Thirty Years After… The Childhood of Jesus by J.M. Coetzee

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Abstract: Although J.M. Coetzee's body of works – unique and highly idiosyncratic – defies easy generalizations or summations, it is possible to identify several major tendencies present in his extraordinary oeuvre. Coetzee's novels published in the 1970s and 1980s, such as *In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K*, were seriously concerned with the power relation between the oppressor and the disfranchised under the oppressive systems and, according to a number of critics, often took the form of an allegory. In the late 1980s and 1990s, Coetzee focused on experimental fiction in which he expertly combined history, biography and fantasy and entered into intertextual dialogue with the masterpieces of Western literary tradition as well as their creators (e.g. *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg*). In the last decade or so, the nature of Coetzee's work has significantly changed. Old forms have been abandoned and Coetzee, instead, has turned towards other genres such as the memoir, essay, lecture, polemic – all of them being, in fact, intimate conversations Coetzee is having with himself, or, to be more precise, his multiple alter egos that he invents for the purpose of his fiction. Most notable examples include his autobiographical trilogy *Scenes from Provincial Life* and *Diary of a Bad Year*. This paper discusses Coetzee's most recent novel titled *The Childhood of Jesus*. Will the novel – published thirty years after *Life and Times of Michael K* – open a new chapter in Coetzee's oeuvre? Does it hail – as the title seems to suggest – a return to allegorical fiction? Or, perhaps, can it constitute another experiment in self-referentiality? My discussion of the novel will try to position the book in relation to Coetzee's other works and investigate its formal and thematic aspects in a comparative manner. The paper will also attempt to trace various literary and intertextual references and will ultimately see *The Childhood of Jesus* as a tribute to Miguel Cervantes and a work of a supreme ironist – a feature that is hardly ever considered when talking about Coetzee and his oeuvre.

Keywords: J.M. Coetzee; intertextuality; irony; Miguel Cervantes; South Africa

> "The persistence of the soul in an unrecognizable form, unknown to itself, without memory, without identity, is another question entirely." (Coetzee 2007: 154)

1. The work as a whole

In a collection of interviews and essays entitled *Negotiations 1972-1990*, Gilles Deleuze talked about his longtime friendship with another celebrated French philosopher, Michel Foucault, as well as about the challenges of reading the latter's works in the following manner:

> When you admire someone you don't pick and choose; you may like this or that book better than some other one, but you nevertheless take them as a whole, because you see that some element that seems less convincing than others is an absolutely essential step in his exploration, his alchemy, and that he wouldn't have reached the new revelation you find so astonishing if he hadn't followed the path on which you hadn't initially seen the need for this or that detour. (Deleuze 1995: 85)

Further elaborating on the role of 'style' in any writer's oeuvre, Deleuze continued with his argument: You have to take the work as a whole, to try to follow rather than judge it, see where it branches out in different directions, where it gets bogged down, moves forward, makes a breakthrough; you have to accept it, welcome it, as a whole. (ibid.)

I was powerfully reminded of Deleuze's pronouncement on the principles of reading Foucualt (and, one could claim, by extension, every writer) when, in December 2012, I learnt about a new novel by J.M. Coetzee scheduled for release in March 2013. For two major reasons, the method of taking 'the work as a whole' immediately appeared to me to be most desirable and, in fact, unrivalled by any other critical approach I could think of at the time. Firstly, Coetzee's new novel was to be released precisely thirty years after the publication of *Life and Times of Michael K* – the work which did not only win the Booker Prize in 1983, but also, together with *Waiting for the Barbarians*, established his position as an important writer in the English language. Secondly, the title of the new novel, i.e. *The Childhood of Jesus*, suggested Coetzee's return – especially after his recent attempts at life-writing genres such as *Diary of a Bad Year* or his *autre*-biographical trilogy *Scenes from Provincial Life* – to allegory, i.e. a literary method which to a number of critics [1], though not all and certainly not the writer

[1] Most notably Teresa Dovey (Dovey 1988) and Dominic Head (Head 1997), the main supporters of allegorical reading of Coetzee's works.

himself [2], used to be Coetzee's dominant modus of writing. While awaiting the release of *The Childhood of Jesus* and, meantime, pondering over its enigmatic title, I kept posing myself a number of questions: Would the novel open a new chapter in Coetzee's extraordinary oeuvre? Would it hail – as the title seems to suggest – a return to allegorical fiction? Or, perhaps, would it constitute another experiment in self-referentiality? When the novel was finally published in March 2013, the reviewers (e.g. Tait 2013; Markovits 2013; Miller 2013; Robson 2013; Lo Dico 2013; Tayler 2013) unanimously labeled *The Childhood of Jesus* a work of allegory, though none of them was capable of providing their readers with an explanation what the 'guise' actually represented or referred to. What dominated their first responses to the book was the pervading and overpowering sense of mystery ("a very mysterious novel. I finished it […] without any clear sense of what it was actually about" [Tait]), puzzlement ("I can't say I have figured it out […] It just isn't really about Jesus, except at some hard-to-pin-down allegorical level" [Markovits]) and the narrative's labyrinthine quality which, nevertheless remained "too elusive to provide satisfaction" (Lo Dico).

The present essay is, to the best of my knowledge, a first detailed critical discussion of *The Childhood of Jesus*, and it aims, in line with Deleuze's idea of taking "the work as a whole," to position *The Childhood of Jesus* in relation to Coetzee's other works by means of investigating its formal and thematic aspects in a comparative manner. However, it has another goal as well. One of the entries from Coetzee's 'diary' focuses on a writer's voice changing over time, on a writer's 'late style,' to use the term of Theodor W. Adorno and Edward Said (Said 2007: 7). Its narrator, señor C, concludes that the experience of many writers growing older is characterised by detachment: "[they] grow cooler or colder. The texture of their prose becomes thinner, their treatment of character more schematic" (Coetzee 2007: 193). But this development may also be seen in terms of "a liberation, a clearing of the mind to take on more important tasks," (ibid.) as in the case of Leo Tolstoy. Hence, in my analysis of *The Childhood of Jesus*, I also hope to see whether the book is a sign of Coetzee's decline into "didacticism"

[2] For example, in 1988, in his seminal essay "The Novel Today," Coetzee famously wrote: "a story is not a message with a covering, a rhetorical or aesthetic covering" (Coetzee 1998: 4). The culmination of Coetzee's anti-allegorical move can be found in the post-script to Coetzee's 2003 novel entitled *Elizabeth Costello*, in which his female alter-ego says that nothing is an allegory: "How I ask you can I live with rats and dogs and beetles crawling through me day and night, drowning and gasping, scratching at me, tugging me, urging me deeper and deeper into revelation – how? We are not made for revelation, I want to cry out, nor I nor you, my Philip, revelation that sears the eye like staring into the sun" (Coetzee 1993: 229). Among critics, the studies of Derek Attridge devoted to Coetzee's oeuvre refuse to treat textual elements as metaphors or symbols of other, grander entities or ideas (Attridge 2005: 32-64).

and "aridity," or, perhaps, a proof of the writer ultimately "ridding himself of the shackles that [have] enslaved him to appearances, enabling him to face directly the one question that truly engaged his soul: how to live" (ibid.).

