . . A pigeon has a home. A bee has a home. An Englishman has a home, perhaps. I have a domicile, a residence. This is my residence. This flat. This city. This country. Home is too mystical for me.’ (197)

But, and as Elizabeth Costello points out, the event of the accident brings out the need for a home:

‘. . . You know, there are those whom I call the chthonic, the ones who stand with their feet planted in their native earth; and then there are the butterflies, creatures of light and air, temporary residents, alighting here, alighting there. You claim to be a butterfly, you want to be a butterfly; but then one day you have a fall, a calamitous fall, you come crashing down to earth; and when you pick yourself up you find you can no longer fly like an ethereal being, you cannot even walk, you are nothing but a lump of all too solid flesh. Surely a lesson presents itself, one to which you cannot be blind and deaf.’ (198)

Just as Paul Rayment is “both guard and prisoner” of his wound, both dependent on and independent of his flat, it seems that he is similarly protective of and held back by his unhomedness in relation to language (62). In hospital, in the immediate aftershock of the accident, the lingering effects of sedation and a bruised jaw give him trouble articulating words. But, more significantly—and no doubt exacerbated by the accident—there is a recurring slippage between what he thinks or feels, often italicised in the novel, and what he actually says. And Paul Rayment is conscious of this distance between his self and his language, as in the reflection he shares with Elizabeth Costello:

‘. . . As for language, English has never been mine in the way it is yours. Nothing to do with fluency. I am perfectly fluent, as you can hear. But English came to me too late. It did not come with my mother’s milk. In fact it did not come at all. Privately I have always felt myself to be a kind of ventriloquist’s dummy. It is not I who speak the language, it is the language that is spoken through me. It does not come from my core, mon coeur.’ (197-8)

And later, Elizabeth Costello returns to Paul Rayment not speaking “from the heart” (231):
‘... And yes, you are right: you speak English, you probably think in English, you may even dream in English, yet English is not your true language. I would even say that English is a disguise for you, or a mask, part of your tortoiseshell armour. As you speak I swear I can hear words being selected, one after the other, from the word-box you carry around with you, and slotted into place. That is not how a true native speaks, one who is born into the language.’ (230-1)

In her J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices, within the context of a discussion on the relationship between language and its speakers in Slow Man, Carrol Clarkson makes the important point that “[i]t is the English language, not Australia, that casts Rayment and Marijana as foreigners” (166). And while it seems to me—and I will return to this further on—that Marijana’s foreignness to the English language is perhaps not that much of an obstacle to her, I agree that Paul Rayment’s distance to language is indeed a central aspect of his unhomedness.

He is, nevertheless, unhomed also when it comes to national belonging. Raised in Lourdes in France and brought as a six year old by his mother and Dutch stepfather to Ballarat, to a house “where the shutters [of the living-room] were always closed,” Paul Rayment seems to, like his stepfather, never quite have made Australia his own (76). Not at home in Australia, he is not at home in any country. Reminiscing in a conversation with Elizabeth Costello, he describes having returned to France as a teenager, in search of the community of his childhood, but finding it no longer available to him:5

‘... Is this your true home?’ She waves a hand in a gesture that encompasses not just the room in which they are sitting but also the city and, beyond that, the hills and mountains and deserts of the continent.

He shrugs. ‘I have always found it a very English concept, home. Hearth and home, say the English. To them, home is the place where the fire burns in the hearth, where you come to warm yourself. The one place where you will not be left out in the cold. No, I am not warm here.’ He waves a hand in a gesture that imitates hers, parodies it. ‘I seem to be cold wherever I go. Is that not what you said of me: You cold man?’

The woman is silent.

‘Among the French, as you know, there is no home. Among the French to be at home is to be among ourselves, among our kind. I am

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5 David Attwell proposes that “Paul Rayment’s condition in Slow Man is post-historical” in the sense of an “unwillingness actively to embrace a diasporic identity.” In effect, Attwell suggests, Rayment is living a form of “afterlife,” his “real life... the one he lived in France as a child” (“Coetzee’s Postcolonial Diaspora” 11-2). And indeed, the notion of such a “post-historical” quality to Paul Rayment’s existence can serve to illuminate the frivolous “sliding through the world” that has, up to and to some extent beyond the point of the accident, impeded his social relations.
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not at home in France. Transparently not. I am not the *we* of anyone.’
(192-3)

So poignantly put, what emerges here is less the lack of national identity than the fact that Paul Rayment is “not the *we* of anyone,” not at home anywhere. And the aftermath of the accident accentuates and forces him to, with certain agony, revisit and consider his social and existential condition; “unmarried, single, solitary, alone” (9). But if the accident reminds Paul Rayment of his lack of *we*, his lack of belonging, it is also the case that the social circles that he *does* belong to no longer seem to interest him. During the hospital episode, it is made clear that Paul Rayment is in a manner socially unhoming himself; he does not want any contact with his old friends: “‘I am not Robinson Crusoe. I just do not want to see any of them’” (14). Among these old acquaintances is Margaret McCord, who comes to see Paul Rayment once in hospital and twice in his home following the accident. While Margaret ostensibly cares about him, and while Paul Rayment does go through the motions of socially decreed hospitality, inviting her to dinner and engaging in conversation, their meal takes place to the tones of “valedictory calls of birds,” apparently marking some sort of an ending from his perspective (37). The reader does not at any point see Margaret McCord’s face, and she does not seem to stir any emotional reactions in Paul Rayment. When she pays her second visit, he is the very figure of unresponsiveness, “still as a stone” as she strokes his hair (57).

It would seem, then, that his existing relationships do not qualify to anchor and sustain him at this new juncture. Instead, as he thinks back on the word “**FRIVOLOUS**” that came to him in the ambulance, we approach what will emerge as the very centre of his unhomedness throughout the novel; the lack of a link to posterity—the lack of a child, no less:

Yet *frivolous* is not a bad word to sum him up, as he was before the event and may still be. If in the course of a lifetime he has done no significant harm, he has done no good either. He will leave no trace behind, not even an heir to carry on his name. *Sliding through the world*: that is how, in a bygone age, they used to designate lives like his: looking after his interests, quietly prospering, attracting no attention. (19)

Reminded of his mortality, it seems that he becomes conscious of his own responsibility for his unhomedness; his “childlessness looks to him like madness, a herd madness, even a sin,” as he envisions having only “empty hands” to show St.
Paul at the gates of heaven (34). And somehow, this responsibility seems to be at the root of the hospitable acts he will undertake further on:

‘... Ever since the day of my accident, ever since I could have died but seem to have been spared, I have been haunted by the idea of doing good. Before it is too late I would like to perform some act that will be—excuse the word—a blessing, however modest, on the lives of others. Why, you ask? Ultimately, because I have no child of my own to bless as a father does. Having no child was the great mistake of my life, I will tell you that. For that my heart bleeds all the time. For that there is a blesure in my heart.’ (155)

Thus, while this blesure, this wound, this childlessness is at the core of his unhomedness, it is also the starting point for the hospitality that he will extend to Marijana and her children, in his desire “to bless them and make them thrive” (156). It seems then, that if Paul Rayment has been “frivolous,” living his life on a figurative island and alienated from the demands and benefits of human closeness, the ill-fated event of the accident—despite his own reflections about doors being closed—will bring about a new openness, as his awareness of his need for other people surfaces. Returning thus to the idea of hospitality to the unexpected, it seems that the accident—in so multiply unhoming this already unhomed character—has put Paul Rayment in a state of apprehension:

[A]t a level far below the play and flicker of the intellect (Why not this? Why not that?) he, he, the he he calls sometimes you, sometimes I, is all too ready to embrace darkness, stillness, extinction. He: not the one whose mind used to dart this way and that but the one who aches all night.

... the cut seems to have marked off past from future with such uncommon cleanness that it gives new meaning to the word new. By the sign of this cut let a new life commence. If you have hitherto been a man, with a man’s life, may you henceforth be a dog with a dog’s life. That is what the voice says, the voice out of the dark cloud. (26)

Not being able to continue as before, the new “he” separated from the old, he has no choice but to prepare to embark on “a dog’s life,” whatever that may be; an unknowable future. And, as the further reading will suggest, he will alternate

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6 Any reader familiar with Coetzee’s fiction will know that dogs are a recurring element in his novels. The idea of “a dog’s life” can perhaps be understood simply as the unknowable, as in Derek Attridge’s reading of animals as others in Disgrace: “animals are others whom [the protagonist David Lurie] knows that he cannot begin to know” (J.M. Coetzee 184). An alternative interpretation is “a dog’s life” as a life commanded by passion—by letting go even—if we follow Paul Rayment’s train of thought as he reflects on his disinclination for passion: “Dogs in the grip of passion coupling, hapless grins on their faces, their tongues hanging out” (Slow Man 46).
between resisting and accepting—at times even embracing—this new life that has befallen him.

