

The background of the book cover is an aerial photograph of a coastline. On the left side, there is a strip of turquoise water with some darker patches, possibly rocks or shallow reefs. To the right of the water is a thin, white strip of sand. The rest of the cover is a plain, light greyish-blue color.

OXFORD

In Other Words

TRANSPPOSITIONS *of* PHILOSOPHY
in J.M. COETZEE'S 'JESUS' TRILOGY

Stephen **MULHALL**

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*Transpositions of Philosophy in
J. M. Coetzee's 'Jesus' Trilogy*

STEPHEN MULHALL

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
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First Edition published in 2022

Impression: 1

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022937326

ISBN 978-0-19-286971-5

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780192869715.001.0001

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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Acknowledgements

Part 1 of this book is a significantly expanded and revised version of my ‘Health and Deviance, Irony and Incarnation’, published in Hayes and Wilm (eds), *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy and J. M. Coetzee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), which benefited from the responses of other contributors to that collection that were offered at a conference arranged prior to its publication.

I would also like to thank three anonymous readers for Oxford University Press, and Alice Crary, for their insightful and extremely helpful comments on an earlier version of the present text.

Introduction

J. M. Coetzee's 'Jesus' trilogy begins with the arrival of two displaced persons—a young boy and his adult companion and protector—at the resettlement camp of a city called Novilla.¹ Neither remembers their lives prior to the sea voyage to this new land during which they met; like every other inhabitant of it,² their memories have been wiped clean of their personal history, although they remember having had such histories, and so know that there is something they don't or can't remember about themselves. At the end of their voyage, they were deposited at a coastal town called Belstar, and held at a reception camp for several weeks, during which they were assigned names (David and Simón, respectively) and approximate official ages (five and forty-five, respectively), and were taught Spanish (the language of their new country). When they arrive at Novilla, seeking a place to live and a means of earning a living, Simón describes himself as David's father, although there is no biological or legal relationship between them; and he quickly embarks on another quest—to find David's mother, or more precisely, to find a mother for David. Neither of them knows the name of David's real mother, or even whether she has also travelled to this land—a letter belonging to David that might have held answers to these questions was lost on board their ship; but Simón is convinced that he or David will recognize her immediately when they see her. And soon after establishing themselves in Novilla, they encounter a woman who stirs an obscure sense of familiarity in Simón when she offers David a friendly greeting. He at once arranges a meeting with her, and asks her to take David as her son; and

¹ The trilogy comprises *The Childhood of Jesus* (London: Harvill Secker, 2013), *The Schooldays of Jesus* (London: Harvill Secker, 2016), and *The Death of Jesus* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2019): hereafter 'CJ', 'SJ', and 'DJ', respectively.

² Coetzee's text neither affirms nor excludes the possibility of new inhabitants being born there.

after a startlingly brief period of reflection, she (Inés) agrees to do so. Their shared task of caring for and educating David—first in Novilla and then for a longer period of time in another, more remote town called Estrella—constitutes the core of the ensuing narrative.

This combination of collective memory loss and the construction of a family on the basis of intuition and sheer will hardly sounds like the premise of an exercise in fictional realism; and as we shall see, other aspects of the basic shape and finer details of life in this land that are disclosed as David's newly constituted 'family' settle into it diverge equally sharply from those governing our everyday existence. That said, we shouldn't deny the clear (if non-linear) correspondences between this fictional world of displaced people, resettlement camps, and erased personal history and the treatment of migrants in our contemporary world (in Australia, where Coetzee currently lives, but also on the Mediterranean borders of Europe, the southern borders of the United States, the south coast of the United Kingdom, and elsewhere).³ And there is a difference between categorizing a text as a generic exercise in literary realism and claiming it as one composed in what one might call a realistic spirit—in which a relation to literary realism is maintained by radically interrogating its generic conventions. This is the subject of an explicit discussion in one of Coetzee's earlier fictions, *Elizabeth Costello*;⁴ and in earlier work of mine on that text, I underlined the fact that that discussion develops an understanding of realism that pivots on a distinction between embedding and embodying, around which Costello (herself a novelist) and her narrator organize their thinking about how the realistic impulse finds expression in modernist literature.⁵ Because this commentary grows out of that earlier work, and assumes a significant degree of continuity of concerns between *Elizabeth Costello* and the 'Jesus' trilogy, a brief recounting of the main elements of that

³ Something emphasized by Tim Mehigan in his article 'Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* and the Moral Image of the World' (in Rutherford and Uhlmann [eds], *J. M. Coetzee's The Childhood of Jesus: The Ethics of Ideas and Things* [London: Bloomsbury, 2017]).

⁴ London: Secker and Warburg, 2003—hereafter 'EC'.

⁵ See Chapter 11 of my *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009).

understanding of realism might provide the reader with some helpful preliminary orientation.⁶

In the first chapter or lesson of *Elizabeth Costello*, the protagonist's son John objects to her earlier use of the category of realism in a lecture, which began by proclaiming the death of realism as a viable literary enterprise and yet claimed as an exemplary exercise in realism Kafka's short story about an ape named Red Peter, who delivers a report to an academy about his experiences as an animal forcibly inducted into Western European society.