2. Behind the gate

The Childhood of Jesus [3] appears to pick up the thread of the narrative where it was last abandoned by the eponymous heroine of *Elizabeth Costello* when she was waiting at the gates of heaven. Now, she seems to have finally passed through the gates and following an identity (gender and name) shift she has assumed the shape of a man named Simón, who, on his journey to 'the other side,' has been joined by a five-year-old boy David. The sense that the novel's diegesis, i.e. "l'univers où advient cette histoire," (Genette 1982: 419) is, indeed, otherworldly which is emphasised several times throughout the book. Both Simón and David arrive in Novilla from Belstar, which the former unambiguously calls "limbo" (Coetzee 2013: 209). The reason why they have found themselves in Novilla is also quite evident to the novel's readers, i.e. they have been given "a new life" and "a new name" (Coetzee 2013: 18). "We are here for the same reason everyone else is. We have been given a chance to live and we have accepted that chance. It is a great thing, to be. It is the greatest thing of all" (Coetzee 2013: 17), Simón explains to the boy. Half-way through the narrative both the location and the ontological status of the characters are further confirmed by Simón and his use of grammatical structure (present perfect tense): "After death there is always another life. You have seen that" (Coetzee 2013: 133). Coetzee's version of heaven is a fusion of classical, ancient components (they cross the water identifiable as the Styx; a Charon-like harbor master does not allow anyone to take the boat back to the old life), and Kafkesque/post-Holocaust images of bureaucratic rules and constraints that govern the new life: having gone through the check-in point, they arrive in Centro de Reubicación (Centre of resettlement) where they are given "passbooks," "proofs of residence," and "relocation allowances" (Coetzee 2013: 9). At first, it may seem that Simón and David have been brought to the

[3] In my opinion, the name of "Jesus" in the title of the book should be read using the phonemic system of the Spanish language, i.e. /xe:sus/. The reasons for this are manifold, e.g. 1) all the names in the book are transcribed in the Spanish language using relevant diacritical marks (e.g. Simón, Inés, etc.); 2) an evident anti-allegorical move and the novel's critique of symbolic reading (discussed in some detail towards the end of the present paper). In English, a name "Jesus" pronounced /xe'sus/ is just a popular male name in Spanish-speaking countries and it connotes (i.e. implies) a number of meanings, while "Jesus" pronounced /'jɛ:su(:)s/ denotes (i.e. marks, indicates) a specific historical figure, namely Jesus of Nazareth.

republic of clerks and, consequently, their status has been reduced to that of "new arrivals" (ibid.). Soon, however, once the initial difficulties are overcome, Novilla (which one's basic command of Spanish allows deciphering as 'no villa,' i.e. not a home [*casa*], not a town/borough [*pueblo*]) ceases to be governed by officers and, instead, is ruled by philosophers, especially those following the principles of moderation.

Novilla is a place of asceticism and a bloodless place – both symbolically and literally due to ubiquitous vegetarianism. It is a republic of universals (goodwill), not particulars (love). People inhabiting this unreal city have "lost interest in old attachments" (Coetzee 2013: 19) and they neither have questions nor show curiosity about what has been left behind. They have even managed to rationalize and rein in their sexual needs which, if they arise, are tended to by special clinics, recreation centres such as "the Salón Confort" and "the Salón Relax" (Coetzee 2013: 141) with receptionists and sessions/appointments meticulously scheduled. "Everyone is busy becoming a better citizen, a better person," (Coetzee 2013: 122) so, after work, everyone attends "the Institute" where they study ideas. Work, especially physical work ("what would be the point?" [Coetzee 2013: 15] one of the characters asks when Simón suggests using a crane to facilitate their work), is not considered a necessity, but a privilege which gives meaning to one's life, while its primary function is providing one with "comradely love" ("without labour, and the sharing of labour, comradeship is not possible, it is no longer substantial" [Coetzee 2013: 110]). Simón, who finds a stevedore job at the wharf, becomes particularly exposed to philosophical disputations, especially during the lunchtime breaks. The rhetorical skills and intellectual abilities of an average inhabitant of Novilla are best exemplified by a discussion between Simón and his fellow stevedore Eugenio. When, having visited the storehouse, Simón realizes that the grain they painstakingly and arduously carry on their back is not used to make bread but spoilt by rats, he rises to offer an argument in favour of progress and change. However, he is expertly challenged by Eugenio:

> 'Our friend invokes the concept of the real in a confusing way,' says the young man, speaking fluently and confidently, like a star student. 'To demonstrate his confusion, let us compare history with climate. The climate we live in, we can agree, is greater than we. None of us can ordain what the climate shall be. But it is not the quality of being greater than us that makes the climate real. Climate is real because it has real manifestations. Those manifestations include wind and rain. Thus when it rains we get wet; when the wind rises our caps get blown off. Rain and wind are transitory, second-order realities, such as are accessible to our senses. Above them in the hierarchy of the real sits climate.

