



## Late Coetzee Revisited

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper I reassess the discussion of Coetzee and late style by focusing on the criticism from around the time of *Elizabeth Costello* in order to observe if these treatments, and the concept of lateness developed by Adorno and Said, help us to understand the late, late Jesus trilogy. After reviewing the crisis in the novel exemplified by the *Dairy* I turn to an analysis of the Jesus novels and then finally assess the discussion of Coetzee in recent work in World Literature. The late, late works of Coetzee do not fit exactly within the existing critical discussion of late Coetzee; yet, they cannot be easily subsumed within an account of the post-historicist, global novel. These novels, while not Coetzee's best, must still be understood within the history of Coetzee's own development as a writer. Precisely, this attention to continuity helps reveal both strengths and weaknesses of late, late Coetzee.

### KEYWORDS

Coetzee; Late style, World Literature.

### 1. INTRODUCTION: LATE, LATE COETZEE?

The maturity of the late works of important artists is not like the ripeness of fruit. As a rule, these works are not well rounded, but wrinkled, even fissured. They are apt to lack sweetness, fending off with prickly tartness those interested in merely sampling them. They lack all that harmony which the classicist aesthetic is accustomed to demand from the work of art, showing more traces of history than of growth. (Adorno, 1998: 123)

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With the publication of *The Death of Jesus* (2019), the time has come to assess late Coetzee. Now that the Jesus trilogy is finished, Coetzee has offered six or seven works since he moved to Australia in 2002 and won the Nobel Prize in 2003.<sup>1</sup> For many, the Jesus trilogy is not among Coetzee's best work. One possibility is that by leaving behind South Africa, Coetzee lost the grounding needed to produce his most important work (see Attwell, 2021), even if that work, like *Waiting for the Barbarians*, was abstracted from that originating context into something minimal and more allegorical than historical in its critical power. This line of interpretation would fit with critics from Vittorio Coletti (*Romanzo mondo*) to Rebecca Walkowitz (*Born Translated*) who see (late) Coetzee as a major figure of *global* literature: a writer speaking from no particular place to no particular audience, a writer speaking to a world market, and in simplified English for rapid translation.

A perhaps simpler hypothesis is that Coetzee (b. 1940) has just lost some of his imaginative power with age—a diminished capacity reflected in less effective fictions. While this may be true to some extent, I think the focus should be placed on Coetzee's *belief* in fiction rather than on his ability to create fully convincing, imaginative worlds. This loss dates back to *Elizabeth Costello* (2003)<sup>2</sup>, and it can be seen most clearly in the *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007). Precisely, critics first began speaking in terms of *late* Coetzee in the wake of these works. In this essay I review the critical discussion of late Coetzee to see how insights developed there can help us understand the Jesus trilogy. Coetzee's most recent work, after the initial crisis and the move to Australia, seems curiously both simpler and yet more difficult to decipher than his famous, concise, and powerful earlier fiction.

## 2. LATE STYLE

Even though the issue of Coetzee and “late style” has already been well discussed (Wittenberg, 2010; Murphet, 2011a, 2011b; Tajiri, 2016), it might be useful to assess how this discussion so far can help us to account for the Jesus Trilogy. Given that Coetzee has, in an exchange with Paul Auster, explicitly disavowed the famous concept of late style as developed by Edward Said, we should be cautious in over-reading this dimension of his work:

I confess I don't remember much of what [Said] has to say [about late style], except that I found myself adhering stubbornly to the old-fashioned understanding of late style that he was engaged in attacking. In the case of literature, late style, to me, starts with an ideal of a simple, subdued, unornamented language and a concentration on questions of real import, even questions of life and death. (Coetzee & Auster, 2013: 97)

Unornamented language, seriousness and import, life and death, have always been to a certain extent characteristic of Coetzee's style. Yet, there is certainly something different in

Coetzee's later and latest works, which requires an analytic approach in the identification of his *late* style as such.

In "Beyond the Literary Theme Park: J. M. Coetzee's Late Style in *The Childhood of Jesus*," Yoshiki Tajiri boldly decides to read Coetzee according to Said's conception anyhow. Said (2006) defines "artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction."<sup>3</sup> As Tajiri notes, Said identifies in lateness (with respect to Conrad): "withdrawal from the world, self-quotation, and mannerism" (Tajiri, 2016: 80), as well as the episodic character of the work. Discussing the *Childhood of Jesus*, Tajiri himself identifies a number of qualities in late Coetzee that he thinks are rather consistent with Said's account, above all the broad "literary theme park" (74; citing Elizabeth Costello, 208) of topics (Kafka, utopia, Don Quixote, and so on) in a sort of postmodernism as pastiche –if postmodernism often involves relatively superficial pastiche, Coetzee seems to be engaging in it here half-heartedly: "postmodernism here looks rather out of date" (78).