'When I think of realism', he goes on, 'I think of peasants frozen in blocks of ice. I think of Norwegians in smelly underwear . . . people picking their noses. You don't write about that kind of thing. Kafka didn't write about it.'

'No, Kafka didn't write about people picking their noses. But Kafka had time to wonder where and how his poor educated ape was going to find a mate. And what it was going to be like when he was left in the dark with the bewildered, half-tamed female that his keepers eventually produced for his use. Kafka's ape is embedded in life. It is the embeddedness that is important, not the life itself. His ape is embedded as we are embedded, you in me, I in you. That ape is followed through to the end, to the bitter, unsayable end, whether or not there are traces left on the page. Kafka stays awake during the gaps when we are sleeping, that is where Kafka fits in.' (EC, 32)

Kafka's ape is not in a realistic situation; no real ape has been, or (we think) could possibly be educated to the cultural level of an average European. Nevertheless, having embedded his ape in European culture, Kafka develops its consequences with a rigorous attention to the real nature of the ape and of the culture he (impossibly) inhabits. A real ape will have sexual and emotional needs; real human beings would try to

⁶ The present work has also been influenced, although less directly, by an interpretation of Coetzee's autobiographical trilogy (as well as of his writings on the theory and practice of life-writing) that is laid out in Essay Two of my *The Ascetic Ideal* (OUP, 2021), entitled 'Writing the Life of the Mind'.

satisfy them, in order to maintain their profits, and would care little about the sanity of the mate they procure, or the potentially monstrous consequences of their congress. Costello is in effect arguing that even a tale which takes its starting point from a sheer impossibility (beyond anything to be encountered in reality) might nevertheless count as a contribution to the project of literary realism, insofar as the development of that tale can be seen as a logically and emotionally rigorous unfolding of the consequences of that unintelligible origin—an unsentimental articulation of what the impossible embedding of one reality into another might reveal about both.

Costello's notion of embedding is itself embedded in a context that associates it with two other notions, which together impart a reflexive aspect to the discussion—confirming our sense that, as her son's question presupposes, her description of Kafka's realism is also a self-description. First, she compares Red Peter's embeddedness in life with her son's embeddedness in her and hers in her son. The familiar comparison of literary creativity with human procreation is thereby given a particular twist: for insofar as both Costello and her son function as the term analogous to life on the ape side of the metaphorical equation, it suggests that the fictional creation endows its creator with life as much as the creator her creation. But when viewed from the vantage point of the 'Jesus' trilogy and its co-created unreal family, a further implication becomes salient: that both children and parents constitute the primary structures of reality for each other, and in that sense embed each other in life.

The second notion Costello associates with realism is that of Kafka as staying awake when we are sleeping. This partly specifies her sense of the realist author as having a commitment to the real and its ineluctable consequences that most human beings most of the time can neither desire nor bear; but it also invokes a canonical cultural image of philosophy—that of Socrates still awake, when all the other winners and diners have collapsed into unconsciousness, as dawn breaks at the end of Plato's *Symposium*. As we shall see, Costello's sense of literature's uncanny intimacy with philosophy, sharing its interest in moral edification and in a genuine apprehension of the real (as the format of a lesson, with its suggestion of taking instruction, already implies), finds a strong

and persistent echo in the 'Jesus' trilogy, and not solely because of Plato's insistent presence within it.

By linking together or constellating these three notions (embedding, pro/creativity, and wakefulness), Costello offers us a way of understanding her own most famous fiction as an expression of what I would call modernist realism. That fiction is entitled *The House on Eccles Street*, and amounts to a recreation of Joyce's Molly Bloom; and Costello declares that her attempt to make something new from the material left over from Joyce's prodigal inventiveness was itself conditioned by a desire to relocate Molly from Joyce's realistically imagined bedroom ('with the bed with the creaking springs') to the real sights and smells of the streets of Dublin in 1904, as well as the particular cultural possibilities actually open to Molly and Leopold alike at that historical moment. Otherwise put: she showed how Joyce's liberation of the sensual reality of women from its prior literary confinement was itself confined, that Molly could 'equally well be an intelligent woman with an interest in music and a circle of friends of her own and a daughter with whom she shared confidences' (EC, 14).

One might, therefore, say that Costello plays off one kind of embeddedness against another: by exploiting the indebtedness of any literary creation to its antecedents, she tries to embed the wholly fictional and yet vitally real Molly more deeply into non-fictional human reality. She tries to stay awake during the gaps when Joyce was sleeping—or rather, she brings us to see his apparently seamless creation (its successful creation of an impression of real femaleness in his Molly) as actually having gaps in the light of her own, apparently more successful, fictional representation of real femaleness. Insofar as a prior fictional representation has any reality to it—insofar as it aspires to, or anyway succeeds in, apprehending something about reality—then attending properly to it in all its fictionality, even if that process takes the form of creating another fiction, may nevertheless bring us closer to what is real.

Where Costello chooses the term 'embedding', her narrator ultimately arrives at the term 'embodying', at least when discussing the discomfort created for literary realism by ideas—a challenge that is even more pertinent for the 'Jesus' trilogy (with its unending sequences of conversations about how best to comprehend everything from human waste to