

METAPHYSICAL EXILE



On J.M. Coetzee's *Jesus Fictions*

ROBERT PIPPIN

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For J. C. and D. D.

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Sigla

CJ *The Childhood of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 2013)

SJ *The Schooldays of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 2016)

DJ *The Death of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 2019)

TGS *The Good Story* (New York: Viking, 2015)

EC *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Penguin, 2003)

Quotations in the text are followed by page numbers in these editions.

1

Introduction

The Rules of the Game

1. The Setting

In the new land, there is no magic, no time travel, no ghosts, no miracles. Characters are mortal, finite human beings with emotional lives, interpretive tasks, disagreements, daily habits, worries about the future, and so forth. But there is a very great deal that is not part of any human world that has ever been or is now. So J. M. Coetzee's three Jesus "fictions" are not realist novels, although the world the characters find themselves in is a recognizably natural world. In this respect, the three volumes are like the rest of Coetzee's fiction, only "more so." As he puts it in *The Good Story*,

I think of myself as using rather than reflecting reality in my fiction. If the world of my fictions is a recognizable world, that is because (I say to myself) it is easier to use the world at hand than to make up a new one.¹ TGS, 69

¹ It is always controversial to bring to bear an author's remarks in his own voice, his criticism, on his fiction. But that need not amount to treating the latter as a mere expression of the former. Carrol Clarkson has established why the situation is unique in Coetzee and she shows how the connection can be made without making this mistake. I follow her lead here. See her remarks about her own approach: "This brings me to the foundational argument of my book: throughout Coetzee's writing, in the critical essays as much as in the fiction, self-reflexive linguistic questions are at the core of his ethical enquiries, enquiries inflected by attentiveness to cultural and historical contingencies." *J. M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (New York: Palmgrave Macmillan,

Accordingly, any attempt to interpret the fictions must begin by accepting the dimensions not borrowed from the real world, the “unreality” of the setting, and so cannot lose sight of four central, governing, highly unusual elements.

1. The first is metafictional. All three titles refer to Jesus, the most recognizable and significant name in the Western tradition, yet Jesus is not a character in any of the volumes and there is not much in the narrative, at least on the surface, that makes any reference to the familiar story of Jesus of Nazareth. This is not to say that the idea of Jesus, a messiah, a redeemer, does not play a structuring role in the fictions. It does.
2. Everyone in the fictions has been transported to this place from somewhere else. No one knows why this has happened or, apart from Simón, seems very curious about the fact. The common language is Spanish. Everyone, in other words, is in exile from their homeland, and many of the inhabitants, probably a significant majority, must learn and speak a language other than their mother tongue.
3. In the course of their trip to this place, their memories of their homeland have been “wiped clean.” They all can clearly remember various facts about human beings, animals, families, and so forth, but, apparently, only such facts. They don’t remember who they were or their life histories, their parents, husbands, wives, and children from their former lives, but they do remember that they had such histories and they know they can’t remember them. This is not a source of consternation, again except occasionally for Simón. In the second and third fictions, this feature of their new lives is present and is discussed occasionally, but it becomes somewhat less

2009), p. 16. The continuity between the Jesus novels and Coetzee’s other works is laid out in D. Attridge, “Reason and Its Other in Coetzee’s ‘Jesus’ Novels,” *Novel* 54, No. 3 (forthcoming).

prominent. The more Simón and David and Inés settle in, the less they have to explain to strangers why Simón is with David, and the less we hear about this strange cataclysmic event. In the third fiction, their fate has pretty much been accepted and the migration story is not as prominent.

4. There is a continuous recognizable narrative with a core problem to be solved. Simón has taken responsibility for David, a lost boy, during the voyage. He becomes something of a foster father or god father for the child, and he decides he can find his mother in the new land, even though he has never seen her and has no way of finding her. He insists he will know her, somehow, when he sees her. He does settle on someone, rather arbitrarily, not in a way that seems informed by anything or credible. She, Inés, accepts the role (also a seemingly arbitrary decision) and they both must care for and educate David. This means they must try to understand him. Both tasks prove extremely difficult, and those difficulties make up the main content of the developing narrative.

Everyone in the new world, in other words, can be considered “homeless” in a way. They don’t live on the streets but they are not at their original home, and they originally know nothing about where they are. This should lead us to think that they would all suffer from a kind of homesickness. But they do not, and for an obvious reason; as noted, they cannot. They have lost their memories. So, the most counterfactual premise of the fictions is a forgetfulness so thorough and so accepted that they do not experience their new world as all that strange, as “not their own.” I say “accepted” because they have not simply forgotten. They know they have memories and that the memories have been taken from them, somehow wiped clean. But the radicality of their situation is not much resisted; they simply try to figure out as quickly as possible what the rules are that they are expected to play by. They leave Novilla for Estrella but there does not seem to be any “outside” world. The new world appears completely