

“he, he, the he he calls sometimes you, sometimes I”

(Na)Pisane życie / 'n Geskryfde Lewe / A Life in Writing

John told him about it himself. Over the phone. George used to call him several times a year. There is something unreal about such an intercontinental conversation. All because of that split-second delay in the interlocutor's reaction. George's reaction was also naturally delayed. He simply could not believe what he was hearing.

“Really?” he asked to make sure.

“Yes.”

The affirmation sounded brief and decisive, like a gunshot from a Boer fort.

A strange feeling came over him. Was he excited? Or perhaps moved? Right away he began shooting questions at John, and then, without waiting for answers, he went on to comment on what he had just heard.

“That's wonderful! ... He must have read your books, John! ... I'm sure he's read them. ... Well, he definitely must have read *Leipoldt*. ... Maybe also *Leroux*. ... I wouldn't be surprised.” For a while he went on like this, interrupting his own train of thought.

After a moment he reassembled his thoughts. He had just been reading a passage from *Summertime*. That unapproachable writer, he thought, “an *alleenloper*, as some male animals are: loner” (Coetzee 2009: 133), had agreed to let John write his biography because, having read his books, he knows John Christoffel Kanne-meyer is not “some busybody, some academic newshound (...) going down the list, ticking off the names, hoping to get some dirt on him” (Coetzee 2009: 35). But there are always two sides to every story, and he remembered that in *Slow Man* Costello says, “Gossip, public opinion, *fama* [...] makes the world go round – gos-

This text is an adaptation of Jerzy Koch's contribution to the J.M. Coetzee discussion panel 'Literature and the World', which was organised by Malta Festival Poznań 2012. The other participants were Derek Attridge and David Attwell, and Przemysław Czapliński acted as moderator.

sip, not truth" (Coetzee 2005: 136). So, a fear might be lurking in J.M. Coetzee's mind: that just like Elizabeth Costello, *deus ex machina*, began to interfere in the life of Paul Rayment (Coetzee 2005: 123), that other man would now be incessantly interfering in John's life.

"But *how* did you write to him?!" George finally asked.

"In Afrikaans," answered John.

"Really? And he?"

"He wrote back in Afrikaans."

In *Summertime* the fictional character John Coetzee speaks a rusty, halting Afrikaans (Coetzee 2009: 93), but John had assured George that the novelist's Afrikaans was O.K. He recalled their discussion: Why did Coetzee need Afrikaans in his prose at all? Someone had written something about this, but George did not think the article had been insightful. When Nadine Gordimer uses Afrikaans words, he thought, there's a whiff of the nineteenth-century "Patriot" dictionary in the air, or at best a whiff of Pauline Smith's prose. A touch of local colour. Coetzee does it deliberately yet naturally. Or perhaps he senses that only an Afrikaner can get close enough to his life, his South African *Bildungsjahre*?

[**MOREOVER: Literature and the World: The Author and his Biographer.** Mr Biographer, as Julia addresses him ironically (Coetzee 2009: 52) in Coetzee's novel *Summertime*. Not a paper biographer named "Vincent" but a real one, John Kanemeyer, dubbed "Professor Kanonimeyer" because he had canonized many a writer in his literary history. (When the syllables Kan-ne-mey-er are pronounced very quickly, the name begins to sound like the Afrikaans "kan-je-my..." - "can-you-...-me.") Yet today, when *Summertime* has passed, and *'n Geskryfde Lewe - A Life in Writing* is on the way to the bookstores, both life-writers - the fictional and the non-fictional one - are dead. But does this make any difference to the reader? What if "dying turns out to be nothing but a trick that might as well be a trick with words, if death is a mere hiccup in time after which life goes on as before?" (Coetzee 2005: 122). But isn't the biographer by nature "the type to brood on what had passed between us, building it up into something bigger than it really was?" (Coetzee 2009: 38). How can *'n Geskryfde Lewe / A Life in Writing* be made to render all the colours of real life in the world? In her book *The Fiery Furnace*, Costello wrote: "What would it need to make the purple fade away and the red and blue and green emerge again, like chicks from a shell?" (Coetzee 2005: 119).]

After the intercontinental conversation came the intercontinental flight. John was waiting for George at Cape Town airport. George recognized the characteristic

contours of his head and figure from a distance. "He was a *Homo sapiens*, or even *Homo sapiens sapiens*" (Coetzee 2009: 58). John was glad to see him, though he only showed it with a smile in which English reserve merged with Afrikaner distance, and British culture was overlaid with Boer hospitality. George was triply glad – to be back in Africa, and to have one John here and the other there. He hugged John, who submitted his large body to this European show of affection and patted George on the back in return. In John's immediate vicinity there was the aroma of spruce needles. They headed for a nearby town in a little car which John drove with such nonchalance that it was difficult to tell pure luck from routine. They got off the highway, and before them was every type of scenery the Boland had to offer: vineyards, mountains, trees and cosy little rivers.¹ For seven days George did not awake from this dream vision: his task was to read the first chapters of John's book about John and then say what he thought.

