

J. M. COETZEE'S

The

CHILDHOOD

of

JESUS

THE ETHICS OF IDEAS & THINGS

EDITED BY

JENNIFER RUTHERFORD & ANTHONY UHLMANN

B L O O M S B U R Y

J. M. Coetzee's
The Childhood of Jesus

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The Ethics of Ideas and Things

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Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc
B L O O M S B U R Y
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Academic

An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

www.bloomsbury.com

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First published 2017

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Uhlmann, Anthony, editor. | Rutherford, Jennifer, editor.

Title: J. M. Coetzee's The childhood of Jesus : the ethics of ideas and things / edited by Anthony Uhlmann, Jennifer Rutherford.

Description: New York : Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016026674 (print) | LCCN 2016047903 (ebook) | ISBN 9781501318627 (hardback) | ISBN 9781501318641 (ePDF) | ISBN 9781501318634 (ePUB)

Subjects: LCSH: Coetzee, J. M., 1940- Childhood of Jesus. | Ethics in literature. | BISAC: LITERARY CRITICISM / General.

Classification: LCC PR9369.3.C58 C4556 2017 (print) | LCC PR9369.3.C58 (ebook) | DDC 823/.914--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016026674>

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5013-1862-7
ePub: 978-1-5013-1863-4
ePDF: 978-1-5013-1864-1

Cover design: Hugh Cowling
Cover image © Lauren Mancke

Typeset by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 8NN

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Acknowledgements

A number of the essays reproduced here were originally presented at *Traverses: J. M. Coetzee and the World*, an international conference held in Adelaide in October 2014. This conference was sponsored by the J. M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice at the University of Adelaide, the Hawke Research Institute, University of South Australia, with the support of the Writing and Society Research Centre at Western Sydney University, the University of Paris 8, the Australian Research Council and the Institut Universitaire de France.

The research undertaken by Professor Anthony Uhlmann towards this book and the work he has published within it have been supported under the Australian Research Council's *Discovery Projects* funding scheme (project no. DP140104427, J. M. Coetzee and Making Sense in Literature). The research undertaken by Associate Professor Paul Sheehan and Dr Lynda Ng is supported under the Australian Research Council's *Discovery Projects* funding scheme (project no. DP150102502, Transnational Coetzee: Revisioning World Literature through the Margins).

Yoshiki Tajiri's essay in this volume is a reprint (with minor emendations) of an article which was published in *Journal of Modern Literature* 39:2: 72–88. We appreciate the kind permission of Indiana University Press.

Anthony Uhlmann's essay in this volume builds upon and takes in new directions a shorter essay originally published by *The Sydney Review of Books* under the title 'Signs for the Soul'. We appreciate the kind permission of Western Sydney University.

Jean-Michel Rabaté's essay in this volume is a revised version of Chapter 9 of *The Pathos of Distance* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016, 163–82), and we appreciate the permission of Bloomsbury.

The editors would like to thank Arka Chattopadhyay for his diligent work as a copy editor on this volume. We would also like to express our appreciation to Haaris Naqvi, the commissioning editor at Bloomsbury Academic, for his advice and support in developing this project.

Introduction

Jennifer Rutherford (University of Adelaide) and
Anthony Uhlmann (Western Sydney University)

A number of critics, including Yoshiki Tajiri in this volume, have begun to talk about the idea of ‘late style’ in Coetzee’s fiction (Murphet,¹ MacFarlane²). This is something Coetzee himself discusses with Paul Auster in *Here and Now*. He states:

It is not uncommon for writers, as they age, to get impatient with the so-called poetry of language and go for a stripped-down style (‘late style’) [...] One can think of a life in art, schematically, in two or perhaps three stages. In the first you find, or pose for yourself, a great question. In the second you labor away at answering it. And then, if you live long enough, you come to the third stage, when the aforesaid great question begins to bore you, and you need to look elsewhere.³

Critics, including Auster himself in *Here and Now*, relate the term to the work of Edward Said and his posthumously published *On Late Style: The Evolution of the Creative Life*, though Coetzee distances himself from Said’s particular use of the concept.⁴ In any case, the impetus, in turning to this idea, is to consider the differences that emerge and set the later works apart from earlier works.

Other terms have been used in recent years by critics of Coetzee as a form of shorthand. Critics have divided the works between the South African fiction, beginning with *Dusklands* and ending with *Disgrace*, and the Australian

¹ Julian Murphet, ‘Coetzee and Late Style: Exile within the Form’, in *Twentieth Century Literature* 57:1 (2011): 86–104. The entire issue of this journal 57:1, edited by Murphet, is dedicated to Coetzee’s ‘late style’.

² Elizabeth C. MacFarlane, ‘Elizabeth Costello and the Ethics of Embodiment’, *New Scholar* 1:1 (2011): 57–68.