> Consider now history. If history, like climate, were a higher reality, then history would have manifestations which we would be able to feel through our senses. But where are these manifestations?' he looks around. 'Which of us has ever had his cap blown off by history?' There is silence . 'No one. Because history has no manifestations. Because history is not real. Because history is just a made-up story.
>
> To be more accurate' – the speaker is Eugenio, who yesterday wanted to know whether he would prefer to work in an office – 'because history has no manifestations in the present. History is merely a pattern we see in what has passed. It has no power to reach into the present.
>
> Our friend Simón says that we should get machines to do our work for us, because history so ordains. But it is not history that tells us to give up honest labour, it is idleness and the lure of idleness. Idleness is real in a way that history is not. We can feel it with our senses. We feel its manifestations each time we lie down on the grass and close our eyes and vow we will never get up again, even when the whistle blows, so sweet is our pleasure.' (Coetzee 2013: 115-116)

Since his very first day in Novilla, Simón is the only character who seems to openly resist the charms and arguments of Novilla. In one of the conversations with Elena, his infrequent lover, he declares: "I am reluctant to yield up: not memories themselves but the feel of residence in a body with a past, a body soaked in its past" (Coetzee 2013: 143). He finds the place lacking substance and weight. And, typical of all elderly characters in Coetzee's fiction, he particularly misses opportunities of sexual intercourse. Since he has not given up entirely on the old life, he still yearns for love and its inevitable constituents such as frustration, doubt and heartsore (Coetzee 2013: 57). For Simón, life in Novilla is "too placid for his taste, too lacking in ups and downs, in drama and tension – is too much, in fact, like the music on the radio. *Anodina*: is that a Spanish word?" (Coetzee 2013: 64). But Simón is not only the man of flesh, but, quite surprisingly, the man of faith as well. When asked by Elena about his decision to give guardianship over the boy to Inés, a young woman whom he – against reason, against common sense [4] – identifies as David's mother, he explains: "If we don't trust the voice that speaks inside us, saying, This is the one! Then there is nothing left to trust" (Coetzee 2013: 105).

[4] One necessarily needs to point to certain inconsistency in the presentation of Simón by Coetzee. His unreasonable decisions (e.g. identifying Inés as the boy's mother) are followed by highly rational ones, e.g. his support of natural philosophy (why it rains [Coetzee 2013: 130-131]), or the argument in favour of machinery, which his comrades call "stupid" and offering "wrong answers" (Coetzee 2013: 114).

Simón is certainly the novel's central character, though in his own words his extra-diegetic function is secondary and subservient to David: "Who I am doesn't matter. I am not important. I am a kind of manservant. I look after the child" (Coetzee 2013: 80). The circumstances of their first encounter lack details and are never provided by the narratives. We simply learn that the man and the boy met on their way to the 'other side' and Simón assumed responsibility over David who had lost a pouch with a letter including his mother's name. The boy remains the novel's ultimate enigma. "You've got a real devil in you," (Coetzee 2013: 43) one of the stevedores exclaims to emphasise the boy's unsettling uniqueness. And rightly so as the boy can read one's mind, communicates the animals, including the dead ones (Coetzee 2013: 199), believes that Don Quixote is real, can sing one of Schubert's arias (in German!), and, according to other kids, says "crazy things," "that he can make people disappear. That he can make himself disappear" (Coetzee 2013: 206). The two realms which are particularly exploited by the narrative to illustrate David's unusualness are those of letters and numbers. It is when Simón decides to teach David how to read and write that he experiences some kind of epiphany: For the first time it occurs to him that this may be not just a clever child – there are many clever children in the world – but something else, something for which at this moment he lacks the word. (Coetzee 2013: 151)

The boy has his own way of reading and counting and refuses to submit himself to what is written on the page – the ability defined by Simón as "real reading" (Coetzee 2013: 163). Instead, with his eyes closed, David places the fingers on the pages and reads "through his fingers," as his aim seems to be not "read[ing] the letters," but "read[ing] the story" (Coetzee 2013: 161, 160). A similar procedure is applied to counting. For David, knowing the numbers does not mean *knowing* their order and, consequently, adding and subtracting, but *naming* the numbers. He looks at numbers as if they were stars and numbers, similarly to those cosmic spheres of plasma, can fall out of the sky into the cracks and die. [5] "It is as if the numbers were islands floating in a great black sea of nothingness," Simón concludes, "and he were each time being asked to close his eyes and launch himself across the void" (Coetzee 2013: 249). According to señor León, David's teacher, he can recite all kind of numbers, yes, but not in the right order. As for the marks he makes with his pencil, you may call them writing, he may call them writing, but they are not writing as generally understood. Whether they have some private meaning I cannot judge. (Coetzee 2013: 205)

[5] Ultimately, it is Simón who falls into the crack when he trips over a rope and tumbles into the space between the quay and the freighter.

Though this brief overview of the book's diegesis and its characters may have already signaled some of Coetzee's thematic and structural 'trademarks,' I should now like to pursue a more systematic analysis of *The Childhood of Jesus* taking the similarities between this particular novel and Coetzee's previous literary works into account.

In my opinion, *The Childhood of Jesus* is to be listed among Coetzee's most intertextual pieces, both in terms of its intricate dialogue with other writers and their works, as well as Coetzee's own oeuvre. The examples are manifold and they reach far beyond Coetzee's inimitable style, i.e. the third person, present tense narrative voice as well as his "rule of three" (Tait). Simón joins a panoply of Coetzee's ageing male characters who lust for young women (Paul Rayment, señor C, *Summertime*'s J.M. Coetzee), while *The Childhood of Jesus* is populated by figures that bear striking resemblance to the characters from Coetzee's other novels: the two doctors, including Dr García (the medical officer from *Life and Times of Michael K*), Ana [6] (Anna from *The Master of Petersburg*, Marijana from *Slow Man* and Anya from *Diary of a Bad Year*), Bolivar [7] (dogs in *The Master of Petersburg*, *Disgrace*, *Elizabeth Costello*). The story of the third brother, "the humblest and most derided, who after the first and second brothers have disdainfully passed by, helps the old woman to carry her heavy load or draws thorn from the lion's paw" and "is crowned prince" (Coetzee 1998: 65) – a children's story which leaves the deepest mark on the protagonist of *Boyhood* – is now substituted by its slightly modified version in which the third brother finds a precious herb of cure for his mother, has his heart consumed by the bear and is "borne up into the sky" (Coetzee 2013: 146-147). Finally, one can also identify at least one Jewish motif, so characteristic for Coetzee's works (cf. Kaplan 2011). Despite his desire for meat, Simón refuses to eat pork as "pigs are unclean animals. Pig meat is poo meat" (Coetzee 2013: 171). However, if, out of all Coetzee's novels, I were to identify the ones that appear to me to be the most relevant for *The Childhood of Jesus*, I would undoubtedly mention three books: *Elizabeth Costello*, *The Master of Petersburg* and *Foe*. [8]

As I have already indicated, *The Childhood of Jesus* could be approached as a follow-up to the open-ended narrative of *Elizabeth Costello*, with Simón as another incarnation of the latter novel's titular character. The similarities are uncanny and impossible to be ignore. Like Elizabeth Costello, Simón is a