To reiterate somewhat, the importance attributed to being open to the unexpected in *Slow Man* is made clear already in its opening page, where Paul Rayment’s initial reaction to the bicycle accident—in a moment of total loss of control—is one of complete responsiveness. An accident, we are reminded some pages further into the text, is in itself other; “something that befalls one, something unintended, unexpected” (21). And there is a strong sense of lightness, even liberation, in Paul Rayment’s reception of this unexpected event:

The blow catches him from the right, sharp and surprising and painful, like a bolt of electricity, lifting him up off the bicycle. *Relax!* he tells himself as he flies through the air (*flies through the air with the greatest of ease!*), and indeed he can feel his limbs go obediently slack. *Like a car* he tells himself: *roll, then spring to your feet, ready for what comes next.* The unusual word *limber or limbre* is on the horizon too.

Lasting just an instant, this almost exhilarated openness to the unknowable “what comes next” soon morphs into a duller yet still accepting sensation, as Paul Rayment “slides” along the ground and is “lulled by the sliding”:

Whether because his legs disobey or because he is for a moment stunned (he hears, rather than feels the impact of his skull on the bitumen distant, wooden, like a mallet-blow), he does not spring to his feet at all but on the contrary slides metre after metre, on and on, until he is quite lulled by the sliding. (1)

But soon, the moment of hospitality evaporates, as it will do several times further on in the novel: “The body that had flown so lightly through the air has grown ponderous, so ponderous that for the life of him he cannot lift a finger” (1-2). *Ponderous* not only, perhaps, in the sense of weightiness and imprisonment that will remain with him for the length of his ensuing stay in hospital and beyond, but also as an allusion to his parallel self-conscious *pondering* of his situation. In his hospital bed imprisoned by “the sealed window,” he no longer anticipates what is to come, but helplessly feels “time at work on him like a wasting disease, like the quicklime they pore on corpses” (11).

It seems that it is this pondering, this self-consciousness—along with his inherent although sometimes interrupted resistance to letting go—that for long
sequences prevents Paul Rayment both from hospitably receiving hospitality and from extending it to others. The scene between Paul Rayment and the young doctor following the latter’s announcement of the inevitable amputation is such an instance of resistance:

Something must happen to his face at this point, because the young man does a surprising thing. He reaches out to touch his cheek, and then lets his hand rest there, cradling his old-man’s head. It is the kind of thing a woman might do, a woman who loved one. The gesture embarrasses him but he cannot decently pull away. (5)

As he passively endures the doctor’s compassionate gesture, so he passively endures all care he receives in hospital. In his mind, he accuses the medical staff of not seeing him for who he really is, these “well-intentioned but ultimately indifferent young people going through the motions of caring for him” (15). Of course, just as he may be anonymous to them, they are all anonymous to him, the young nurses and doctors a faceless mass in the “land of whiteness” (13). Anticipating Paul Rayment’s relations with other people further into the novel, the absence of distinct faces seems to coincide with the absence of hospitality or openness on his part. He does not see them and so cannot let them in; and, in not letting them in, does not see them.

And Paul Rayment is by no means oblivious to this lack of openness; “to him there is no future, the door to the future has been closed and locked” (12). His discomfort is aggravated by his awareness of common expectations of how one should be open to the unexpected in life—expectations that he, for the time being, fails to live up to, but that the novel, in Coetzee’s, Costello’s or Rayment’s words seems to strive towards:

From the opening of the chapter, from the incident on Magill Road to the present, he has not behaved well, has not risen to the occasion: that much is clear to him. A golden opportunity was presented to him to set an example of how one accepts with good cheer one of the bitterer blows of fate, and he has spurned it. (14-5)

Once home, he “welcomes those days when for one reason or another no one arrives to take care of him” (25). However, despite his own doubts as to his openness, and his tendencies towards seclusion, Slow Man allows such prominence to those unexpected situations where Paul Rayment—in fleeting moments—lets his guard down in the face of the other and lets what happens happen, that the leaning towards hospitality of novel and protagonist alike cannot be ignored. It seems to me that Paul Rayment, as he reflects on where the accident has brought him, puts words to the condition that
has—contrarily to what he seems to think at this early stage—rendered him open to certain encounters that will befall him:

*Unstrung*: that is the word that comes back to him from Homer. The spear shatters the breastbone, blood spurts, the limbs are unstrung, the body topples like a wooden puppet. Well, his limbs have been unstrung and now his spirit is unstrung too. His spirit is ready to topple. (27)

And this—“unstrung,” “ready to topple”—is the state he is in when Marijana Jokić, the new day nurse, of Croatian origin, enters the novel. One of the first things that he notices about her is her language:

[S]he speaks a rapid, approximate Australian English with Slavic liquids and an uncertain command of *a* and *the*, coloured by slang she must pick up from her children, who must pick it up from their classmates. It is a variety of the language he is not familiar with; he rather likes it. (27)

Unlike his own self-conscious and distanced weighing of words, Marijana’s “approximate” speech, where the words often come out wrong, seems not really to impede her communication. Contrarily, despite her deficient English, she seems pragmatic, direct and comfortable in her use of language; after their first conversation he notes “how devoid of double entendre the exchange is” (29). And just as Paul Rayment’s unhomedness in language is a reflection of his unhomedness at large, Marijana is not only at home in language, she is also at home in the world; rooted through her family though uprooted from her home country; her soul “solid, matter-of-fact” (174). Indeed, there is a sense of “homedness” around the Jokićs; the husband Miroslav is a beekeeper, just as his father and grandfather before him. This fundamental familial belonging, that stands Marijana firmly although on foreign ground, seems to be her main attraction in the eyes of Paul Rayment:

From the loins of two, Marijana and her spouse, there have issued three—three souls for heaven. A woman built for motherhood. Marijana would have helped him out of childlessness. Marijana could mother six, ten, twelve and still have love left over, mother-love. (34)

As Elizabeth Costello suggests later in the novel, this is the quality that draws Paul Rayment to Marijana; her “burstingness” because she is loved, her family “at home in the world” (87). However, his interest in Marijana seems not only based on the difference between them—her fullness where he is empty—but also on what he perceives as their sameness. He feels affinity with her European background, conspicuously noting all her immigrant attributes; the “old-world hand” in which she
Elmgren

annotates her shopping list; the “unreconstructed old-European way” in which she smokes; the head-scarf she wears “like any good Balkan housewife” (29, 31, 40).

Critics of Slow Man have tended to afford quite some interest to the care extended by Marijana to Paul Rayment—and whatever we might call the feeling that he reciprocates with. Marais suggests that Paul Rayment feels “unconditional care” for Marijana, that she “befalls’ him” (196). Marais’ argument is that after Marijana’s arrival, Paul Rayment, previously controlled by reason, is—to his own surprise—transformed in such a way as to be commanded by his passions; “the implication being that he has become strange, a stranger, to himself” (197).

While I share Marais’ view of the nature of the change that Paul Rayment undergoes, I would venture that this is not mainly brought about by, but instead coincides with, the arrival of Marijana, produced rather by his new responsive—or why not “unstrung”—state of mind, as well as by his unhomedness, brought to the surface by the accident. Certainly, Marijana is a welcome change to the line of nurses preceding her—she has Old World origins, and, unlike her predecessors, she is not indifferent to his specificity—but I would say that neither her arrival nor his reactions to her are in themselves particularly other. “Who is this woman, he thinks, to whom I yearn to give myself? A mystery, all a mystery” (127). But it is not Marijana herself who is the mystery to him. It seems to me that Paul Rayment is quite astute in his own analysis:

Has whatever it is that had been floating in the air these past weeks begun to settle, faute de mieux, on Marijana? And what is its name, this sediment, this sentiment? It does not feel like desire. If he had to pick a word for it, he would say it was admiration. (51)

And his “admiration,” it seems, is closely linked to “the children who come with her, come out of her” (51). There is a sense of deliberation here—he wants to fall for Marijana, wants to gain closeness to her double belongings, to the Old World and to her family. As Elizabeth Costello shrewdly remarks at a later point:

‘. . . Are you not desirous of joining the we of Marijana and Drago? And Ljuba? And Blanka, on whom you have yet to lay an eye?’