Said, discussing Adorno on Beethoven, specifies in lateness "a moment when the artist who is fully in command of his medium nevertheless abandons communication with the established social order of which he is a part and achieves a contradictory, alienated relationship with it. His late works constitute a form of exile" (Said, 2006: Kindle format 255). This of course resonates interestingly with Coetzee's actual exile coinciding with the full development of his late style. Cutting links to his homeland and setting up in an unknown land in willed self-exile would then be attended by an *exilic* style. Again, with respect to Beethoven, Said writes: "the power of Beethoven's late style is negative, or rather is its negativity: where one would expect serenity and maturity, one instead finds bristling, difficult, and unyielding – perhaps even inhuman – challenge" (Said, 2006: Kindle format 327). These works "remain unreconciled, uncoopted by a higher synthesis; they do not fit any scheme, and they cannot be reconciled or resolved, since their irresolution and unsynthesized fragmentariness are constitutive, neither ornamental nor symbolic of something else" (Said, 2006: Kindle format 331). Tajiri does not agree that the *Childhood of Jesus* can be characterized in exactly this way –far from bristling and unyielding, he speaks of "its very simple style and relatively straightforward story line" (72)– yet, it is never particularly clear to the reader what Coetzee is up to (the nature of the allegory), or why.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, the book and the trilogy as a whole, can seem unreconciled to contemporary Anglophone fictional norms and irresolvable as well as strangely fragmentary, if not prickly.

Julian Murphet had already broached the topic of lateness in Coetzee before the publication of the Jesus books in "Coetzee and Late Style: Exile within the Form" (2011a). Alluding to Adorno's classic treatment of late Beethoven rather than to Said's discussion of that material and Adorno himself, Murphet discusses *Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man*, and the *Diary of a Bad Year* as "a literature of leave-taking, a trilogy of novels in flight from

homeland, from the body, and from the very comforts of novelistic form” (2011a: 86). Murphet sets the tone for his essay by quoting Adorno at length:

The force of subjectivity in late works is the irascible gesture with which it leaves them. It bursts them asunder, not in order to express itself but, expressionlessly, to cast off the illusion of art. Of the works it leaves only fragments behind, communicating itself, as if in ciphers, only through the spaces it has violently vacated. Touched by death, the masterly hand sets free the matter it previously formed. The fissures and rifts within it, bearing witness to the ego’s finite impotence before Being, are its last work. (Adorno, 1998: 125)

Obviously, if such a characterization applies to Coetzee, it is precisely to the Coetzee of *Elizabeth Costello* and the *Diary* (and *not* the Jesus novels or even *Slow Man*). Of these works Murphet notes “a progressive worrying away at the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, art and opinion, illusion and truth” which reflects “a steely authorial resolve not to charm via synthesis and integration” (88). A loss in a belief in fiction accompanies a loss in faith in realism itself, which is a key topic for Coetzee, as can be seen in the famous Realism “lesson” from *Elizabeth Costello* and its dialectic of “embodying” (9) and “embeddedness” (32). “Realism”, notes Murphet, “is a thoroughgoing spirit of immanence; and that, I am arguing, is what has been subtracted from Coetzee’s Australian trilogy, with a deliberateness that borders on perversity, but which might well contain serious lessons for us about the knowledge of contemporary literature” (2011a: 92). Ultimately, Murphet insists that this irascible Coetzee (as observed in the characters of Elizabeth Costello and JC) cannot transform and contain his opinions and beliefs into plausible fictional material and gives up even trying. “Divesting themselves of the appearance of art, Coetzee’s late works rouse themselves to the expression of a subjectivity that cannot be communicated through art alone” (98). Following Murphet, and before addressing the Jesus works from the perspective of Tajiri, it will be instructive to pay close attention to the crisis of sorts in the novel represented by Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year*, the most daring (and deconstructed) of the late works Murphet singles out in 2011.

### 3. “THE FORCE OF SUBJECTIVITY”: FICTION AND THE *DIARY*

“Is ‘the writer’ in any way different from the ‘mere’ citizen? Does writing impose special obligations, moral and political, and mark the writer out for a special fate?”<sup>5</sup>

These thoughts are voiced in the “Strong Opinions” of JC, the writer figure in *Diary of a Bad Year* that is substantially based on Coetzee himself. JC, like Coetzee, gained renown as a novelist late in his career –notably after immigrating to Australia in 2002– and lost his taste for creating rich fictional worlds. “Readers who come to my recent books looking for the