[6] In Hebrew, Anna means 'favour,' 'grace.' The (in)significance of the proper names will be discussed in the concluding part of the present paper.
[7] In Spanish, Bolivar means 'mighty,' 'warlike.'
[8] I recognise the fact that some critics and interpreters might be prone to prioritise other novels (e.g. *Waiting for the Barbarians* [unspecified location, similar atmosphere] or *Boyhood* [motherhood, special position of a son] and find them more relevant than the novels that I have favoured in the present paper.

philosopher and arguments and debates, whose wide range of topics runs across the fields of ontology, epistemology and ethics, are where his home is. Their world is the world of ideas and incessant self-interrogation. Like Elizabeth Costello in a famous lecture in which she has drawn an analogy between the industrial production of meat and the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis, Simón alienates himself from his comrades by putting some very accusatory arguments (e.g. he calls their work "a useless pageant" [Coetzee 2013: 11]), or problematic and highly controversial comparisons (the dead bodies are called the poo, while plumbers are described as undertakers [Coetzee 2013: 133]). And like Elizabeth Costello, Simón is competently contradicted by other characters in the novel (e.g. Ana who ridicules Simón's 'pro-sex' argument [9], or Elena who castigates his decision of giving up David following what he calls "a conviction" [10]) who force the readers to question their support and identification with Simón's way of reasoning. What the two characters also have in common is their love of linguistic games: paradoxes, syllogisms and puns in particular. [11] Also, a close reading of rhetorical formulas (e.g. 'if' questions, inferring the general from the particular, exclamations – like in, for example, a discussion of uniqueness vs. sameness of "human nature" [Coetzee 2013: 49]) exploited by Simón and Elizabeth Costello reveal a complete overlap of Coetzee's two literary creations. Finally, Simón's resistance towards Novilla, the republic of abstraction, and his desire for what is "tangible" (Coetzee 2013: 56) could be seen as identical to Costello's support of "the thing itself, the only thing" (Coetzee 2003: 217) and rejection of the reading of body as "a vessel of revelation," (Coetzee 2003: 229) most explicitly expressed in "At the Gate" and an imagined letter of Elizabeth Chandos to Francis Bacon. When Simón challenges the principles of the heavenly state ("you tell us to subdue our hunger, to starve the dog inside us. Why? What is wrong with hunger? What are our appetites for if not to tell us what we need? If we had no appetites, no desires, how would we live?" [Coetzee 2013: 29]), he simply offers a different shape to Costello's own argument favouring the authority of the body and recognition of "fullness, embodiedness, the sensation

[9] "As a tribute to me – an offering, not an insult – you want to grip me tight and push part of your body into me. As a tribute, you claim. I am buffled. (…) If you found me to be an incarnation of the good, you would not want to perform such an act upon me. So why wish to do so if I am an incarnation of the beautiful. Is the beautiful inferior to the good? Explain" (Coetzee 2013: 32).

[10] "A conviction, an intuition, a delusion – what is the difference when it cannot be questioned?" (Coetzee 2013: 84).

[11] E.g. the "un-realness" of history will be decided on by "the verdict of history" (Eugenio: "Will you concede that history is not real?"; Simón: "I will bow my head to the force of the real. I will call it submitting to the verdict of history" [Coetzee 2013: 117]). When David writes a sentence in Spanish and misspells the word 'God'/'*Dios*'(he writes "Deos sabe si hay Dulcinea o no en el mundo" [Coetzee 2013: 218]) and, consequently, asks who God is, Simón responds: "God knows is an expression. It is a way of saying no one knows." This declaration is followed by a question: "Is God no one?" (ibid.).

of being […], of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world" (Coetzee 2003: 78).

Another novel which is powerfully present in *The Childhood of Jesus* is Coetzee's 1994 *The Master of Petersburg*. Both narratives are, in fact, the stories of responsibility and parentage – the difference is that the search for a son [12] is substituted by a search for a mother. Also, the setting is familiar, especially the docks where Simón is employed which bears striking resemblance to the Stolyarny Quay where Dostoevsky's stepson was found dead, having fallen from the tower (as I have already mentioned, Simón also falls into the river and almost drowns). But what encourages me to identify a very special link between the two novels is the idea which prevails in both texts: the command to respond to the unexpected, to accept the Other in an unconditional way. Simón's appeal to Inés to take the boy and become a mother to him is solely based on suspending one's rationality and responding to the inner voice:

> Please believe me – please take it on faith – this is not a simple matter. The boy is without mother. What that means I cannot explain to you because I cannot explain it to myself. Yet I promise you, if you will simply say Yes, without forethought, without afterthought, all will become clear to you, as clear as day, or so I believe. (Coetzee 2013: 75)

He further adds:

> You have doubts, I can see. *How can this child whom I have never laid eyes on be my child?* You ask yourself. I plead with you: put doubt aside, listen instead to what your heart says. Look at him. Look at the boy. What does your heart say? (Coetzee 2013: 79)

This part of *The Childhood of Jesus* is reminiscent of the "Ivanov" chapter of *The Master of Petersburg* in which Dostoevsky responds to "the voice of the unexpected" (Coetzee 1990: 80), having been woken up by a voice calling "Isaev!" Firstly, he attends to the chained and terrified dog. Secondly, he attends to the beggar/police spy named Ivanov. What governs his actions is not reason (on the contrary, Dostoevsky knows that he acts against logic and reason) but attentiveness:

> Tediously the paradox comes back: *Expect the one you do not expect*. Very well; but must every beggar then be treated as a prodigal son, embraced welcomed into the home, feasted? Yes, that is what Pascal would say: bet on everyone, every beggar, every mangy dog; only thus will you be sure that the One, the true son, the thief in the night, will not slip through the net. And Herod would agree: make sure – slay all the children without exception. (Coetzee 1990: 84)

[12] What is worth noticing that Pavel Iasev, like David, is not Dostoevsky's (Simón's) biological son.

It is precisely the same principle – illogical, thoroughly unreasonable – that governs Simón's attitude to the boy. The principle which first made him take care of the boy while crossing the sea to the other side and is now to be followed by Inés who exercises her contentious motherhood.