³ J. M. Coetzee in Paul Auster and J. M. Coetzee, *Here and Now: Letters 2008–2011*. (London: Faber and Harvill Secker, 2013), p. 88.

⁴ Auster and Coetzee, *Here and Now*, p. 97.

fiction, foreshadowed by *Elizabeth Costello* (an Australian character in international settings), followed by two novels 'set' in Adelaide (*Slow Man*) and Sydney (*Diary of a Bad Year*). This distinction, then, refers at once to the place of composition and the settings of the works.

Yet this idea has come to seem increasingly unhelpful, since the last part of *Scenes from a Provincial Life, Summertime*, returns to South Africa. It is still more unhelpful with regard to *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), which is set in an indeterminate Spanish-speaking place that resembles Latin America but cannot be strictly identified with it. While this shift might indeed be linked with Coetzee's now sustained engagement with Argentina (which has developed most fully after the novel appeared, as he has been visiting professor at the Universidad Nacional de General San Martín since 2014), categories related to place seem most useful as ideas that need to be critiqued or rendered more complex.

Still, it is apparent that the connection between actual places and imagined places is not an arbitrary relation in his works. While the relationships are made complex in works such as *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg*, in many of them it seems a structuring dialogical relation. Yet how does this play in *The Childhood of Jesus*, where the actual place to which the imagined place is related seems deliberately opaque? We will leave this question in suspension here, only raising it to underline again the problem of difference that necessarily motivates readers of *The Childhood of Jesus* considering the book in the context of his work as a whole.

When *The Childhood of Jesus* was published in 2013, it was met with an initially puzzled reception, as critics struggled to come to terms with its odd setting and structure, its seemingly flat tone, and the strange affectless interactions of its characters. Most puzzling was the central character David, linked by the title to an idea of Jesus. The articles assembled here are at the forefront of an exacting process of critical engagement with this novel, which has begun to uncover its rich dialogue with philosophy, theology, mathematics, politics, and questions of meaning.

The essays offer a number of things. First, they provide contexts necessary to a fuller understanding of the work. Pippin and Rabaté, for example, are

the first critics to examine in detail how Coetzee's novel enters into dialogue with apocryphal infancy gospels left out of the New Testament canon of the Bible, that record the strange nature of Jesus as a child. Here he is at once all-powerful and lacking in discipline and higher knowledge, striking dead those who offend him, tormenting his teachers and so on. Other contexts concern the migrant or refugee experience (Sheehan and Ng, Rutherford); the importance of mathematical theory to this novel (Brits) as Coetzee draws on his deep understanding of mathematics; and a range of engagements with other writers (such as Gerald Murnane and Borges), as well as other texts (the Bible, Plato and the philosophical tradition, Coetzee's own earlier works).

Behind these contexts are key philosophical, political and formal concerns – concerns which all relate to questions of meaning and how meaning is constructed. With regard to philosophy, a key distinction between the immaterial (the spiritual or conceptual) and the material (matter, mud, shit) is developed. With regard to politics, these concerns play out in terms of ideals of justice and truth that confront physical realities. These concerns in turn enter into dialogue with an understanding of how literary form might approach its own limits: the limit that separates representation from the real, and the mirroring limit that creates 'realities' out of representations.

While the essays in this book speak to one another or against one another, they did not emerge from dialogue proper; rather, most were presented at a major conference on Coetzee's work in Adelaide in 2014 and so the authors were not able to engage directly with one another's work. Rather than this being something we have sought to smooth out in the editorial process, we feel instead that points of overlap and apparent contradiction that at times emerge in the readings underline the multiplicity of approaches that can be taken to Coetzee's book. That is, for example, it is possible to read the new life in Novilla as an exploration of the migrant experience *and* an exploration of an imagined afterlife. That is, for example, it is possible to see within the book *both* the utopian Plato of *The Republic* and the mythic Plato of *Phaedrus*. The novel itself is built around paradox and seemingly deliberately points its readers in several directions at once. While it is not possible to follow all of these at the same time, the critics assembled here each follow distinct lines,

together offering readers an overview of the startling complexity of Coetzee's novel.

This collection is organized into four sections. While all sections speak to aspects of the interactions set out above, they have been grouped in terms of their principal points of emphasis. Section I, with chapters by the distinguished philosopher Robert B. Pippin (a former colleague of Coetzee's at the Chicago Committee on Social Thought) and Jean-Michel Rabaté, concerns questions of philological, philosophical and literary critical interest – offering specific, detailed answers to the puzzle offered by the title of the book and its relation to the substance of the novel.