‘That is another question,’ he snaps. And will not be drawn further. (193)

His own reluctance to acknowledge his motives notwithstanding: Paul Rayment opens up his home, literally and figuratively, to Marijana, seeking a home for himself through her. As a nurse, Marijana, of course, is not a guest but comes with a contract and a key of her own; she comes and goes with neither invitation nor expectations of
hospitality. She cares, cooks and cleans for him, but without intruding and taking over in the patronising and almost parasitical way of the previous succession of nurses. Instead, “[t]here is an intuition on her part as to how he will feel” and she absents herself when he wants to be left alone (33). Yet her natural and energetic way of tending to his home, her “ruddy good health,” as well as the “angelic clarity” of her daughter Ljuba who sometimes accompanies her mother, all seem to remind him of his own frailty and inabilities, not to mention the familial continuity that he finds lacking in his own life (39): “From the kitchen comes the even murmur of their voices. Mother and daughter: the protocols of womanhood being passed on, generation to generation” (31). In a manner, then, despite his desire for the contrary, their presence further unhomes him, making him feel like a parasite in his own home:

He finds himself avoiding the child’s gaze, hiding out in his armchair in a corner of the living-room as if the flat belonged to the two women and he were some pest, some rodent that had found its way in. (39)

While this feeling comes across as a product of his own unhomedness rather than of Marijana’s conduct towards him, for she is both professional and intuitive with regards to his needs, it is also true that there are limits to her responsiveness to him. Indeed, sometimes “he thinks she does not bother to listen to him” (54). And this lack of responsiveness is, for long sequences, also true of Paul Rayment himself in relation to Marijana. For the most part his reactions to Marijana are less the effect of actually engaging with her than abstractions in his mind; his reflections as if fetched out of a book:

*Anything*, he thinks to himself: *I would give anything for . . .* He thinks the thought with such fervour that it is impossible it does not communicate itself to Marijana. But Marijana’s face is impassive. *Adored*, he thinks to himself. *I adore this woman! Despite all!* And also: *She has me in the palm of her hand!* (185-6)

As Elizabeth Costello remarks, Paul Rayment’s feeling towards Marijana is an “inchoate attachment,” both undeveloped and unclear (82). We do not see him paying attention to the singularity of Marijana’s face; instead, he focuses on her vigorous appearance and “warm, ruddy” skin, seeming to find in her the correspondence to an idea (91):

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7 In an interesting discussion on how “[l]iterature, by telling the stories of those who truly deserve to be main characters, also establishes the standards for a life worth living”, Barbara Dancygier sees Paul Rayment’s lack of “true commitment and passion” towards Marijana as an illustration of his inability to act as a main character, much to the frustration of Elizabeth Costello (243-4). While I agree that Paul Rayment is very much an anti-hero, it seems to me that there is something recognisably human in his deficiencies, and something restorative in the fact that he does, after all, let go and let others in.
In her he begins to see if not beauty then at least the perfection of a certain feminine type. *Strong as a horse*, he thinks, eyeing the sturdy calves and well-knit haunches that ripple as she reaches for the upper shelves. *Strong as a mare.* (50)

Similarly, he does not seem interested in the specificity of her person, “he has never quizzed Marijana and he has no intention of doing so”; instead he attempts to slot her into his frame of reference by checking out “*Peoples of the Balkans: Between East and West*” at the library, reducing her to her Old World origins into which he reads both sameness and difference (66, 64).

However, if Paul Rayment is only projecting his desires on Marijana, not truly hospitable to her, it is another story with her son, Drago. In my reading, Paul Rayment’s encounters with Drago stand out as pivotal moments in the novel. The significance of their relationship is underlined through the striking intensity of their first meeting. Prior to this, however, Paul Rayment has already lingered on the boy’s “*dreamboat*” appearance in a photograph brought to work by Marijana (42). The manner in which this photograph seems to set Paul Rayment’s mind in motion regarding the son he never had, engendering his somewhat bizarre notions of how he might “acquire a son,” suggests that there is something in Drago’s aura to which Paul Rayment is particularly susceptible or open (45):

> It is not beyond the bounds of the possible to acquire a son, even at this late juncture. He could, for instance, locate (but how?) some wayward orphan, some Wayne Blight in embryo, and put in an offer to adopt him, and hope to be accepted; though the chances that the welfare system, as represented by Mrs Putts, would ever consign a child to the care of a maimed and solitary old man would be zero, less than zero. Or he could locate (but how?) some fertile young woman, and marry her or pay her or otherwise induce her to permit him to engender, or try to engender, a male child in her womb.

> But it is not a baby he wants. What he wants is a son, a proper son, a son and heir, a younger, stronger, better version of himself. (45)

And thus we are reminded of the fundamental unhomedness of Paul Rayment discussed earlier; his lack of familial belonging—the idea of the missing son which the aftermath of the bicycle accident propels him towards. Unlike Marais, I would not see the missing child here as a metaphor for the other which cannot be grasped and brought into the same; but rather in the more literal sense, the frivolousness and loneliness of “[leaving] no trace behind” in time (19).

When they presently meet, it is on the casual initiative of Paul Rayment, following which Marijana “turns up in the company of a tall youth. . . . unmistakably:
Drago” (67). Under the pretext of having her son inspect the wrecked bicycle, Marijana brings him along to expose him to the dangers of reckless driving. Paul Rayment’s initial impressions of “this handsome youth, bursting with good health” seem to focus on the distance between Drago and himself; not only are they physical opposites, they are also of different generations and origins—his mind wanders, exoticising: “Drago Jokić: a name from folk-epic. The Ballad of Drago Jokić” (69). As it turns out, however, their short sit-down is surprising to Paul Rayment and reader equally:

If he had been asked to predict, he would have said that young Drago would sit through a lecture of this kind with his eyes cast down, picking at his cuticles, wishing the old geezer would get it over with, cursing his mother for bringing him. But it is not like that at all. Throughout his speech Drago regards him candidly, a faint, not unfriendly smile on his well-shaped lips. (69)

As he speaks he is aware of the boy watching his lips, brushing aside the word-strings as if they were cobwebs, tuning his ear to the intention. His respect for the boy is growing, growing by leaps and bounds. No ordinary boy, this one! The envy of the gods he must be. The Ballad of Drago Jokić. (70)

There is something about the openness in this moment between Paul Rayment and Drago, about their simultaneous attentiveness to each other. While Paul Rayment soon reverts to his usual parodical mind-wandering, this does not take away from the force of this instant of unexpected reciprocal hospitality. It seems that not only is Paul Rayment letting Drago in; Drago is letting him in too. Elizabeth Costello later ventures a plausible clue to the nature of Drago’s appeal to Paul Rayment: “From the beginning, you have glimpsed something angelic in Drago, and I am sure you are not wrong. Drago has remained in touch with his other-worldly origins longer than most children” (182). And perhaps there is a fundamental openness to the other in this “angelic” quality of the child. After the boy has left, it is clear that he has had a strong effect on Paul Rayment:

‘My dear Marijana,’ he says—*heightened emotion*, he tells himself, *in a moment of heightened emotion one can be forgiven for slipping in the odd term of endearment*—‘I am sure he will be all right. I am sure he will have a long and happy life and rise to be an admiral, if that is what he wants to be.’ (71)

In Paul Rayment’s reflections that follow the encounter with Drago, “father” precedes “husband,” it is the image of the child—the imagined son—that stands out:

The situation is absurd. . . . Nevertheless, he will give anything to be father to these excellent, beautiful children and husband to Marijana—
co-father if need be, co-husband if need be, platonic if need be. He wants to take care of them, all of them, protect them and save them.

Save them from what? He cannot say, not yet. But Drago above all he wants to save. Between Drago and the lightning-bolt of the envious gods he is ready to interpose himself, bare his own breast.