[MOREOVER: Literature and the World: The Author and his Biographer. And the Reader. The two of them. Does the writer's life become complete in his biography? Is there any life after *life in a biography*? Is this already a meta-meta-narrative? Or maybe it is the finish line, the end? Which is what John Coetzee says – the one in *Summertime*. Into the lips of Eugène N. Marais (who after observing baboons for a long time attributes to them "the stirrings of melancholy, the birth of a first awareness of their own mortality" (Coetzee 2009: 97)), Coetzee puts the following words: "Never again, he was thinking: *Just one life and then never again.*" It is tempting at this point to paraphrase C.J. Langenhoven's² aphorism and say, "Cherish your biographer like the apple of your eye. It is no small thing that there exists someone who is willing to live your life without you."³ The protagonist of *Summertime* says emphatically, "but I am a difficult person to live with" (Coetzee 2009: 133). And somewhere at the back of one's mind is the thought that, just as Costello was able to write two stories simultaneously, the biographies of Paul Rayment and Marianna Popova (alias Natasha and Tanya) (Coetzee 2009: 115, 118), so J.M. Coetzee

¹ This is a paraphrase of a passage from the first chapter of Etienne Leroux's novel *Sewe dae by die Silbersteins* (1962; *Seven Days at the Silbersteins*, transl. by Ch. Eglington, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1964, reedition 1972); in the English translation this fragment reads: "In his (J.J.'s) immediate vicinity there was the aroma of pine needles. Henry drove the Riley with a guilelessness in which it was difficult to distinguish between luck and skill. The Western Province landscape of vineyards, mountains, trees and cosy little rivers all contributed to the décor." (Leroux 1972: 13).

² "Cherish your wife like the apple of your eye. It is no small thing that there is someone who has undertaken to bear out their life with you [Waardeer jou vrou soos die appel van jou oog. Dis nie 'n geringe saak dat daar iemand is wat onderneem het om haar hele lewe met jou te verslyt nie]." (Langenhoven 1973: 235).

³ Waardeer jou biograaf soos die appel van jou oog. Dis nie 'n geringe saak dat daar iemand bestaan wat onderneem het om jou lewe sonder jou opnuut te lewe nie.

life-writes not only with *Summertime* but also with Kannemeyer. But is he a demiurge? Or did he need his Kannemeyer as Paul needed his Marianna? In *Slow Man* „he, he, the he he calls sometimes you, sometimes I” (Coetzee 2005: 26). Just like in Max Frisch’s *Mein Name sei Gantenbein*,⁴ let’s suppose, or rather, *Let’s Assume my Name is Coetzee...*]

While John was writing about John, George flew back and forth several times a year. During each stay, he was entrusted, as a friend, with the task of reading consecutive chapters. He would wake up early. (There he always woke up early.) Even before the collared doves began their concert, before the terrible cries of the ibises rang out – cries that sounded even worse than their local name, *hadida*. He would light the lamp on the bedside table and, sipping Delheim Estate water, he would read page after page. As John Christoffel’s book grew, George grew up with John Maxwell. First the family, then the genealogy, then the village, the school, a sequence of homes, university life, etc. The automatic pencil is always sharp. If he particularly liked a passage, he would put an exclamation mark in the wide margin; when he had reservations or found something hard to follow, he wrote question marks; sometimes he wrote “verte” and on the clean reverse side noted down questions or comments, as if continuing that first intercontinental telephone conversation, though John was just next door.

[MOREOVER: Literature and the World meet in the writer’s biography in a particular way. Should the biography, like “a book [...] be an axe to chop open the frozen sea inside us?” (Coetzee 2009: 61). Or should it perhaps be “a gesture of refusal in the face of time. A bid for immortality?” (Coetzee 2009: 61). How could the life of the writer, J.M. Coetzee, which is by nature thoroughly literary, have remained unnarrated in a story of a story? But what is it that the biographer shapes with his narrative? Is this the right narrative? And to whom exactly does he give voice? J.M. Coetzee or John Coetzee? “‘Have you a better idea,’ John said – ‘a better idea for how to use one’s life than writing books?’” (Coetzee 2009: 63). That is what Kannemeyer might have asked, rhetorically.]

John the Biographer made it a habit to visit the places where his protagonists had lived. That is why, in his last years, he went on trips from A to V; first to Austin in America, then to Adelaide in Australia, and finally to Voëlfontein. What could George do? Standing in for the biographer after his death, he went to Czarnylas – Schwarzwald, the Black Forest – where one branch of Coetzee’s ancestors – the

⁴ The English translations of this novel by Max Frisch have two different titles: *A Wilderness of Mirrors* (transl. by Michael Bullock, London, Methuen, 1965) and *Gantenbein: A Novel* (transl. by Michael Bullock, San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

du Biels – had come from. He photographed churches, villages, the gloomy forest. In the cemetery he did not find the name Dubyl but there were many Dubielczyks: Bert, Emma, Susanna and Willy, with either Polish or German inscriptions on the gravestones. A pool of genes mixing with other genes (as often happens in borderlands), overflowing the earth, being diluted. Literature in the world, the word melting into reality.

[**MOREOVER: Literature and the World.** J.M. Coetzee did not want to read Kannemeyer's biography of him until it came out in print. This was part of the contract. And now? Will he read it? And if he does, what will J.M. Coetzee (the writer in the world) write about John Coetzee (the writer in literature)? Literature in the face of the world. Czarnylas, Donkerwoud, Schwarzwald in the face of the world. "The dark heart, *el oscuro corazón*" (Coetzee 2005: 157). Or, as Paul Rayment reads in Elizabeth Costello's last notes, "dark dark dark (...). They all go into the dark, the vacant interlunar spaces" (Coetzee 2005: 121). (Could this possibly be an echo of Conrad's hard-core version in *Heart of Darkness*, "The horror! The horror!") What if biography is, after all, like Venus de Milo: without hands, "their loss only makes her beauty more poignant"? (Coetzee 2005: 59).] Then life-literature-biography would relate in the manner of thesis-antithesis-prosthesis (Coetzee 2005:62).]

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