Section II, with chapters by Rutherford, and Sheehan and Ng, concerns the social and political resonances of the novel. Rutherford links Coetzee's imagined Novilla with the Cartesian fantasy of creating artificial human life, reading the text's many scatological references as analogues of modernity's waste-making regimes. Sheehan and Ng suggest that the politics and aesthetics of place are central to the work, linking the unlocatable quality of Novilla with the question of migrancy and the assimilating drive of modern nation states. They further link the novel to the genre of the political utopia through reference to Plato's *Republic*.

Section III, with chapters by Uhlmann on intuition and literature and Brits on mathematics and religion, considers formal processes of making meaning in literature and in mathematical and theological representations. These essays consider how meaning is generated and developed through intertextual strategies, with identifiable references to concepts from mathematics and themes from writers with whom Coetzee enters into dialogue. Uhlmann interrogates the concept of intuition in the novel, and Brits considers it in relation to Cantor's transfinite number 'aleph-null' (\aleph^0).

Section IV interrogates the kinds of relationship that might allow us to reflect on ethics; that is, on education, formation, familial bonds and the larger question of how we should live. Kossew traces the search for mother, motherland and mother tongue in the novel, suggesting this interrogation of familial bonds sustains the possibility of constituting forms of belonging for all displaced peoples. Mehigan explores Coetzee's 'literature of ideas' and its excavation of the idea of the good in a secular age, and Tajiri takes up Coetzee's

late style and the question of meaning in a contingent, relative and random world, reflecting on the manner in which the novel enters into dialogue with themes apparent in all of Coetzee's oeuvre.

These diverse, far-reaching and at times discordant chapters testify to the multifaceted critical engagement inspired by the novel. At the forefront of literary invention, the novel affirms the enduring capacity of contemporary literature to engage with the most intractable social, political and spiritual problems confronting us at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The essays gathered here allow a fuller understanding of the searching questions the book raises, beginning what will undoubtedly be a much longer conversation about this novel and its forging of new forms of thinking in literature.

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Section I

Philological and
Philosophical Concerns

What does J. M. Coetzee's Novel, *The Childhood of Jesus* have to do with the Childhood of Jesus?

Robert B. Pippin

At the beginning of the novel, a forty-five-year-old man and a five-year-old boy are in a place called Novilla, having arrived after a sea voyage and a stay in some sort of transitional refugee camp called Belstar. At least, those are the ages they are assigned when they arrive, based on how old they looked to the assigner. They have had to learn Spanish at Belstar, the language of Novilla (and of Cervantes, a relevant fact later¹), and they have been given new names. We are told a few times in the novel that the journey also involves being 'washed clean' of one's past memories, and while the man remembers that he had a prior life, and while he knows it was very different from the life he experiences in Novilla, he does not seem to be able to recall any details, and so we learn nothing about that life, or why the sea voyage and what appears to be the resettlement of whole populations were necessary. He says once that he has 'a memory of having memories'.² The man is now called Simón, and the boy's new name is David.³ The novel begins when they show up at their new home, Novilla. During the voyage, the boy had become separated from his mother and Simón assumed responsibility for him. A letter which the boy had worn in a pouch around his neck, apparently explaining some aspects of his

¹ Alonso Quixano in Cervantes's novel will also get a new name, Don Quixote, and is about the same age as Simón.

² J. M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 2013), p. 98.

³ Their original names are never mentioned. Simón is mostly referred to in the third person or as 'the man' and infrequently referred to by name.

situation, was also lost on the ship. (So at least in David's case, his 'pastlessness' is due to a lost text, something that will be important later.) The boy's father is only mentioned once: 'His father is a different matter',⁴ but in the context of the novel this is not unusual. It is often suggested, and sometimes we are told, that fathers are rather dispensable in a family. Mothers are all-important.⁵

I propose that we approach this novel by focusing on three prominent aspects that should help us begin to understand it: the major elements of the plot, the content of the many conversations, and the constant intertextual formal structure.

There are three major elements in the narrative. Simón must try to understand the conventions and culture of his new home. He finds work as a stevedore, but while there is modern technology in Novilla – cars, cranes, electricity, and so forth – these are not used on the docks, and so the work is, in Simón's view, more suitable for pack animals than humans.⁶ Simón, bewildered, must try to understand how his comrades tolerate what they are doing, why they accept it. His job is simply to carry very heavy sacks of grain from the hold of a ship onto the docks. (At one point, he persuades them to try a crane and the results are disastrous. He ends up in the hospital.) He settles in, meets neighbours, tries to adjust to an extremely simple diet (mostly bread and a bean paste), and engages in several philosophical conversations with various interlocutors.