He 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. (72-3)

Interestingly, the absurdity and madness of wishing to save Drago—“from what?,” something unknown, something he “cannot say, not yet”—seems to be as striking to Paul Rayment himself as it is to the reader. “How is Drago getting on?” he asks Marijana, as casually as he can,” trying to play down his interest (74). It is as though he is aware of a certain if not impropriety then at least unusualness, in his attention to the boy, but cannot help himself. His “letting go” is apparent when he presents Marijana with his grandiose offer to fund Drago’s education:

‘But if you are serious about it,’ he plunges on, and even as he speaks he feels the recklessness of what he is saying, but he cannot stop himself, will not stop himself, ‘and if Drago himself really wants to go, I could help financially. We could treat it as a loan.’ (75)

In this “plung[ing]” and “recklessness,” then, it seems that Paul Rayment’s generosity towards Drago is accompanied and enabled by his responsiveness to something which is out of his control; a product of his hospitality to the unexpected. It is as though he thrives in this loss of control: “Giving always bucks him up, he knows that about himself. Spurs him to give more. Like gambling. The thrill all in the losing. Loss upon loss. The reckless heedless falling” (92).

Paradoxically, then, his letting go seems to put him in a state of resolve that verges on the manic, forceful images such as “shield of benevolent protection” and being willing to “pay anything” replacing his previous passivity: “Over the whole brood he wants to extend the shield of his benevolent protection. And he wants to love this excellent woman, their mother. That above all. For which he will pay anything” (77).

And in this new and determined condition, invested with energy after the session with Drago and encouraged by the smile he manages to produce in Marijana’s

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8 Neimneh and Al-Shalabi suggest that Rayment’s offer to pay for Drago’s education involves him in an “ethics of caring,” where he wishes to reciprocate the care he has received from Marijana (37). Although this indisputably reflects Rayment’s own logic, it seems to me that his will to give is propelled not primarily by an ethics of care, but rather by the desire to gain a belonging with the Jokićs.
face—the idea of being homed within reach—Paul Rayment reclaims his power as host; hospitality brought on by hospitality, thus. He suddenly finds himself “[fussing] around the flat, doing his best to make things spick and span for her” (72). Through this and subsequent acts of hospitality towards Marijana, Drago and Blanka, it seems he is hoping to find for himself a new home; by inviting in the Jokićs, to be included in their we, as it were. “It is an investment in his future. In the future of all of us,” he incongruously explains his offer to sponsor Drago to Marijana (76).

However, it seems as though, in his will to maintain the moment of reciprocity with Drago, Paul Rayment somehow loses sight of him. The deliberation and excessiveness of his acts of generosity seem to cancel out the hospitality they originated from and sought to prolong; with these grand gestures, he repels the Jokićs rather than to draw them closer.

Certainly, Drago’s reactions to Paul Rayment and his hospitality are not entirely consistent. When Drago unexpectedly arrives at Rayment’s doorstep, following an argument between his parents regarding the proposed school funding, we do not see the reciprocal welcoming of their previous encounter. There is a different kind of charged atmosphere between the two, a mutual directedness, as they both in turn “doggedly” approach each other; this doggedness the opposite of letting go, it would seem (132, 134). And when Paul Rayment offers Drago to “sleep here if you like,” the boy withdraws, choosing to spend the night in Victoria Square instead (134).

On his next visit, Drago appears in the company of Elizabeth Costello, who draws him in to a strange game of commenting on Paul Rayment’s existential dilemma vis à vis Marijana. Drago has his attention directed towards Elizabeth Costello, responding here with a lingering “crooked smile,” there with “a strange, barking laugh of delight” (137, 140). The two of them behave, Paul Rayment protests, “as if [he] were not in the room” (139). When Paul Rayment eventually regains mastery of the situation—resumes his power as host—he does so by setting boundaries to his hospitality, including himself in the “we” of the Jokićs while excluding Elizabeth Costello as the stranger:

‘. . . What is going on between myself and Drago’s family is none of your business. You do not belong here. This is not your place, not your sphere. . . . None of us is able to feel for you. You are the one outsider among us. Your involvement, however well-meaning it may be, does not help us, merely confuses us. Can you understand that? Can I not
Neither Drago nor Elizabeth Costello comment on the obvious parallel to Paul Rayment’s own “well-meaning” involvement with the Jokićs, on his appropriation of their familial belonging. When, however, after the “uncomfortable silence” that follows, Drago prepares to leave, we can perhaps read this as the boy distancing himself from the inauthentic “us” Paul Rayment is claiming for them (141). However, the latter pushes further into the role of the godfather he wishes to emulate:

‘No,’ he says. ‘You may not go back to the park, if that is what you have in mind. I don’t approve. It is dangerous, your parents would be horrified if they knew. Let me give you a key. . . . You can come and go as you wish. Within reason.’ (141-2)

After staying one night, Drago disappears again with no explanations. And if Paul Rayment’s hospitality fails to draw Drago closer to him, it has a similarly adverse effect on Marijana, who stays away, not fulfilling her nurse’s contract and certainly not inviting him into her life. When she eventually reappears, it is to ask a favour on behalf of her daughter Blanka, who has been caught shoplifting. Again, Paul Rayment’s “will to give” is spurred; he makes a disproportionate gesture of generosity, appeasing the store owner by buying six hundred dollars’ worth of trinkets for Blanka—that Marijana refuses (171). While Rayment is perfectly aware of the inappropriateness of this gift, he seems to thrive in assuming the role of “friend of the family,” “in high spirits” afterwards on the phone with Marijana, “like old friends, old gossips” (171, 173). Marijana, however, “does not respond”; it seems that the closeness is mainly a product of his own mind (173).

Paul Rayment is soon provided with another opportunity to help the Jokićs, with Drago threatening his parents to move into Rayment’s store room. He asks Marijana to tell Drago that he is welcome to stay in his apartment for a few days.

“That is how it happens. In a flash, in a flesh. If there were any clouds, they have fled” (174). With Drago thus taking up residence in his flat, Paul Rayment’s hospitality towards the boy undergoes several stages. In what seems to be a significant instance of openness to Drago, he shows the boy his Fauchery photographs, in a strong emotional moment referring to them as “our historical record”:

And he throws his hand up in an odd, unintended gesture. Astonishingly, he is close to tears. Why? Because he dares to mention his own death to this boy, this forerunner of the generation that will take over his world and trample on it? Perhaps. But more likely it is
because of our. Our record, yours and mine. Because just possibly this image before them, . . . an image in whose making he, the little boy from Lourdes, had no part and in which Drago, son of Dubrovnik, has had no part either, may, like a mystical charm—I was here, I lived, I suffered—have the power of drawing them together. (177)

In a valuable discussion on the potential of a work of art to draw people together, Clarkson refers to this incident as a “poignantly positive one,” in its highlighting the possibility of a we, “a transcendent position of intersubjectivity, where the point of connection is all the more powerful because the distinctiveness of each party is insisted upon, rather than suppressed” (180). And certainly—a clear contrast to Paul Rayment’s inclusion of himself in the “us” of the Jokićs—there is a sense of authenticity to this “our,” joining man and boy together in their place and time of Australian history; a sense of homedness, it seems, to Paul Rayment.

Parenthetically, perhaps the emotional significance of the moment also has something to do with the role that the photographs seem to have played in Paul Rayment’s otherwise reportedly frivolous life up to the accident. In being “fixed [and] immutable”, the photographs seem able to anchor or “home” the change—resisting Paul Rayment in a way that human relationships have not been able to (64):

He gives [the photographs] a good home and sees to it, as far as he is able, as far as anyone is able, that they will have a good home after he is gone. Perhaps, in turn, some as yet unborn stranger will reach back and save a picture of him, of the extinct Rayment of the Rayment Bequest. (65)

By showing Drago his Fauchery collection, then, Paul Rayment is inviting him in to the one area where he has actually attempted to make a mark in time, to the home he has created for the photographs—and, in a sense, for himself, with them.

As time passes, however, the (possibly one-sided) feeling of belonging together of this moment is lost, and Paul Rayment is left disappointed with Drago’s response to his hospitality:

When he invited Drago to stay, there was, behind the invitation, nothing that he would deem—he picks up the disapproving word of the day, weighs it, tests it—inappropriate. His heart, as far as he can see into his heart, was and is pure, his motives innocent. He is fond of Drago with a measured, an appropriate fondness, as any man might be of an adopted son, or son-to-be.

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9 This point approaches that of David Attwell, when he argues that the Fauchery collection is Paul Rayment’s “attempt to re-embed himself” and to “achieve historicity,” but that, ultimately, his being “momentarily re-embedded [is achieved] not through his own manipulation of historical images but through his being re-circulated in and through a social network” (“Coetzee’s Postcolonial Diaspora” 17).
The cohabitation he envisioned for the pair of them was to be on the mildest scale: a few companionable evenings together, Drago hunched over his homework at the dining table, he in an armchair with a book, while they waited for the tempers in the casa Jokić to cool down.