kind of pleasure that one can legitimately expect from the novel, and that one perhaps gets from a book like *Michael K*, find them thin and artificial, and who can blame them?" (ibid. draft: 56). This subsequently effaced statement would have appeared in the section of the second diary, or "Soft Opinions," titled "On the writing life" where, citing Gabriel García Márquez on writerly inspiration, JC laments his short-comings: no "flight[s] of the soul," no "pleasure in the visual world," and a "growing detachment from the world"; being this typical of some artists late in their careers (Diary 192-93). Finally, JC compares himself unfavorably to Tolstoy, who late in his career nonetheless continued to explore and teach "how to live" (193). JC had mentioned Tolstoy in an earlier Strong Opinion ("On authority in fiction") as "the exemplary writer". In that installment, JC had written "what the great authors are masters of is authority", authority "attained only by opening the poet-self to some higher force, by ceasing to be oneself and beginning to speak vertically" (2007, 151). This almost mystical quality is not simply inspiration, but a matter of wisdom which exceeds the artistic frames in which it is expressed. "Authority cannot be taught, cannot be learned" (151), and JC seems to admit his lack of it –thus his failure at being a great writer. If we read these statements as more or less autobiographical –as reflecting the turn after *Disgrace* (1999) to the Elizabeth Costello works, along with the curious autobiographical works themselves– we are faced with a sort of paradox: Coetzee moves away from robust fiction (if his minimal fiction was ever anything like "robust") to philosophizing, or at least articulating "Strong Opinions" (as well as experimenting with minimal, distanced autobiography) even as he claims to lack authority inside or outside fictional worlds. Notwithstanding his own assessments, the literary public had judged his fictional works to be quite successful (the two Bookers, the Nobel), but the late Coetzee has felt compelled to leave behind the fictional machinery and move towards this curious non-authoritative, quasi-fictional writing.

Apparently, being a writer does indeed impose these special moral and political obligations, and the late Coetzee has felt the need to engage in moral and political thinking more directly than he had done fictionally in works like *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*. and *Disgrace*. In *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) he is visibly uncomfortable with this decision. In fact, the Strong Opinions penned by JC are hedged by two accompanying parallel texts, one by JC himself in his daily register (perhaps not how famous writers express their opinions), and one by Anya, the Australian-Filipina young woman he eventually takes on as a typist/secretary, as well as her boyfriend, a successful Australian financier. Through Anya, Coetzee expresses dissatisfaction with JC's strong opinions, questioning whether such activities by a writer are worthwhile or are not rather a waste of his abilities.<sup>6</sup> As ever imminently self-conscious, Coetzee here is himself questioning what the social role of a writer is (or should be) and whether he is (or has been) capable of it. The pressing social concerns which have apparently forced this move on Coetzee are such issues

as animal rights and vegetarianism (as in the Elizabeth Costello works) as well as contemporary global political developments under the American hegemon starting with George W. Bush: the rise of the neo-liberal security state, surveillance, censorship, state-sponsored violence and consequent reactionary terrorism, migration, asylum and detention (plus more familiar, deeper moral questions about dishonor, shame, and the curse, as well as speculation about art, ageing, and other concerns). *Diary* is an interesting book precisely in its hedging of the opinions, suggesting that Coetzee has not in fact lost his ability to construct engaging fictions. Issues of senile desire, of male rivalry, indeed of aggression, greed, and cybercrime, arise within the parallel text in an engaging story about two young Australians that serves as a counterpoint to the not-always-convincing arguments within the *Opinions*.<sup>7</sup> The *Opinions* do force us however to think deeply about the nature of contemporary democracy, the guilt or shame that accrues to citizens of states that engage in torture, state-sponsored terror, and assassination by remote-control (drone warfare). The unconventional triple parallel layout *is* the anxiety of Coetzee's decision to engage in political and moral speculation within his attenuated fictional world, rather than outside of fictional texts in his own person –this can be observed in the contrast of Harold Pinter (127) and Coetzee in their uses of the Nobel lecture.

Many critics find Coetzee's moves here to be unconvincing, but they are certainly in character. Coetzee thinks the current political situation is so bad that one cannot avoid addressing it in one's writing. This was also the case of apartheid-era in South Africa, but Coetzee managed quite ably to address this in his fictional texts, even if obliquely.<sup>8</sup> Something about the contemporary neo-liberal global order, the "War on Terror" and American global domination, has, mixed with his late-life embitteredness and orneriness, challenged Coetzee's sense of what fiction can and must do. As Murphet puts it, extending Adorno's account, "[d]ivesting themselves of the appearance of art, Coetzee's late works rouse themselves to the expression of a subjectivity that cannot be communicated through art alone" (2011a: 98). However, Coetzee cannot help but feel this move to be a sort of betrayal of his *raison d'être* as a fiction writer (as in *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year*). In a draft version of the installment "On Universities" lamenting the rise of the neo-liberal university in the 1980s and 90s (*Diary* 35-6), Coetzee adds a personal paragraph: "I myself had the good fortune to quit the academy in the 1980s, in my middle years. From the sidelines I watched somewhat scornfully as autonomous universities capitulated to the politicians and were turned into managed enterprises." Coetzee continues:

The plan I devised when I was still an undergraduate was to support myself by teaching while in my spare time pursuing the vocation of writer. It was not a wise plan. In the decades I spent following it I became not just a novelist but an academic novelist, more than a little bookish, somewhat bloodless too.<sup>9</sup>