However, the one text that particularly speaks to me through the narrative of *The Childhood of Jesus* is *Foe*. The similarities indeed proliferate both in terms of the novel's diegesis as well as it thematic concerns. Both Simón and David are in some way castaways who have reached the shores of the new land following some kind of catastrophe. David certainly is a new version of Friday – an enigma over whose 'meaning' the war is fought between Simón and other characters of the novel. Even his eccentric clothes chosen by Inés ("he wears a new white shirt [in fact more blouse than shirt – it has a frilly front and hangs over his pants] […] blue shoes with straps instead of laces, and brass buttons on the side" [Coetzee 2013: 88-89]) are reminiscent of the new outfit of Friday (Daniel Foe's wig, frilly shirt and shoes) that he wears when he finally arrives in England. David believes that holes lie between the pages of his book and if one does not hurry closing it, one may fall into it. In fact, his fear may not sound too foolish if we recall the closing scene of *Foe* in which the narrator literally slips overboard (he dives into the open book) and enters Susan's narrative. He descends underwater and in the wreck of the ship he encounters Friday – "half buried in the sand" and with "the chain about his throat;" (Coetzee 1987: 157) he finds the home of Friday – the place where no words are uttered and where "bodies are their own signs" (ibid.). David also repeats a number of gestures first performed by Friday, including his overt refusal to learn how to write. Like Friday, David develops his private script, his idiosyncratic mode of communication, whose meaning remains a secret to everyone. [13] "There are stories for himself, not for us," (Coetzee 2013: 208) señora Otxoa, who visits David to decide upon his transfer to a special school, concludes. Simón is the novel's Susan Barton figure who insists on teaching David/Friday how to count and write and who protects him from various assaults on his uniqueness (e.g. when Inés wants to turn David into an infant acquiring a cot and a stroller). Like Susan, Simón ultimately defends David from the system, as they escape from Novilla to avoid David being re-sent to the special school. Another theme that both *The Childhood of Jesus* and *Foe* have in common is that of the ownership of the story. The questions that were posed in Coetzee's 1986 book – Who owns the story? Who does the book belong to? Who possesses the meaning of it? – are formulated again, this time in relation to an illustrated version of Don Quixote that David has been reading in his 'own way.' Coetzee's self-conscious

[13] David may be writing stories about his parentage, or about his origin, the place he comes from. A number of hypotheses are provided in the course of the narrative with none of them confirmed.

(and highly ironic – the feature that I am going to address in the later part of my article) use of his well-known tropes is perhaps most visible in one scene when Simón asks the boy about the very last number as the boy claims to have visited them all. "Only don't say it's Omega. Omega doesn't count," (Coetzee 2013: 150) Simon exclaims and, when challenged by the confused boy about the meaning of Omega, he responds: "Never mind. Just don't say Omega." It seems to me that in this way Coetzee ridicules one of the most prevalent critical readings of *Foe*. When on the last page of the third chapter Friday is writing the letter *o*, Foe self-confidently asserts that "it is a beginning […] tomorrow you must teach him *a*" (Coetzee 1987: 152). In a conventional interpretation of this scene (cf. Kusek 2009) *O* stands for omega, the sign of an end, the sign of the rejection of false authorization offered by Foe and Susan and based on accepting the dominant discourse. Here, as I will soon argue, this gesture serves as a self-conscious way of distancing oneself from one's oeuvre and from attempts to read the actions of his characters as meaning something more, something else than what they really are.

3. In a labyrinth of texts

Among the most characteristic components of Coetzee's writing practices is their intricate web of relations with texts by other writers, often the ones Coetzee is known to hold in high regard: Defoe, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Kafka, among others. So when discussing *The Childhood of Jesus* as 'part of the whole,' an element of a larger set, one necessarily needs to pay special attention to the novel's intertextual borrowings and inspirations. Before I embark on discussing two founding texts of *The Childhood of Jesus*: the Bible, the New Testament in particular, and *Don Quixote*, I would like to point to some other works that enter the pages of Coetzee's latest piece – the ones that I have managed to identify, often engaging myself in a detective-like work as that of an archivist or a librarian.

The Childhood of Jesus is a truly Borgesian labyrinth of texts. Novilla owes a lot both to *Die deutsche Gelehrtenrepublik* – a work by the German poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock about the utopian republic of scholars/philosophers [14], and, unmistakably, to Voltaire's *Candide* ("So it is for the best, after all, that I am here, on this wharf, in this port, in this city, in this land. All is for the best in this best of all possible worlds" (Coetzee 2013: 41) – Simón ironically comments on the unconditionally positive way Novilla is perceived by its inhabitants). Georg Hegel also makes his way into the narrative with Simón's and Eugenio's discussion of good and bad infinities (Coetzee 2013: 250).

[14] I am indebted to Wojciech Szymański for directing my attention to Klopstock's work.

Plato certainly provides another important context for *The Childhood of Jesus*, sometimes approached by Coetzee with a tongue-in-cheek bravado (when David watches television in the house of señor Daga, Simón's major antagonist, he specially enjoys Mickey Mouse and Pluto whose name he pronounces as "Plato" [Coetzee 2013: 184]). Coetzee's novel is particularly resonant with two Platonic texts, namely *The Republic* and *The Symposium*. Simón himself is a Platonic philosopher as he believes in ideas ("we are like ideas. Ideas never die") and the duality of a human being ("we partake of the ideal but we also make poo. That is because we have a double nature" [Coetzee 2013: 133]). Also, the metaphor of a cave, the dynamics between shadows and reality, is one of the central tropes in the novel, as visible, for example, in the following passage, when Simón talks about his recognition of Inés as David's mother and his decision to entrust her with the boy:

> I have no memories. But images still persist, shades of images. How that is I can't explain. Something deeper persists too, which I call the memory of having a memory. It is not from the past that I recognize Inés but from elsewhere. It is as if the image of her were embedded in me. I have no doubts about her, no second thoughts. At least, I have no doubt that she is the boy's true mother. (Coetzee 2013: 98)

A picnic with Ana during which Simón offers a series of arguments on the nature and in favour of Eros and sex – the arguments which become refuted by a young woman – can certainly be seen as a reworking of a drinking party in *The Symposium*.

In the course of the narrative, the references to other literary texts become more frequent, but at the same time more playful and cryptic. During the party held by Inés and attended by her brothers, Simón and Daga, David, who is responsible for pouring wine, suddenly joins the elders in drinking it as well. Having choked on the drink and dropped the bottle, the boy is mocked by Diego, Inés's brother, in the following manner: "What ails thee, gentle King? […] Canst thou not hold thy liquor" (Coetzee 2013: 193). This response strikes the reader as quite unusual and rightly so as it appears to be a slightly modified quotation from Canto XV of "Purgatorio," second part of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Towards the end of the canto, Dante has a complex vision (the vision of gentleness, the opposite of wrath, as Virgil explains later on) which is comprised of three scenes: Jesus being found in the temple by his mother and Joseph; a woman calling upon her husband, Pisistratus of Athens, to kill the man who dared to touch their daughter, which the good kind declines; an angry mob stoning a boy to death and the boy forgiving his persecutors. Enjoying his vision, Dante, as if in sleep, slips on the ladder, and is rebuked by Virgil with the words that Coetzee

subsequently adapts, i.e. "What ails thee, that thou canst not hold / Thy footing firm" (Alighieri 1909: 209).