But that is not how it turns out to be. Drago brings in friends; soon the flat has become as noisy and confused as a railway station. . . . None of the quiet growth in intimacy that he had looked forward to has come about. In fact, he feels that Drago is pushing him away. After the evening of the mushroom risotto they do not even eat together. (180)

As it seems, Paul Rayment’s hospitality towards Drago does not have the effect that he might have been hoping for. Rather than gaining a sense of togetherness with the boy, he is further unhomed and “unhosted”; his guest choosing the forms for their cohabitation. And the openness in Drago that he was hoping for is absent too:

‘It is not just the noise,’ he complains to Elizabeth Costello. ‘Drago is used to a large family, I don’t expect a monkish silence from him. No, what upsets me is the way he reacts when I dare to ask for a little consideration.’

‘How does he react?’

‘A shutter falls. He does not see me anymore . . .’ (181)

And with Marijana, the case is much the same:

He had been hoping to receive from Marijana a little more of what he pays her to provide . . . but evidently that will not be forthcoming. Twice a month, like clockwork, a little mechanism at the bank switches money from the Rayment account to the Jokić account. In return for his money, in return for the home from home that he provides for Drago, he receives—what? (189)

Although he is dissatisfied with the lack of reciprocity, this is a time when his apartment is actually populated with young members of the Jokić family; Drago and his friends coming and going, Marijana occasionally even dropping off her youngest child Ljuba—who ignores him. While the distancing and unpredictable behaviour on the part of the Jokićs makes it difficult for him to maintain his capacity as host, it seems, however, that he is coming to accept this lack of control—the fact that his hospitality will not make him at home with this family; the impossibility of gaining a closer “we” than this: “They come, they go, they do not explain themselves: he had better get used to it” (205).

In fact, when Drago leaves—and this is perhaps the result of Elizabeth Costello’s efforts to make him more self-aware (to which I will return further on)—Paul Rayment is satisfied to have regained his apartment, rather than disappointed to have been left alone:
Yet what a relief to be by himself again! One thing to live with a woman; quite another to share one’s home with an untidy and imperfectly considerate young man. Always tension, always unease when two males occupy the same territory. (205)

No sooner has he landed in this self-sufficient sentiment, however, than the need for other people surfaces, with a fall—again. Unlike the fated incident on Magill Road, however, this second fall, caused by a slip with his Zimmer frame in the shower, renders him not sliding, but a helpless immobile heap on the tiled floor, imprisoned beneath the device that is supposed to help him move. There is another important difference as well: Where in the hospital he had no names to fill in the family form; both Drago and Elizabeth Costello now spring to mind. When, eventually, he phones Marijana for assistance, she helps him as required but, as before, is essentially unresponsive to his heartfelt appeal to her:

‘. . . I believe I understand you. I have an accident and am shaken to the core. My spirits rise, my spirits fall, they are no longer under my control. As a result I become attached to the first woman to cross my path, the first sympathetic woman. I fall, excuse the word, in love with her; I fall in love with her children too, in a different way. I, who have been childless, suddenly want children of my own. Hence the present friction between us, between you and me. And it can all be traced back to my brush with death on Magill Road. Magill Road shook me up so much that even today I let my feelings pour out without reckoning the consequences. Is that not what you are telling me?’

‘Well, you are wrong, Marijana. It is not like that at all. I am not in a confused state. I may be labile, but being labile is not an aberration. We should all be more labile, all of us. That is my new, revised opinion. We should shake ourselves up more often. We should also brace ourselves and take a look in the mirror, even if we dislike what we will see there. I am not referring to the ravages of time. I am referring to the creature trapped behind the glass whose stare we are normally so careful to avoid. Behold this being who eats with me spends nights with me, says “I” on my behalf! If you find me labile, Marijana it is not just because I suffered a knock. It is because every now and then the stranger who says “I” breaks through the glass and speaks in me. Through me. Speaks tonight. Speaks now. Speaks love.’ (209-10)

It seems that Paul Rayment, although overwhelmed by the force of his emotions, has arrived at a different position than at the outset of the novel, embracing his lability; more at home with himself, willing to “take a look in the mirror”. However, although he imagines Marijana’s “blood [moving] in her, responding!,” she is unmoved, and leaves after administering the necessary care (211). When Drago returns by
coincidence, it is he who offers compassionate care, again engendering Rayment’s uncontrolled emotions: “everyone has abandoned me, even the son I never had; then you came, you!” (215). In response to his gratitude, Drago says a mere “[t]hat’s OK,” which, to Paul Rayment’s mind, ought to be: “That’s OK, you would do the same for me” (215). But, unlike Rayment, Drago does not seem to think in such reciprocal terms.

However, if Paul Rayment in this moment “would move heaven and earth, spend every penny he had, to save him”; his openness changes when he, led as usual by Elizabeth Costello, discovers that Drago and his friend have retouched one of his Fauchery photographs, the original no longer in place (216). Possibly, the fact that “they did it using some kind of digital technique,” which the change-resisting Paul Rayment himself has not thought to catch up with, aggravates the feeling of intrusion, of being further “overtaken by time” in his own home (218). This perceived abuse of his hospitality, along with Elizabeth Costello’s remark that there is “no affection” behind the prank, causes tears to come to his eyes and, significantly, causes him to distance himself from Drago; the latter’s difference suddenly a matter of disparagement; the welcome child an unwelcome stranger: “‘Is that who they are then?’ he whispers. ‘Gypsies? What else of mine have they stolen, these Croatian gypsies?’” (220).

Incidentally, the notion that Drago, by light-heartedly inserting his grandfather into the picture of Australian forerunners, is actually confirming the “our historical record” of their earlier moment of “we-ness” with the photographs, does not enter Paul Rayment’s mind.

Paul Rayment’s hospitality oscillating back and forth, based, it seems, more on his need for others than on their conduct towards him; in the end, he seems, despite the missing Fauchery, to value the remains of his relationship with the Jokić family, “the tenuous status he still holds among them” (223). And so he composes the below letter to Miroslav, where, although mentioning the missing photograph, he makes clear that he has not “turned [his] back on Drago, far from it” (225). Interestingly, his main request, however, is that his hospitality—previously allegedly with “no strings attached”—might be reciprocated with access to the Jokić home (151):

*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?*
It is no easy matter for me, in my present reduced state, to come visiting. Nevertheless, will you in principle open your home to me? I want nothing in return, nothing tangible, beyond perhaps a key to the back door. I certainly harbour no plan to take your wife and children away from you. I ask merely to hover, to open my breast, at times when you are elsewhere occupied, and pour out my heart’s blessings upon your family. (224)

The letter never sent, however, he opts instead to make a visit in person to the Jokićs, on the advice and in the company of Elizabeth Costello. Arriving unannounced, they enter uninvited and unwelcomed; Marijana greets them “without preliminaries. ‘What you want?’” (243). Paul Rayment’s rational side seems to be in control; arriving in the actuality of the home he has figuratively sought after for months, he seems unsentimental in his reflections, as if he is in a new mental place, no longer believing in the possibility of a we with the Jokićs; the distance between them so apparent:

There is a long silence. Marijana is wearing blue sandals. Blue sandals and purple toenails: he may be an ex-portrait photographer and Marijana may be an ex-picture restorer, but their aesthetics are worlds apart. Very likely other things about them are worlds apart too. Their attitudes towards mine and thine, for instance. A woman he had dreamed of prising away from her husband. I want to look after you. I want to extend a protective wing over you. What would it be like in reality, looking after her and her two hostile daughters and her treacherous son? How long would he last, he and his protective wing? On the other hand . . . On the other hand, how proud her breasts, how comely! (244)

Yet throughout the exchange, where on the surface he comes across as rational and calm, an internal “letting go,” such as the above “on the other hand . . . .” keeps interrupting. When in Drago’s bedroom, Marijana, finally completely directed towards him, shows for the first time “that the makeshift English she employs is not enough for her,” his reaction is the unreasonable: “If only he could speak Croatian! In Croatian, perhaps, he would be able to sing from the heart” (250). And when she definitively rejects the “no-good idea” of the godfather, his one last attempt to appeal to her is devoid of the previous confidence and buoyancy of giving (251):

He cannot laugh. His throat is dry. ‘I could live in your back yard,’ he whispers. ‘I could have a shed put up. I could live in a shed in your back yard and watch over you. Over all of you.’ (251)

In the irrationality of this final plea, the rawness and vulnerability of Paul Rayment’s unhomedness is in plain view; the pretenses of hospitality no longer shading the need to belong that, after all, has been at the root of his actions all along.
Returning to Drago, if Paul Rayment’s initial encounter with the boy was one of openness to the unexpected or, perhaps more accurately, unexpected openness; the scene towards the end of the novel, where it is revealed that Drago has secretly been building him a recumbent bicycle as a token of gratitude, is an equally strong moment; and, what is more, one where openness and a sense of homedness seem to coincide. At first, his mind wanders almost cynically, wondering whether Blanka too has “been busy as a bee, working on a gift”; calling the gift “magnificent” but internally adding “[m]unificent too” (254). Yet the blush that creeps over his face stays there, and, after a while, we finally reach the point where the words that he thinks match what he actually says:

‘Thank you. In all sincerity, all heartfelt sincerity, thank you, each one of you. Thank you most of all to the absent Drago.’ Whom I have misjudged and wronged, he would like to say. ‘Whom I have misjudged and wronged,’ he says. (257)

In this strong moment, then, he seems to find a temporary home in language. And, in a sense, it is his hospitality towards Drago and his family that, although not providing him with a shed in their backyard, has brought him to this point.