This self-accusation comes out in the actual *Diary* in “On the Writing Life”: “At heart he is not a novelist after all, [critics] say, but a pedant who dabbles in fiction” (*Diary* 191). Again, this expresses Coetzee’s acute sense that his “opinionated” fiction fails in its duty as fiction. His opinions, notably *not* wisdom, *not* authoritative, mark his fiction without achieving success on a moral or political (philosophical) level. This curious self-doubting work then, along with the experiments in the autobiography in the trilogy of “Scenes from Provincial Life,” sets the stage for the late “Jesus” trilogy. This has to do with the very disposition and character of Coetzee, his biography, and his acute self-consciousness, but it came to a crisis *at this point* because of the then current situation of global catastrophe. Without being able to adopt a prophetic, authoritative tone, Coetzee simply had to speak up at social injustice.

Those times coincide with his “exile”, being some factors in the late style of Coetzee of which he is not conscious or in control. David Attwell has argued precisely this in his article “Coetzee’s Postcolonial Diaspora” (2011), where he addresses “the ways in which place comes to define what is possible for the subject-of-writing” (9).<sup>10</sup> In short, “it is the geography of Australia that has made its mark on Coetzee, not its history” (10) –thus the sparseness and disengaged (or unengaging) nature of the Australian works. The conflicted and complex relationship of Coetzee with South Africa, his uncomfortable position as beneficiary of racial injustice and his on-going lived experience of this injustice gave rise to the power of his important earlier fictions. The exile from South Africa, and the turn away from history, has led to a “post-historical” quality of the works, complemented by a stylistic post-modernity, however “out-dated” it may seem. This postmodernity is played out in a sort of self-reflectivity that Attwell describes, with reference to Roland Barthes, as the writerly exploration of a “middle voice.” As Said had written, “Late style is what happens if art does not abdicate its rights in favor of reality” (Kindle format: 282). Finally, as Attwell notes, “the post-historical suits the wanderlust of the middle voice” (16), and the result is a fiction which is not well-grounded, not convincing and engaging, and not vitally important the way Coetzee’s earlier work was. Now, Attwell’s 2011 article seems to really address *Slow Man* (and *Elizabeth Costello*), and of course does not treat the Jesus trilogy, but it in fact seems to anticipate some criticisms of those late, late novels.

#### 4. LATE, LATE COETZEE – THE JESUS TRILOGY

*Childhood of Jesus* (2013) explores issues of fatherhood, responsibility, education, and love, as well as offering a late speculation on the transition from Eros to Agape as a typical ageing Coetzee protagonist must learn to give himself over to a project (of paternity) not of his own choice. It has a curious style – seemingly allegorical (Jesus), presenting a not fully fleshed out fictional world, a Hispanophone quasi-socialist immigrant land (Oz? the afterlife?)<sup>11</sup> where the protagonist Simón takes on the responsibility of taking care of a child (David),

finding him a mother (Inés), and raising him (with the help of a simplified *Don Quixote*), even as he himself learns how to live and work in this quasi-utopian land.<sup>12</sup> Coetzee seems to have trouble fully believing in this world and the reader follows suit. It ends with Simón, Inés, David, Bolívar the dog, and Juan the hitchhiker –the extended “family of David” (2013, 260)– crammed in a car, on the road, on the run from authorities who want to stick David in a reform school and in absolute uncertainty, looking for a new life.

The continuation, *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), follows the escape of the group from Novilla to Estrella, a small provincial town where Simón must learn again how to make ends meet to support the “gifted” child. *Schooldays* continues to treat the issue of education and parenting as David is enrolled at an Academy of Dance. Again, the question is posed as to what is appropriate for a child of 6 to learn, the Academy erring on the side of movement and physical self-expression, tied to some mystical, numerological mumbo-jumbo, rather than discipline and the basics of the three R’s. Also raised is the infatuation of David for his instructor, the dancer Ana Magdalena Arroyo, who is the wife of the director of the Academy, Juan Sebastián Arroyo. Coetzee takes this J.S. Bach scenario (the younger wife, the children, the teaching duties) and adds to it a Dostoevskian figure, Dmitri, who will end up murdering Ana Magdalena, demanding forgiveness of Arroyo, and generally making himself aggressively abject in Dostoevskian fashion. But before the murder, Dmitri, like Daga in *Childhood*, presents another version of bad influence (*la mala educación*) with his inappropriate passion and his pornographic pictures. In the meantime, David may or may not be developing as a prodigy of dance (what virtuosity can be involved in a 6-year-old dancing the ‘number 7,’ as late in the book (2016, 245-6)?).

The book presents normal episodes of childhood (a duck with a broken wing because of a stone-throwing kid; first getting to know little girls; going to school, etc.) seen from the perspective of the father who has to find a way to raise a kid towards becoming a good man (2013, 246). Continuing the quasi-allegorical conceit (afterlife?) from the first book, David thinks he must be an orphan (a typical childish fantasy) to which Simón responds:

When you travel across the ocean on a boat, all your memories are washed away and you start a completely new life. That is how it is. There is no before. There is no history. The boat docks in the harbor and we climb down the gangplank and we are plunged into the here and now. Time begins. The clock starts running. You are not a *huerfano*... (2016, 17).