A similarly quizzical intertextual move is performed by Coetzee when Simón and the boy go on a trip out of Novilla into the countryside. While on the bus, David suddenly starts singing the first stanza of Goethe's "Der Erlkönig" (Schubert's aria, I should presume, as it is the one best known). To a conscientious and attentive reader, the circumstances and the setting (a weekend trip) of the boy's performance (in German, though the boy thinks he sings in English!) are contrasted with the story offered by Goethe in his poem, the story of the death of a child assailed by a supernatural being while travelling with his father. On its own, Goethe's poem is, similarly to Coetzee's novel, full of questions: Who is the father? Where are he and his son going? Who is the Alder King, sometimes also translated as the Elf King? Initially, one could think that the story of David and Simón is a re-enactment of the Alder King poem (the child, but not the father, sees and hears the supernatural, the Alder King; the father tried to provide his son with rational explanations; the boy dies proving his vision was real). But upon a close inspection of the words sung by the boy, one realizes that David makes a number of mistakes.

The original poem reads:

Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?
Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind;
Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm,
Er faßt ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm. [15]
(Goethe 1994: 86)

However, the boy sings the following version, substituting "Nacht" (1st line) with "Dampf" (steam), "faßt," "sicher" and "halt" (4th line) with "füttert" (feeds), "Zucker" (sugar) and "küsst" (kisses):

Wer reitet so spät durch Dampf und Wind?
Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind;
Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm,
Er füttert ihn Zucker, er küsst ihn warm.
(Coetzee 2013: 67)

[15] The English translation reads: "Who rides there so late through the night dark and drear? / The father it is, with his infant so dear; / He holdeth the boy tightly clasp'd in his arm, / He holdeth him safely, he keepeth him warm" (Goethe 2006: 173).

Is there any significance in the changes introduced by Coetzee? Or, is this another playful literary trick? Personally, I am tempted to support the latter claim, but prior to providing a more systematic justification of my claim, I would like to discuss two narratives which are the Ur-texts of *The Childhood of Jesus*, i.e. the story of Jesus of Nazareth and Don Quixote.

Indisputably, Biblical allusions are the most frequent intertextual components in the whole narrative and they are manifested at the level of words/expressions, concepts and specific events. *The Childhood of Jesus* both opens and closes with appropriated episodes from the Gospels (it starts with the search for a place, indifference of the Novilla/Bethlehem people, a night spent in a hand-made shelter; and ends with David taking a new name and gathering first disciples around him, including Juan [i.e. John]). Simón who has "no *natural* (my emphasis) duty of care" to David and his "claims are very abstract, very artificial" (Coetzee 2013: 124, 95) is easily identified as a Joseph-figure, not a biological father, but a guardian of Jesus. As the Hebrew origin of the name implies, Simón is the man who listens, who gives heed or attention, so, at times, Simón is also to be recognised as Saint Christopher, a carrier, a stevedore (*estibador*), who carries the boy both literally (as in the first scenes of the novel) as well as symbolically (Simón carries grain which is used to make bread, and the bread is referred to as "the staff of life. He who has bread shall not want" [Coetzee 2013: 97]). [16] The quoted sentence illustrates another feature of *The Childhood of Jesus*, i.e. permeation of its language with Biblical vocabulary: bread is "the staff of life", the boy is referred to by Simón as "light of [his] life," (Coetzee 2013: 240) while the latter is "girding [his] loins" [17] (Coetzee 2013: 52) when commencing the search for David's mother. Elena and her son Fidel who want to – in accordance with the meaning of their names [18] – guard the boy and encourage Simón to save David from what they consider Inés's unlawful claims, could be interpreted as Saint Helena and Constantine I. The latter was the first Roman emperor to be converted to Christianity, while the former, Constantine's mother, according to legend, found a piece of the cross on which Christ was crucified when she traveled to Jerusalem. The embodiment of evil, a devil-like figure, the tempter is señor Daga, who, according to Simón "is trying to lead you [David] into temptation" (Coetzee 2013: 188). Daga poses a threat not only to the boy (e.g. he gives the boy alcohol in a silver flask or kidnaps him), but to the mother as well. He may be promising to give Inés a child, but his name – which in Spanish means dagger – suggests

[16] The expression "staff of life" is a direct borrowing from the Bible (cf. Leviticus 26:26, Psalm 105:16; Ezekiel 4:16; Ezekiel 5:16; Ezekiel 14:13; Isaiah 3:1). Interestingly, David abhors bread.
[17] "Gird (up) your loins," i.e. prepare and strengthen yourself for what is to come. E.g. 1 Kings 18:45-6 and 1 Peter 1:13.
[18] In Greek, Elena means torch and moon while, in Latin, Fidel stands for faithful.

the pain he is going to inflict upon the mother, in line with Simeon's prophecy ("This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, but he will be a joy to many others. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul"). [19] Among some more explicit references to Biblical content that I have managed to identify in reading *The Childhood of Jesus*, I would list Simón's twisted version of consubstantiation ("if you eat pig you become like a pig. In part. Not wholly, but in part. You partake of the pig" [Coetzee 2013: 171]), and the already mentioned episode of a party held by Inés during which David goes around with a bottle and tumbler and pours wine for everyone (the scene brings together the images of the Wedding at Cana and the Last Supper).