If the actions and reactions of the Jokić family affect Paul Rayment’s extension and withdrawal of hospitality as well as his feelings of (un)homedness; the perhaps central influence on him in both respects—after the accident itself, that is—is Elizabeth Costello. But her unexpected and otherworldly arrival is also in its own right a striking instance of complete otherness to reader and Paul Rayment alike. Significantly, just before her entry on the scene, Paul Rayment is writing a letter to Marijana, trying to recall his condition when he first met her:

When I first met you, he writes, beginning a new paragraph, I was in a shattered state. Which is not true. His knee might have been shattered, and his prospects, but not his state. If he knew the word to describe his state as it was when he met Marijana, he would know his meaning too, as it is today. He deletes shattered. But what to put in its place? (79)

What he actually did call his feeling at the time was “unstrung” (27). So this, a figure of waiting or preparedness—hospitality—may be “his meaning” when he first hears Elizabeth Costello’s voice on the entry phone. And certainly, he is remarkably hospitable to the event of her arrival, inviting in this stranger whom he knows nothing about, offering her a seat and a glass of water.

However, although Paul Rayment goes along with the event of Elizabeth Costello’s arrival and passively continues to allow her to direct the action, he is not
unconditionally hospitable to her actual being. “Who is this madwoman I have let into my home? How am I going to rid myself of her?” he soon thinks, and, a while later: “Idiot woman! He ought to throw her out” (81, 83). Interestingly, however, he doesn’t act on these inner reservations, but, instead, asks only a minimum of questions and offers her to have a cup of tea and lie down.

Elizabeth Costello, however, it soon transpires, meets all the qualities of an “unwelcome guest,” as she herself puts it (84). Clearly, she disturbs Paul Rayment, both through the inexplicability and otherness of her behaviour, and through her obtrusive manner and blatant violation of common laws of hospitality; making “inappropriate, unseemly” remarks and, not least, refusing to leave (80):

‘No, no, no,’ she says, ‘it’s not like that, I’m afraid. I’ll be with you a while yet.’
‘I think not.’
‘Oh yes, Mr Rayment, I’m afraid so. For the foreseeable future I am to accompany you.’ (84)

With Paul Rayment’s realisation that he has lost his mastery over his home and with it his power to host, there is a drop in his hospitality to Elizabeth Costello; she is left to search for painkillers in the bathroom cabinet on her own and he cannot conceal his irritation. Yet, the strangeness of her comportment and her inadequate explanations—“I’m sorry. I am intruding, I know. You came to me, that is all I can say”—seem to bring him back to his initial state of passive responsiveness, as he listens to her curiously informed version of his situation vis à vis the Jokićs (85). He offers her dinner and tries again to impose a limit to her stay: “If you want to stay the night, you are welcome, but that must be the end of it, it the morning you will have to leave” (87). But he is simply not in control; “I will be with you a while yet,” she says (87).

Of course, he cannot but be affected by her presence. For if Paul Rayment is waiting for something in his self to be brought into being—in his case, it would seem, that which his unhomedness, the missing child not least, has left missing—so, clearly, is Elizabeth Costello. As Marais puts it, “. . . inspiration is in this novel depicted as a form of unconditional hospitality. That which inspires cannot be invited” (Marais 201). And so Elizabeth Costello waits; sometimes passively, more often trying unsuccessfully to push the action forward. And simultaneously, Paul Rayment tries with increasing frustration to decipher what it is that she is trying to achieve with him; bearing some faith, it seems, that she will bring out something in him that he himself cannot.
Perhaps the most remarkable instance of Paul Rayment’s hospitality to the unexpected that Elizabeth Costello brings to him, is when he goes along with the otherness of meeting with the mysterious Marianna: “Why not see what you can achieve together, you and Marianna, she blind, you halt?” (97). Although Paul Rayment was attracted to Marianna during a brief earlier encounter and in subsequent day-dreams—a circumstance to which the omniscient Elizabeth Costello is of course privy—the fact that he allows her to orchestrate an erotic meeting with this stranger, even consenting to be blindfolded, stands out as a striking surrender of control. During Elizabeth Costello’s surreal monologue, as if out of a fairy tale—“whatever you and she get up to, you get up to it in the dark. . . . Think of your bed as a cave. A storm is raging, a maiden huntress enters seeking shelter”; Marianna’s mother referred to as a “crone”—he feels “drugged and bemused,” yet nods to accept her proposition according to which he has only to “wait and prepare [himself]” (98). But this letting go seems both inevitable and painful:

It is like a sea beating against his skull. Indeed, for all he knows he could already be lost overboard, tugged to and fro by the currents of the deep. The slap of water that will in time strip his bones of the last sliver of flesh. Pearls of his eyes; coral of his bones. (100)

The actual episode with Marianna comes across as just as unreal and dreamlike as its prologue. Elizabeth Costello administers a blindfold of lemon leaves covered in a paste of flour and water to Paul Rayment’s eyes (lemon leaves, anecdotally, are supposedly used in herb magic to remove old conditions and open the way to draw a new lover) and then slips away, leaving him to the sounds of the door closing and opening again. Marianna, the unknowable arrived one, does not address him. “‘I am here,’ he says into the dark. Despite his unbelief, his heart seems to be hammering” (102). A moment later, he adopts a more casual attitude, “What the hell, he thinks: he turns towards the hand and kisses it. Let us play this to the end,” rationally examining each turn of the subsequent exchange in the dark with Marianna, trying to reduce her strangeness by placing her into his frame of reference: “The accent not Australian, not English either. Croatian? Another Croatian?” (103).

Whether due to the lack of a visible face or to his rational deliberations, this extended moment—despite its fundamental strangeness—is ultimately one of commonplace awkwardness and fumbling, with none of the exhilarating intensity of the face-to-face attention Paul Rayment shared with Drago. Yet, if he, in a somewhat cavalier tone, asserts that there is no need for the two of them “to adhere to any script.
No need to do anything we do not wish. We are free agents”; there is still the feeling that he is waiting for something to emerge out of the encounter (105). And perhaps he would have hoped for the incident to truly be the “crossing of a threshold” that he believes Elizabeth Costello has in mind for him (112):

> God knows what Elizabeth Costello really wants, for him or for herself or for this Marianna; God knows to what theory of life or love she really holds; God knows what will happen next. (112)

Shaken by the Marianna incident and failing—despite or perhaps because of his ponderings—to grasp what Elizabeth Costello is waiting for, he implores her repeatedly to release him from her grip on him:

> ‘What I don’t understand,’ he goes on—he was not angry when he began this tirade, he is not angry now, but there is certainly a pleasure in letting himself go—‘what I don’t understand is, seeing that I am so dull, so unresponsive to your schemes, why you persist with me. Drop me, I beseech you, let me get on with my life.’ (117)

> ‘Why waste your time on someone who exasperates you with his obtuseness and keeps letting you down? Give me up as a bad job. Visit yourself on some other candidate.’ (199)

As with the Jokićs, but now for different reasons, his hospitality towards Elizabeth Costello oscillates back and forth. On the one hand, it seems that his generally unstrung condition makes him susceptible and open towards the unexpected that he suspects she might deliver. On the other hand, his rational side keeps intervening, frustrated with the loss of control and not being able to make sense of this guest who has turned him into a hostage:

> Damn her! All the time he thought he was his own master he has been in a cage like a rat, darting this way and that, yammering to himself, with the infernal woman standing over him, observing, listening, taking notes, recording his progress. (122)

At these times he is not even ostensibly hospitable in the conventional sense, in fact, he asks her to leave: “I am not under your control, not in any sense of the word, and I am going to prove it. I request you to kindly return my key—a key you took without my permission—and leave my flat and not come back” (129). Although she does temporarily leave, it is not in his power to keep her away. With Paul Rayment thus evading her when she is trying too hard to “welcome” him, Elizabeth Costello is frustrated:

> As I try to impress on you, our days are numbered, mine and yours, yet here I am, killing time, being killed by time, waiting—waiting for you.
He shakes his head helplessly ‘I don’t know what you want,’ he says.