Simón recounts the immigration story from *Childhood* and David asks, “But is it *true*? Is it a *true* story?” to which Simón can only respond, “I don’t know. It *feels* true to me” (19). Later, after Ana Magdalena’s murder, the boy expresses fear of death. “Trust me, my boy, there will always be a next life. Death is nothing to be afraid of. It is over in a flash, then the next life



begins” (139). So, since we are not obviously dealing with hell or paradise, this seems to be cyclical, reincarnation in so many worlds.

As in *Childhood*, Simón doubts his suitability for the task of parenthood and eventually begins to question his very beliefs and techniques (e.g., 207). In the book we see many episodes whose point is really Simón’s need to learn “loving care” (180) and how this relates to discipline and guidance – a lesson already begun in *Childhood*. Simón, like every parent, has to learn how to be a parent; but more importantly for a cool, rational character, he has to learn to doubt his own typical certainties (and doubts).

At the same time, Simón is another example of the typical ageing Coetzee protagonist (like David Lurie), here genuinely moving beyond desire, as in the nudist encounter with the beautiful Ana Magdalena (93):

Unable to see his soul, he has not questioned what people tell him about it: that it is a dry soul, deficient in passion. His own, obscure intuition – that, far from lacking in passion, his soul aches with longing for it knows not what – he treats skeptically as just the kind of story that someone with a dry, rational, deficient soul will tell himself to retain his self-respect. (194)

These seemingly quasi-autobiographical explorations reflect an ageing man resisting the ablation of desire ever more feebly, in a sort of terminal decline. Such a topic is certainly of general importance, and Coetzee shows typical insight in exploring it, but since he has been doing this for decades now, it cannot be understood as urgent or particularly brilliant.

The book ends with the fiasco of the lecture by the philosopher friend of Arroyo, Javier Moreno Gutiérrez, on the thought of “Metros,” an apparent pre-Socratic philosopher (Protagoras?), to which Arroyo responds by having his sons dance the numbers two, three, and five, which leads David to take the stage to dance 7, whereupon Dmitri shows up and demands forgiveness which is denied as he is taken away by the police. The novel then closes with David removed by Inés from the Academy even while Simón assumes the volunteer menial position at the school he had earlier arranged when they sought to get David readmitted. In the final scene Simón takes a dance lesson with Arroyo’s sister-in-law, Mercedes, and the last image is the ecstatic experience of Simón as he gives himself physically over to the music of Arroyo/Bach: “there is only the music. Arms extended, eyes closed, he shuffles in a slow circle. Over the horizon the first star begins to rise” (260).

One is reminded of the close of *Diary*. The penultimate entry of the second diary is devoted to Bach:

The best proof we have that life is good, and therefore that there may perhaps be a God after

all, who has our welfare at heart, is that to each of us, on the day we are born, comes the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. It comes as a gift, unearned, unmerited, for free. (221)

After speculation about speaking to Bach, the entry ends with a curious thought about paternity:

Who is Johann Sebastian Bach to me? In naming him, do I name the father I would elect if, from all the living and the dead, one were allowed to elect one's father? Do I in this sense choose him as my spiritual father? And what is it that I want to make up for by bringing at last a first, faint smile to his lips? For having been, in my time, such a bad son? (222)

Here Bach, a notably problematic father (and husband), is presented as the ideal spiritual father, against whom JC judges himself a failure. What kind of son will David prove to be to his struggling, dry, rational, humorless "father" who nonetheless strives earnestly to provide "loving care" (180) and attention to help David fit well into his world? Interestingly, the last entry of the diary, following the Bach bit, is devoted to Dostoevsky and *The Brothers Karamazov*, to Ivan and "the personal anguish of a soul unable to bear the horrors of this world" (225). "What one recognizes," continues JC,

even as one hears Ivan's words, even as one asks whether he genuinely believes what he says, even as one asks whether one wants to rise up and follow him and give back one's ticket too, even as one asks whether it is not mere rhetoric...that one is reading, even as one asks, shocked, how a Christian, Dostoevsky, a follower of Christ, could allow Ivan such powerful words – even in the midst of all this there is space enough to think too, *Glory be! At last I see it before me, the battle pitched on the highest ground! If to anyone (Alyosha, for instance) it shall be given to vanquish Ivan, by word or by example, then indeed the word of Christ will be forever vindicated!* And therefore one thinks, *Slava, Fyodor Michailovich! May your name resound forever in the halls of fame!* (226)

This aesthetic-moral recognition, an artistic triumph despite the horrors of this world, reaffirms not only art but indeed life for JC, and for Coetzee, in the end. But then, how does this help explain *Schooldays*? What is late Coetzee doing here? Has he resorted to merely referencing rather than imitating his masters Bach and Dostoevsky here in *Schooldays*?