David is a new Jesus (the historical Jesus of Nazareth claimed to be from the tribe of Judah, one of whose member was King David), a boy who finds a mother (Greek origin of the name Inés means pure, holy and chaste; an indication of Virgin Mary), has a guardian (Simón), but whose father is never mentioned since, according to Simón, "his father is a different matter" (Coetzee 2013: 74). References to Jesus of Nazareth are manifold. David dreams of establishing a sect: "the Brotherhood of David" (Coetzee 2013: 195). White doves and fish are the animals he likes or dreams about and he strongly opposes physical violence ("I don't want them to fight;" "You mustn't fight" [Coetzee 2013: 47]). He believes himself to be a savior who can bring the dead back to life. When Marciano, one of the stevedores, drowns as a result of the fire at the wharf, the boy insists on finding his body so that he could "suck the smoke out of him" (Coetzee 2013: 159). "I want to save him," he adds. When El Rey, the stevedores' horse, dies, he finds the dead animal and announced the horse's resurrection:

> He clambers onto the platform. 'Poor, poor El Rey!' he murmurs. Then he notices the blood that has congealed in the horse's ear, and the dark bullet hole above it, and shuts up.
>
> 'It's all right,' says the boy. 'He is going to be well again in three days.' (Coetzee 2013: 198)

When asked to write on the blackboard "'I must tell the truth' he acts in the following manner: 'Writing from left to right, forming the letters clearly if slowly, the boy writes: *Yo soy la verdad*, I am the truth'" (Coetzee 2013: 225). David, as his Biblical name suggests, is Novilla's royalty – though his kingship is only understood by a few yet. His birthday gift from Simón and Inés is a red pouch with the initial letter 'D' in gold (red and gold the royal colours) and, towards the end of the book, the boy indeed starts acting like a king. Upon his escape from

[19] Luke 2:34-35. One should also mention that in Christian iconography the Sacred (also known as Blessed or Immaculate) heart of Mary is depicted with a dagger (or daggers) through it.

Novilla with Simón and Inés, they meet Juan. When this first 'apostle' suggests abandoning their company, David shouts: "Stay, I command you" (Coetzee 2013: 273). On the night when the boy escapes from the reformatory school in Punto Arenas, Simón has a vision:

> Early the next morning, in the nameless space between sleeping and waking, he has a dream or vision. With uncommon clarity he sees a two-wheeled chariot hovering in the air at the foot of his bed. The chariot is made of ivory or some metal inlaid with ivory, and is drawn by two white horses, neither of whom is El Rey. Grasping the reins in one hand, holding the other hand aloft in a regal gesture, is the boy, naked save for a cotton loincloth. (Coetzee 2013: 237-238)

The vision of a triumphant boy escaping is unmistakably that of resurrection due to the passage's Christian iconography ("naked save for a cotton loincloth"). The stone which was sealed in order to protect the tomb and which was rolled away upon Christ's resurrection is substituted by the barbed wire which the boy claims to have walked through uninjured.

Christ's death and resurrection are evoked once again in a scene from another founding text of *The Childhood of Jesus*, namely *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. David's favourite episode from *An Illustrated Children's Don Quixote* – a book which has been borrowed from the library by Simón to teach him how to read and which the boy does indeed 'read' but in his own way – is that of the Cave of Montesinos. It is one of the best known fragments of *Don Quixote* (chapter XXIII, part II) which describes Don Quixote's descent into the cave. Having been pulled up from the cave, Don Quixote claims that he has spent three days and three nights there. His conviction is challenged by Sancho who insists on his master being in the cave for not more than half an hour. The episode unmistakably alludes to Christ's resurrection (precisely three days and night after crucifixion [20]) and to Saint Thomas, the skeptical apostle. In Coetzee's novel, when Don Quixote learns about Sancho's disbelief, he addresses his servant with a phrase ("O friend of little faith, when will you learn, when will you learn" [21] [Coetzee 2013: 164]), which bears striking resemblance to what Jesus famously says to Saint Thomas in the Gospel according to Saint Matthew ("O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"). [22]

[20] In Coetzee's novel, Don Quixote is presented as similar to Jesus: "There is a man in the book who calls himself Don Quixote and saves people. But some of the people he saves don't really want to be saved. They are happy just as they are. They get cross with Don Quixote and shout at him. They say he doesn't know what he is doing, he is upsetting a social order" (Coetzee 2013: 226).
[21] I find it impossible to determine whether this fragment comes from any version of Don Quixote's story available in English. The phrase certainly is not used in Cervantes's narrative so I am inclined to believe that it is another of Coetzee's playful inventions.
[22] Matthew 14: 31.

However, regardless of its Biblical connotation, the above episode as well as the character of Don Quixote is primarily used to stage the major debate that *The Childhood of Jesus* addresses, namely that between fantasy and reality. In the famous the Cave of Montesinos episode, we are encouraged by Cervantes to ask who is dreaming and who experiences the real thing. Is it Sancho? Or, perhaps, Don Quixote? The impossibility of determining the truth is addressed by Simón in one of his conversations with David:

> It presents the world to us through the pairs of eyes. Don Quixote's eyes and Sancho's eyes, To Don Quixote, it is a giant he is fighting. To Sancho, it is a windmill. Most of us – not you, perhaps, but most of us nevertheless – will agree with Sancho that it is a windmill. That includes the artist who drew a picture of a windmill. But it also included the man who wrote the book. (Coetzee 2013: 154)

Duly supported by extensive critical commentary [23], every reader of *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* knows that obfuscation of truth is the governing principle of Cervantes's book, as proven, for example, by its complicated tri-level narrative structure which comprises of author, translator and editor. The fictional author is Cide Hamete Benengeli, the Arabic author, the Moorish historian who records the events of Don Quixote. The translator of the story into Castilian is an unnamed *morisco*, while its editor Miguel de Cervantes. Coetzee further complicates this phenomenon of multiple authorship, when he makes David read *An Illustrated Children's Don Quixote* by… Benengeli himself.

4. Fiction of fiction of fiction…

In my opinion, *The Childhood of Jesus* is – essentially – a quixotic novel, both in the sense that its plot owes a lot to the story of Don Quixote, but, above all, in the story's evocation of the spirit of unpredictability and extravaganza that permeates the pages of Cervantes's work. What unites Coetzee's and Cervantes's narratives is their indeterminacy and what I would call epistemological uncertainty. In a constant game and change of appearances, we are never to determine whether don Quixote is in fact a madman, or an actor, an ironic subject, who, by means of (supposedly) re-enacting certain conventions, simply ridicules them (e.g. when he corrects the narrator). In other words, we, the readers are confused on whether Don Quixote *is* or *plays*. Doubleness of vision and permanent polarization of a reader's attitude towards the character of David seems to me the constitutive principle of *The Childhood of Jesus*.

[23] Among those who wrote about Don Quixote one will find Georg Hegel, Karl Marks, György Lukács and Michel Foucault (cf. Mitosek 2013: 44-47).