‘Push!’ she says. (203)

And a while later: “Come on. Do something. Do anything. Surprise me” (229). But just as Elizabeth Costello must patiently wait for Paul Rayment’s every next step in order to receive her writerly inspiration, so Paul Rayment too seems to need to wait for the other in order to fully come into being; be it Elizabeth Costello, Drago or even Wayne Blight, the agent of the accident that sets it all in motion. In other words, when Elizabeth Costello tries to make Paul Rayment approach his singularity, taking down the drapes from his mirrors and urging him to “make a stronger case for [himself],” to “push” and to sing “from the heart,” this is not something that he can accomplish on his own (82, 231). For, as she tells him by the riverside, it is necessary to look carefully at the other, to bring not only the other, but yourself into being: “Bring these humble ducks to life and they will bring you to life, I promise” (159). And, just as with Drago, Paul Rayment’s openness towards Elizabeth Costello does seem to coincide with some form of directedness towards her; it is when he looks at her properly, that his hospitality is brought on.

So, while they are both frustrated with the sequences of limbo, it appears that Elizabeth Costello very well could be this other, with her intent waiting and directedness slowly bringing out a change in Paul Rayment, occasionally liberating him from his self-imprisonment and enabling him to “make a stronger case for himself”. For, following her arrival, we do, if only in short moments, see him “looking in the mirror” and “singing from the heart”. The perhaps most telling example is his (previously quoted) outburst to Marijana:

I may be labile, but being labile is not an aberration. We should all be more labile, all of us. That is my new, revised opinion. We should shake ourselves up more often. We should also brace ourselves and take a look in the mirror, even if we dislike what we will see there. I am not referring to the ravages of time. I am referring to the creature trapped behind the glass whose stare we are normally so careful to avoid. Behold this being who eats with me spends nights with me, says “I” on my behalf! If you find me labile, Marijana it is not just because I suffered a knock. It is because every now and then the stranger who says “I” breaks through the glass and speaks in me. Through me. Speaks tonight. Speaks now. Speaks love.’ (210)

So, then, if Paul Rayment’s hospitality towards the unexpected is encouraged by Elizabeth Costello and seems in turn to lead to his increasing responsiveness to her, how does the notion of unhomedness, which we started with, fit into this picture? It
It seems to me that, although Paul Rayment resists it, Elizabeth Costello is offering herself as the only available “we” to him. And indeed, he seems to—despite himself—occasionally feel at home with her, as in the scene when his flat is populated with Drago, Shaun and Ljuba, and the “two seniors” find themselves alone with each other (190):

> It is the first exchange that he and the Costello woman have had that he would call cordial, even amiable. For once they are on the same side: two old folk ganging up on youth (191).

And crucially, although Elizabeth Costello and her orchestrations are strange to him, the sameness between them in their ageing and ailing conditions stands out from the outset. To his annoyance, she compares her “[b]ad heart” to his “bad leg,” yet he himself similarly reflects on “[t]he halt leading the halt” as he leads her to the bed in the study to rest; her “grey-faced” and later “white about the gills” countenance seeming to reflect “the livid hue” of his hand in hers (80-84). As Elizabeth Costello says incisively at one point: “We don’t have much time left, either of us” (203) 10.

Not only that: Elizabeth Costello, too, is unhomed. Where Paul Rayment’s unhomedness is quite explicit—the truncated body, the distance to language, the lack of a family to anchor him in time—the case of Elizabeth Costello is more intricate: “When I am with you I am home, when I am not with you I am homeless” (159) 11.

This, of course, is not about being cast out to live in the streets, although she makes a comically melodramatic point out of it:

> Do you think I find this existence any less hard than you? Do you think I want to sleep outdoors under a bush in the park, among the winos, and do my ablutions in the River Torrens? You are not blind. You can see how I am declining. (203)

No, if she is unhomed, it is not mainly in the literal sense. Admittedly, she does appear to lead a lonely life, twice divorced and estranged from her children; but, more importantly, she is speaking from the point of view of the writer writing him. She is unsettled when she cannot access the alterity in him that inspires—is necessary for, but is also brought into being by—her writing.

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10 As Pellow puts it, “Coetzee uses both of his main characters, Rayment and Costello, to demonstrate the constant threat of loneliness, particularly to people who perceive themselves as becoming ‘aged’” (529).

11 Donald Powers offers an interesting perspective when he suggests that “[f]or Costello, identifying through writing with a character who is a multiple emigrant and foreigner is to be at home.” Powers relates “the respective attitudes of Rayment the emigrant and Costello the writer towards language and modes of belonging” to the multiple emigrant status of Coetzee himself.” To rephrase this in the context of this essay, it is Costello’s own unhomedness as a writer that invites her hospitality—and by the same token Coetzee’s—to the unhomed character Rayment (20-1).
For me alone Paul Rayment was born and I for him. His is the power of leading, mine of following; his of acting, mine of writing. (233)

And—although this is not reasonably something that Paul Rayment can apprehend, he appears, after all, to be written by her—in a manner, perhaps they both have art—in her case writing, in his case the photograph collection—as a response to their unhomedness; a way to make a mark and find a home in time. So when Elizabeth Costello says “[y]ou are my rock,” perhaps we can infer that her hospitality to him is ultimately about finding a home for herself (199).

Not only, however, is Elizabeth Costello unhomed in her waiting, but, just as Paul Rayment did after the accident, Elizabeth Costello refers to herself as “unstrung”.12

I can’t begin to tell you how tired I am. And not with the kind of tiredness that can be fixed by a good night’s sleep in a proper bed. The tiredness I refer to has become part of my being. It is like a dye that has begun to seep into everything I do, everything I say. I feel, to use Homer’s word, unstrung. . . . And not just the bodily self. The mind too: slack, ready for easeful sleep. (160)

Although she, like Paul Rayment, refers to it in a somewhat defeatist way, this seems to be the very condition which renders them both susceptible to varying degrees of openness to the other that they both long for.

Yet, unhomed and unstrung though they may both be in their different ways, and their mutual need to be brought into being notwithstanding, Paul Rayment can, in the end, not find it in himself to actually live with her, as she proposes. Not at home with her, perhaps, he has—nevertheless—come to a point where he is no longer untouched by her being:

Nevertheless.

Nevertheless, ever so gently, he lifts her and slips a cushion in under her head.

. . .

If the object of his care were a child—Ljuba, for instance, or even handsome, heart-breaking, treacherous Drago—he might call the act tender. But in the case of this woman it is not tender. It is merely what one old person might do for another old person who is not well. Humane. (236-7)

12 Julian Murphet, in the context of a discussion of Coetzee’s “late style”, reads “unstrung” as “the exile from one’s body”, arguing that Coetzee’s recent work is informed by an “enactment . . . of exile,” the trilogy of Elizabeth Costello, Slow Man and Diary of a Bad Year forming “a literature touched by death” (86). Where Murphet sees the protagonists of these novels as “persons taking regretful leave of their bodies,” I would add that, in Slow Man, this very condition of leave-taking is key to understanding Costello’s and Rayment’s attempts toward hospitality toward the other.
He subsequently reflects on the futility of expecting him, in his unhomedness, to provide a figurative home for Elizabeth Costello: “How can he be [her] missing piece when all his life he has been missing himself? Man overboard! Lost in a choppy sea off a strange coast” (237). And, when all is said and done, there is very little to say that Paul Rayment will not continue to be “missing” in the future as well. In the very final scene, however, inconclusive though it may seem; isn’t there a slight glimpse of being at home, as “he leans forward and kisses her thrice in the formal manner he was taught as a child, left right left” (263)?