*The Death of Jesus* (2019) takes off where the *Schooldays* ends, four years into the family relationship of Simón, Inés, and David. David has become something of a prodigy at soccer and is developing into a gifted adolescent. ("And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him", Luke 2:40). The boy, however, is seduced by the director of a nearby orphanage and the prospect of joining their organized soccer team, and again asserts his orphanhood, as he has regularly done in the

series. Here we have something like the Son of Man, no son of his father (Joseph; Simón), renouncing family (Luke 14:26) and devoting himself to the orphans of the world (e.g., James 1:27). Yet, even as he begins on his mission among the orphans, David is mysteriously stricken with a debilitating illness affecting his joints. Removed to a hospital, he becomes the center of attention not only of Simón, Inés, and the dog Bolívar, as usual, but also of the hospital staff, including Miss Devito and the resurgent Dmitri, now working part-time as an orderly (and the rest of the time presumably locked in a mental ward of the hospital), and indeed some of the community of the Los Manos orphanage. It is at this point that David begins telling his parables/stories, mixing the tone of Jesus' parables with imaginary further adventures of Don Quixote. Coetzee here is pressing the allegory of David as a sort of Jesus *manqué*, struck down by illness too early before he can accomplish his good works. This again raises many questions that cannot satisfactorily be answered about the series: who is David; what, if anything, does he have to do with Jesus; where/what is this strange, Hispanophone, quasi-socialist country of immigrants?<sup>13</sup>

Some critics have tried to read the David/Jesus allegory more fully, and even see a quasi-religious dimension to Coetzee here. Shannon Forest writes that:

Coetzee offers a radical and anti-progressive concept of time and history [in the Jesus works] in order to escape the march toward a posthistory in which connection with the real through religious consciousness is lost. Otherwise, the end is inevitable. He fears that in the name of 'progress,' the gap that instigated the quest for fullness will become invisible. Some of the critical responses to the Jesus novels affirm this fear. The allegorical mode of reading does not lead 'nowhere,' rather it proposes an epistemology of 'the gap' and its repression, which is invisible without provisional belief. (162)

Disagreeing with Attwell, then, as much as with Tajiri, Forest sees Coetzee expressing an important sort of metaphysical need in these works through the Jesus allegory. I am not convinced by this reading, understanding Coetzee's articulation of the need to fill this gap in a more aesthetic than religious manner, a very important difference; Bach, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, and so forth, not Jesus are what we need to see a way through suffering and injustice. The question is, do we need Coetzee?

To a certain extent, then, I think Tajiri is correct in suggesting that the Jesus allegory is a trap. In any case, the point of the novels really seems to be one about Simón, not David. The responsibilities of parenthood, the frustrations of paternal love, lack of romantic or erotic love to sustain these difficulties, and eventual loss of a child – that is, more or less autobiographical experiences that Coetzee has kept latent since the death of his son Nicolas in 1989.<sup>14</sup> Why has he transferred these experiences in the way he has, superposing them on his own experiences of *dépaysement* in the immigration to a new, foreign land? Presumably, to

take strong and difficult experiences and de-personalize them to degree that can more readily speak to others (towards the exemplarity of the Christ story itself?); to find the degree of distance he himself needs to work through such experiences, as he attempted to do earlier in *The Master of Petersburg* (1994). Why the Spanish conceit? To say something about the difficulties of immigration and *dépaysement*, an important current topic? This is not developed in depth in the novel, perhaps with the aim of placing David's education around the child-version of *Don Quixote*. He certainly could have found other ways to do this, but it is a consistently important element of the trilogy. *Death* ends specifically raising the question of "the message" of *Don Quixote*, and thus begs the question of its own message, leading again, via Cervantes as well as the other Old Masters, to the question of aesthetic redemption.

Reflecting the bewilderment of many of the initial reviewers of the novel, Alex Preston in the *Guardian* review (*The Death of Jesus* by JM Coetzee – a barren end to a bizarre trilogy, 31 December 2019) calls the whole trilogy "an elaborate joke by its author at the expense of the exegetes attempting to 'translate' his work." Certainly, such confusion and exasperation are understandable, and the final installation of the Jesus triptych does perhaps seem weaker than the first, but it is unlikely that Coetzee would spend upwards of ten years (and perhaps his last productive decade) on such a "joke," as he has always been aware of the solipsisms of literary criticism and theory. In a more plausible way, but from an equally critical perspective, Preston adds, "Now it feels as if all of the pleasures left to the reader of a Coetzee novel are pleasures of the head, not of the heart." Always a cerebral and theoretically-informed writer, Coetzee experienced a crisis of belief in fiction around the time of the Nobel canonization and has extended his own loss of confidence in the (moral-political) value of his own novels to the form in general. "...Und wozu noch Dichter in dürftiger Zeit" seems to be a major question plaguing the late Coetzee and judging from the Jesus trilogy, he has not managed to come around to a renewed full belief in the redemptive value of thick and full fictional worlds. The Jesus trilogy seems to be a relatively failed return to an unbroken fiction (albeit in the form of a possibly broken allegory) after the fictional crisis of *Elizabeth Costello*. But one does not have the sense that Coetzee has somehow in his recent books failed to capture Australia. This clearly seems to be of little interest to him. Late Coetzee is not an Australian writer. He is a vexed world writer.