Then, second, there is the main element of the narrative, a quest, and its consequences. Simón is committed to finding David's mother in Novilla. When questioned about how that is possible, given that he has never seen her, has no information whatsoever about the woman, and has no reason to believe she is even in Novilla, he confidently says that he will know her when he sees her.⁷ Out on a walk with David one day, he comes across a place, *La Residentia*, apparently occupied by people considerably better off than most. (Novilla appears to be some sort of benevolent socialist country,

⁴ Coetzee, *The Childhood*, p. 74.

⁵ Coetzee, *The Childhood*, p. 104.

⁶ In fact, the contrast is explicit; there are large draft horses which perform essentially the same work on the docks. The horses, and David's affection for them, call to mind the Don again, and his horse Rocinante.

⁷ If one were intent on finding conventional religious resonances of the title, this (strictly speaking, wholly irrational) 'act of faith' about the possibility of finding David's mother might well be one.

and this sudden appearance of class difference and a gated community with tennis courts, where no one seems to work, is not explained. It is one of many potential sites of disruption and dissatisfaction that the contented, rather bovine citizens simply seem to accept.) He sees a young woman of about thirty with her two brothers on the tennis courts and immediately decides she is David's mother – his real, one and only mother. He manages to meet her and he proposes that she accept David as her child. She appears to be a spoiled, self-indulgent, rather whiny and unpleasant woman, but she does immediately accept and moves into Simón's apartment, displacing him to a storage house on the docks. There are several suggestions that the woman, named Inés, is a virgin, and for this and various other obvious reasons she could not possibly be David's biological mother.⁸ (The suggestion of a virgin mother, as well as Simón's St Joseph-like position, sound a few faint notes of the mysterious title of the novel. So does the notion of a 'new life' and pastlessness, since these go together in Christianity. A new life, born again, just is escape from, forgiveness for, the past; redemption from it.) But Simón insists that she is nevertheless David's 'real' mother, even though he does not dispute the biological facts. (At one point, he even explains her attachment to the child by saying that 'blood is thicker than water',⁹ even though they cannot be blood relatives, and it is clear that Simón knows this.)

Thus begins the third major turn in the plot. David is a very unusual child, as we shall discuss later, and begins to have trouble after they have been in Novilla for a year and he must start school. He is non-compliant, disruptive, disrespectful and often simply bizarre. When the authorities try to place David in what appears to be some sort of reform school, he escapes, and Inés decides to flee the city they are in and to begin another 'new life' somewhere else. Simón finally agrees to go along. They drive the car of Inés's family away from the city. David has an accident and is temporarily blinded. They pick up a hippie sort of hitchhiker named Juan, and drive off to their new future. The novel ends in a way that could suggest the possibility of a sequel and indeed, as this book goes to press *The Schooldays of Jesus* has just been published.

⁸ Coetzee, *The Childhood*, pp. 94, 102–3.

⁹ Coetzee, *The Childhood*, p. 95.

There are two other striking features of the novel that will help create a context – a context of ideas, one should say – within which these details begin to make some sense. The first sort of context arises from the many philosophy discussions. These concern mostly human desire in a number of different contexts (not at all an unusual theme in Coetzee's novels, especially the last three, if one counts *Summertime* as a novel), and metaphysics, especially the metaphysics of numbers and of the body–soul relation, and we shall return to them shortly.

But before considering those discussions, we need to note some details about the literary form. The novel is written in the historical present, and seems a kind of fable, in the manner of Kleist or Kafka. The laws of nature are not suspended as in so-called magical realism, and so we have a kind of realist novel, but only after the governing presupposition of one unreal premise: that there is a country named Novilla populated entirely by refugees, and having the unusual and barely believable characteristics we have briefly described. Once that premise is established, the rest of the narration is realistic and relies a great deal on free indirect discourse. Accordingly, we could say that Simón's mind is, largely, as much 'the landscape of the novel' as Novilla is.

However, the novel's most prominent literary or formal feature is its complex intertextual referential structure. There are many references to Plato (probably more to Plato than to anyone, and so to a major, repeating theme: the relation between the ideal and the real), to Wittgenstein, to Nietzsche, to Goethe, to Kafka, to Cervantes among others. But the most obvious and most puzzling is the very first thing we literally read: the title, *The Childhood of Jesus*. There is a small boy at the centre of the narrative, and so the title directs our attention to him. He is obviously not the historical Jesus, but the title seems to require us to find some other sort of meaning, since it is David's childhood we read about, and the book purports to be about a childhood. Coetzee has said in a public lecture that he wanted to publish the book without a title – just a blank cover, with the title only revealed at the end.¹⁰ And one can imagine the shock to, and perhaps amusement of, the reader at such an end – at least

¹⁰ This was at a reading in Cape Town in December of 2012. It is a fact mentioned in several reviews. For example, Jason Farago, *The New Republic*, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/114658/jm-coetzees-childhood-jesus-reviewed-jason-farago> [accessed 1 May 2016].