Hospitality in *Slow Man* – Final Reflections

As this reading has sought to suggest, hospitality in *Slow Man* is a multi-faceted affair, where it seems to be the very unhomedness of the central characters Paul Rayment and Elizabeth Costello that brings out their hospitality, both to the unexpected and to other people. It is as though, balancing on the edge of their being, “unstrung” and “being wasted by time,” these characters simultaneously have little left to lose—hence, the “reckless, heedless falling,” the hospitality to the unexpected, albeit in limited moments—and everything to gain—the possibility, late in life, of a home, a we.

And this condition of being “unstrung,” of “letting go,” seems to be at times exhilarating, filling Paul Rayment—or, for that matter Elizabeth Costello with her many inspired outpourings—with energy; but at times more a ghastly sense of loss of control.

As for the characters who are less unhomed, notably Marijana and Miroslav, they come across as more pragmatic, less prone to throw themselves into the unknown. Their hospitality is not about letting go, nor about being fully responsive to the other person: it is about being humane while doing the required—sometimes slightly more or slightly less—to meet prescribed rules of politely welcoming the guest at the door or extending thanks where thanks are due. Not founded in an urgent need for other people, their hospitality seems not as volatile as that of Paul Rayment.

Crucially, age seems to be a non-trivial aspect of hospitality as responsiveness to the other in *Slow Man*. As mentioned, the “two seniors” Elizabeth Costello and Paul Rayment are both, more or less successfully, attempting to welcome the unexpected. But if the middle-aged Marijana—far from both birth and death—is more
down-to-earth than she is responsive, this does not seem to apply to Drago or Ljuba, the latter gazing at Paul Rayment with eyes of “angelic clarity,” “searching black eyes,” eyes that “bore into him” (76, 125). As for Drago, he too is referred to as “angelic,” as having ”remained in touch with his other-worldly origins longer than most children” (182).

Drago and Ljuba thus simultaneously “[a]t home in the world” and retaining some form of original hospitality to the other, their attentiveness seems to cause Paul Rayment to look at himself more closely (87). Indeed, on several particularly critical occasions—the scene where Rayment receives a massage from Marijana, the fall with the Zimmer frame, the final sit-down with Marijana in the Jokić living-room—he conceives of the children as witnesses to his weakness; sometimes disturbed by Ljuba’s presence, sometimes thankful for her or Drago’s absence, as though the event were not real if not seen through their eyes (187, 207, 247). Interestingly, Elizabeth Costello too is evoked in his mind on several of these occasions; she too a witness who seems to have the power to—in being responsive to him—momentarily bring him more fully into being.

In my reading, Paul Rayment’s perceived need for a child, awakened by the accident, is understood as a central aspect of his unhomedness. The opposite of being frivolous, which he so regrets, his longing for “a younger, stronger, better version of himself” can be seen as the longing for an original responsiveness or openness to change, that he, approaching old age, needs to relearn (45). And perhaps we might infer that the child’s effortless “angelic” openness when embarking on life can serve to inspire the ageing person’s attempted openness to the unexpected as life draws to an end13.

Another important notion that transpires from this reading is the inescapable failure of those acts of hospitality that are deliberately conceived in order to gain something. The willed hospitality that Paul Rayment attempts towards the Jokić family, seems to inevitably fall short of drawing him closer to them. And this is also true for Elizabeth Costello; it is certainly not her advice to “push” that produces an openness to change in Paul Rayment. The same applies to the rational deliberations

13 Derek Attridge makes a very similar observation in his reading of The Master of Petersburg: “The young . . . are not subject to the corrosive and inhibitory self-consciousness of their elders. Their spontaneity is a very different thing from the effortfully achieved openness to the event that we see in Dostoevsky. . . . the path to the arrivant in the novel lies through the younger generation . . .” (Attridge, J.M. Coetzee 131-2)
Paul Rayment occupies himself with; when he is thinking too hard, this seems to interrupt his hospitality. Deliberation as de-liberation in multiple senses, thus, it would seem. And this is also a point that Marais emphasizes: if Paul Rayment has changed, it is “despite himself,” suggesting that, in Slow Man, “the notion of the self as a prison is directly related to Rayment’s rationality” (Marais 197).

It follows that being “homed” in a we of some sort, which seems to be the object of Paul Rayment’s hospitality, is not something that can successfully be deliberately pursued, but rather something that should be gratefully received in moments of unconditional openness. Only then can it be authentic enough to hold. For this reason, the notion of “our historical record” that Paul Rayment, apparently to his own surprise, experiences so strongly in the moment with Drago and the photographs, feels authentic. And while Paul Rayment does not opt for a future with Elizabeth Costello, there is something in their shared predicament of waiting that makes a potential “we” credible there too. The “we” of Paul Rayment and the Jokićs, so persistently pursued, on the other hand, does not qualify. As Marijana puts it: “Is not realistic—you see?” (251). We might say, then, essentially, that in Slow Man, “homedness” is not found in extending hospitality to the stranger as other, but, instead, in receiving the sameness that might be found in the stranger.

And language—the use of and relation to which is so visible in Slow Man—seems to reflect rather than produce the feeling of being (un)homed. The distance between self and language, in other words, seems to have little to do with fluency.

How, then, does this reading resonate with the theories of hospitality sketched at the outset of the essay? For sure, with the idea we have pursued here of hospitality as a response to unhomedness, Derrida’s notion of there being “no house or interior without a door or windows” rings very true (Hospitality 61). With regards to Derrida’s aporia, with the conflict between the respective laws of unconditional and conditional hospitality, it seems to me that Slow Man certainly entangles the reader (as well as the characters themselves) in the complexities herein. In his own home, Paul Rayment alternates between experiences of being host, “hostage” and guest, depending both on his own sense of control over his self as well as his home—and on the conduct and attentiveness of his visitors.

And certainly, the difficulties of hospitality without reciprocity or limits are made quite clear, as is the simultaneously enabling and disabling use of language, not to mention the drive to seek out sameness in the other. For although there are multiple
instances of openness to “who or what turns up,” they seem to always be overturned by rational deliberations, attempting to convert the unexpected into the known (Derrida, *Hospitality* 77).

Bringing the other into the realm of the familiar, leads us back to Attridge and his understanding of hospitality as “responding to the other person through openness to change,” which, to my mind, is central to the reading of *Slow Man* (*Singularity* 34). For not only is Paul Rayment repeatedly overwhelmed into accepting the unexpected; towards the end of the novel, he seems, to some extent, to have internalised the notion that “[w]e should all be more labile, all of us” (210). Just as Attridge describes Dostoyevsky’s waiting for the *arrivant* in *Master of Petersburg*—ultimately resulting in the onset of his writerly inspiration—so it seems to me that Paul Rayment, in his interactions with Drago, Marianna and Elizabeth Costello especially, is waiting for and responsive to something that he cannot foresee.

So, in the end, where does all this bring Paul Rayment—and the reader? While my ambition has been to attempt the responsiveness that Attridge suggests that certain literary works demand of the reader, I must concede that there is a strong sense of irreducibility to Coetzee’s novel, as Marais very validly makes the point:

> In requiring him or her to make of the same a home for the other, to be infinitely responsible despite being a finite being, it will drive him or her mad. It will do so by ensuring that s/he is always unequal to his or her infinite responsibility, and so never able to love well enough, always necessarily guilty of betrayal, of irresponsibility. (Marais 219)

Indeed, the reader leaves *Slow Man*, if not unstrung then with a genuine experience of the frustration that inhabits some of its characters, as they strive to be hospitable to the other. For with the inconclusiveness of this inscrutable novel, the workings of hospitality can neither be fully grasped nor exhausted by any reader.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that there is a sense of progression in *Slow Man*, as Paul Rayment moves from a sense of imprisonment in his unhomedness and helplessness at being “unstrung”, to a certain liberation in his acceptance of and hospitality to being changed by other people. This is not about hospitality as in the exhilarated “letting go” that he experiences at times; but rather hospitality in the largeness of small moments. It is about allowing himself to be overcome by the generosity of the Jokićs, not wanting “[t]he blush [to leave] his face”; it is about finally taking “a good look” at Elizabeth Costello’s “every detail, every hair, every vein” (255, 263).
So, finally, if it is not a “younger, stronger” version of Paul Rayment that we leave in the final scene, then perhaps it is at least one that is a little bit “better”, a little less “frivolous” than his previous self. And with that, perhaps, just a little less unhomed.
Works Cited