## 5. COETZEE AND WORLD LITERATURE

Nobel Prize winner and international big seller, Coetzee is willy-nilly an important figure in contemporary World Literature. A full discussion of the phenomenon of World Literature and its relation to post-colonial literature is not possible here,<sup>15</sup> but the question of the global novel within the contemporary regime of World Literature is very relevant to the Jesus

trilogy. Prior to the trilogy, a scholar like Vittorio Coletti could already rank the Australian works of Coetzee within his critical account of the *romanzo mondo* (e.g., 67), which can best be understood as the “global novel” –a *dépaysé* novel responding to a global world for an international audience. As already suggested by Attwell, exile and *dépaysement*, late style, post-historicity, seem to be good conditions for acceptance on the global market, as is translatability, and thus, quick translation.

In a contribution to a 2009 special issue of *New Literary History* on “Comparison,” Rebecca L. Walkowitz proposed a concept of “comparison literature” (Felski 235), that is of transnational fictional works that are indeed “born translated” (236-7), using Coetzee as the principal witness for her intervention. In her subsequent book, *Born Translated* (2015), Walkowitz notes that Coetzee’s *Childhood of Jesus* was translated even faster than *Harry Potter 6* and like the latter was “born translated.” While this is obviously true as a marketing phenomenon and publication and distribution strategy, is it meaningfully true stylistically? That is, are Coetzee’s works written for translation or rather written as (pre-)translations? A multi-Booker, Nobel prize winner, to say nothing of J.K. Rowling, knows that his or her books are going to be widely translated sooner rather than later. Does this help explain the thinness of the Jesus trilogy?

Walkowitz is certainly right to note in her book that translation has always been a part of literature and is not specific to our particular historical moment (2015: 2). But widespread translation and dissemination of new works has certainly intensified in recent years along with the development of a global market for literature. From this apparent similarity between Coetzee’s books and Rowling’s Potter phenomenon, Walkowitz speaks of books “written for translation from the start” and notes, apparently positively, an “opportunistic approach” (3) to the global market by these and other contemporary writers.<sup>16</sup> Naturally, the publishers of best sellers or of major prize winners are going to look to maximal distribution of their authors; this is a state of the global market and the industry of publication (and indeed this is what the prizes are for), but it is certainly not *necessarily* a function of the writer’s style. Is this global market situation of contemporary fiction really leading to radical stylistic and other changes in fiction itself? Walkowitz speaks of books “written as translations” (4), but technically, this is not true of Coetzee. Just because a Dutch edition (or Argentinian-Spanish one in the case of the *Death of Jesus*) was published at the same time or even earlier does not mean the book was “written as a translation” in the fashion of Beckett or Nancy Huston. But Walkowitz’s point is clear: what we are dealing with is books written with an eye to easy and rapid translatability. Of course, as Walkowitz notes, in *Childhood of Jesus* supposedly everyone speaks Spanish, which would then be “translated” into the English (or Dutch) of the text. This is an old conceit from the novelistic tradition, as observed in *Don Quixote*.<sup>17</sup> Thus, on the one hand, Walkowitz overstates her case. But *Childhood* does indeed depict a sort of post-natal,

hispanophone quasi-Utopia, as I have described, and clearly *dépaysement* and language (and *Don Quixote*!) are real issues for the novel.

Walkowitz speaks of “the effects of circulation on production” (6) – meaning global markets and audiences changing the way writers write by, among other things, changing the intended readers of their works, notably from some circumscribed national linguistic community to some international audience without a shared language or tradition. Thus, to make books more easily readable/translatable writers engage in “preemptive translation”; the books thus have no native reader. This is surely not a good thing, or not necessarily so: no specific intended audience, no community, no situatedness. Walkowitz celebrates novelists she thinks make a virtue of this situation, since this represents, among other things, an un-illusioned realism about the contemporary global literary market. Is this the answer to scholar’s confusion about the Jesus works?

In this sense, late Coetzee would be very different indeed from the notion of lateness developed by Adorno and Said. On Adorno’s own lateness, Said wrote: “to be late meant therefore to be late for (and refuse) many of the rewards offered up by being comfortable inside society, not the least of which was to be read and understood easily by a large group of people” (Kindle format 458). According to Walkowitz, the very opposite is the case in late Coetzee’s relationship to the global market. Coetzee did *not* refuse awards and rewards (even if he made things difficult for himself through exile). Instead, he is making the most of his post-national, post-historical status to reach a maximal audience and achieve maximal success. Is this true of Coetzee/Walkowitz’s “opportunistic” global style?

For his part, Julian Murphet had already well articulated the risks of the style for late Coetzee: “Today there can be no “universalist” vantage point for the production of effective artworks and works of literature: that kind of abstraction does not give rise to persuasive “novelistic” modes of immanence, which are critical to the success of cultural artifacts. Yet, nor can the increasingly transnational and “global” level of being in the world be repressed from any genuine work of art: it must enter the text if the latter is not to sink to the level of stupid chronicle and myopic “nativity” (2011a: 101). Coetzee has perhaps not found the right balance of the ethico-aesthetic commitments of his early years, with his nonetheless always insistent urge to explore the “middle voice,” and his non-fictional outrage at contemporary political and moral issues. But he does not seem to be simplifying his works to engage global readers more easily. Early in his career he honed a sort of minimalism, masterfully balancing a certain realism and vestiges of Modernism –embodied by Kafka and Beckett– as well as flirting with contemporary post-modernist self-reflectivity in reaction to a post-colonial African novel dominated by a Lukácsian realism that he rejected. This had nothing to do with a global literary market; this was a politico-aesthetic choice that had very much to do with his situation in South Africa. He then, after the late success of *Disgrace*, experienced a sort of crisis, as discussed above. The latest works are a return to the form of his best works (quasi-

allegorical and thus “universalist” or universalizing) to address the lingering “traumas” of fatherhood and loss (including the ablation of desire), among other things, but with a globalizing dimension, a relevance to the contemporary world.<sup>18</sup> But they are relatively ineffective in their realization. Here we have a Coetzee who (feels he) does not measure up to his masters, upon whom he places so much responsibility. This is indeed late work not as ripe fruit, but as the bitter self-reflection of a vexed fictionist “measuring [himself] against the illustrious dead” (Coetzee, 2003: 26) and finding himself wanting.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I am not exactly counting the strange, “posthumous” work *Summertime* (2009), the culmination of the autobiographical trilogy also comprising *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002).

<sup>2</sup> *The Lives of Animals* (1999), *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), the Nobel lecture (2004), and to an extent *Slow Man* (2005).

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, I only have access to a Kindle version of Said, which does not provide real page numbers. So, this citation is Kindle format 240.

<sup>4</sup> Tajiri, in alluding to Derek Attridge’s seminal discussion of allegory in Coetzee, follows Murphet in understanding the “Jesus” allegory as false, more a trap than a consistent trope (73). See Murphet on Coetzee’s achievement to “allegorise the impossibility of allegory itself” (2011b: 3).

<sup>5</sup> Draft version of *Diary of a Bad Year* (Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin) 42.3, draft diary 12 Sept – 30 Dec 2005, p. 38 – this earlier draft includes a number of passages on writing and the writer, as well as material about South Africa, that did not make it into the final draft but are interesting as attesting to Coetzee’s then (and on-going) concerns.

<sup>6</sup> At one point JC asks, “Do I really qualify as a thinker at all, someone who has what can properly be called thoughts, about politics or anything else? I have never been easy with abstractions or good at abstract thought.” (2007: 203)

<sup>7</sup> Curiously, JC, like Elizabeth Costello, is not always convincing and seemingly not really seeking to convince. Rather than trying to win a rational argument (Coetzee, 2003: 67), aiming “to save my soul” (89).

<sup>8</sup> For a famous disagreement about the oblique nature of this critique, see Gordimer.

<sup>9</sup> “On Universities,” 6 October 2006, HRC 42.4 early draft 2005: 35.

<sup>10</sup> This is also briefly developed in Attwell’s *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, chapter 13. See also Boehmer.

<sup>11</sup> Or “a treatment of the state of human being as one of exile,” as Robert Pippin puts it (5).

<sup>12</sup> Spivak speaks of the “rarefied (And fascinatingly dull) primitive socialism without locatable geographical lineaments” (109).

<sup>13</sup> De Villiers devotes a whole article to not really knowing how to assess these novels yet trying to make this an enabling enigma, a question of literature and prestige, the hypertrophied contemporary academic publication scene, and another legacy of "difficult" Modernism.

<sup>14</sup> On the death of Nicholas, see Kannemeyer, 452-457.

<sup>15</sup> For a fuller discussion of this topic see Chesney (2017).

<sup>16</sup> Thomsen notes the same phenomenon around Harry Potter, citing works by Rushdie, DeLillo, Auster, and García Márquez (9). Are these also "born-translated" authors?

<sup>17</sup> It must be said that Coetzee has in fact been working recently in Spanish and has been active in literary institutions in Latin America as he tries to make connections in the "Global South" outside of the grasp of Anglo-American-European publishers and critics. This is a very interesting development and suggests a very different motive from success in Global or World Literature on the part of the Nobel laureate.

<sup>18</sup> In this sense, I agree with Ferrant that there is an important degree of "continuity" (166) between the Jesus trilogy and Coetzee's earlier, South African works.

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