> What if we are wrong and he is right? What if between one and two there is no bridge at all, only empty space? And what if, who so confidently take the step, are in fact falling through space, only we don't know it because we insist on keeping our blindfold on. What if this boy is the only one among us with eyes to see? (Coetzee 2013: 250)

But what if David is wrong and we are right? Is David, indeed, a very special boy? A new Jesus – as the title could be read to suggest – who can talk to animals and bring the dead back to life? Or an orphan who simply misses the "real" (Coetzee 2013: 207), as señora Otxoa concludes. Or a magician, a charlatan? The sense that we, the readers, do not know who the boy really is intensifies in the second part of the novel. Perhaps there was no barbed wire in Punto Arenas? Perhaps David is just a liar, an irritating, boisterous and obnoxious child who has no love and respect for his guardians (e.g. the scene when he ruthlessly questions Inés about the man she likes most [Coetzee 2013: 193]). When, having escaped from Novilla, the boy puts what he believes to be a cloak of invisibility on and is blinded by the flash, one may be almost sure that the boy's trickery has finally been exposed. However, when a few pages later the group meets Juan who, like David, is a Cabbalist, a "number mystic" and who believes in the "secret causes" and "always a reason" behind numbers (Coetzee 2013: 274-275), the reader is once again forced to re-consider their conclusion as to the boy's nature. Undoubtedly, my impression of reading *The Childhood of Jesus* is that of a duel, of a fight between reason and faith, disbelief and suspension of it.

But the novel is also powerfully quixotic in its parodistic procedures. While Cervantes's novel parodied the style of old literature, *chansons de geste* and sonnets, among others, Coetzee might be seen as performing a similar gesture in respect to e.g. Platonic dialogue, Biblical stories as well as his own novels (most explicit, perhaps, in his treatment of the 'omega' interpretation of *Foe* ridiculed by Simón). In this light, *The Childhood of Jesus* is to be read as a work of supreme ironist – a feature that is hardly ever considered when talking about Coetzee and his oeuvre. Consequently, all the literary and intertextual references which I have managed to identify in *The Childhood of Jesus* may be seen not as pertaining to some kind of extra-textual meaning, not as 'the guise' which should be deciphered, not as allegories, but as the products of ironic consciousness, instruments of play and not the means that should be used so as to arrive at some kind of truth – hence, making a significant part of the findings discussed in this article entirely futile and pointless. Like *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*, *The Childhood of Jesus* is "fiction of fiction of fiction… like a game of mirrors" and "its only truth is multiplied and multilayered illusion" (Mitosek 2013: 56).

What appears to support this interpretation of *The Childhood of Jesus* is the way Coetzee's narrative addresses the issue of names and naming. As has been shown by my analysis of the novel, literally *every* [24] name has been selected by Coetzee in such a way so that it could refer us, the readers, to some external reality – including, most unequivocally, the titular Jesus. But a close reading of some of the passages of *The Childhood of Jesus* reveals that this approach should be abandoned altogether and that we should read against what the names appear to say, we should resist their cultural conditioning.

Simón refuses to be called "padrino" (i.e. father) as it "slot[s] [him] into roles" (Coetzee 2013: 28). "There isn't a proper word for what I am," (Coetzee 2013: 33) he says. In one of the discussions with his guardians David insists that Don Quixote is "not his [the book's principal character] *real* name" (Coetzee 2013: 162). On one of the last pages of the novel the boy himself admits: "I haven't got a name. I've still got to get my name," (Coetzee 2013: 271) and implores everyone: "You must call me by my real name," (Coetzee 2013: 273) though he does not yet provide them with one. It is ridiculous to follow names, Coetzee seems to be saying and he again reveals his ironic side when having arrived at Laguna Verde, one of the characters inquires about the relationship between a name and a place: "(why? – there is no lagoon)" (Coetzee 2013: 261).

Randomness of names and, what should be inferred from this premise, randomness of the characters and their stories, their total singularity [25], are finally addressed on the final pages of the novel:

> The names we use are the names we were given there [Belstar], but we might just as well have been given numbers. Numbers, names – they are equally arbitrary, equally random, equally unimportant. […]
>
> Of course there are no random numbers *under the eye of God*. But we don't live under the eye of God. In the world we live in there are random numbers and random names and random events, like being picked up at random by a car containing a man and a woman and a child named David. And a dog. (Coetzee 2013: 274-275)

[24] Even the reformatory school in Punto Arenas could be read as Punta Arenas, the capital city of *Magallanes y la Antártica Chilena* Region, the place which was originally established as a penal colony.
[25] The argument for singularity is provided by Simón: "While I was in hospital with nothing else to do, I tried, as a mental exercise, to see the world through David's eyes. Put an apple before him and what does he see? An apple: not one apple, just an apple: not two apples, not the same apple twice, just an apple and an apple. Now along comes señor Leon (señor Leon is his class teacher) and demands: How many apples child? What is the answer? What are apples? What is the singular of which apples is the plural? Three men in a car heading for the East Blocks: who is the singular of which men is the plural – Eugenio or Simón or our friend the driver whose name I don't know? Are we three, or are we one and one and one" (Coetzee 2013: 248-249).

The Childhood of Jesus has no "llave maestre," no "llave universal" that would make "all our troubles […] over" (Coetzee 2013: 4). Coetzee's very intricate and puzzling game of references, quotations, mis-quotations, etc., challenges the readers' attempts to make sense of it, to discover its meaning. In her book on irony Zofia Mitosek inquires about the reasons for ironists not speaking directly: "Is it because they want to make fun of the subject they address? To ridicule their listeners/readers? To hide their convictions? To expose conventions? Or, simply because they want to have fun?" (Mitosek 2013: 9).

In his 'Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech,' Coetzee partly provided us with his answer to the question posed by Mitosek:

> Two years ago Milan Kundera stood on his platform in Jerusalem and gave tribute to the first of all novelists, Miguel Cervantes, on whose giant shoulders we pigmy writers of a later age stand. How I would like to be able to join him in that tribute, I and so many of my fellow novelists from South Africa! How we long to quit the world of pathological attachments and abstract forces, of anger and violence, and take up residence in a world where a living play of feeling and ideas is possible, a world where we truly have an occupation.
>
> But how do we get from our world of violent phantasms to a true living world? This is a puzzle that Cervantes' Don Quixote solves quite easily for himself. He leaves behind hot, dusty, tedious La Mancha and enters the realm of faery by what amounts to a willed act of the imagination. What prevents the South African writer from taking a similar path, from writing his way out of a situation in which his art, no matter how well-intentioned, is – and here we must be honest – too slow, two old-fashioned, too indirect to have any but the slightest and most belated effect on the life of the community or the course of history?
>
> What prevents him is what prevents Don Quixote himself: the *power* of the world his body lives in to impose itself on him and ultimately on his imagination, which, whether he likes it or not, has its residence in his body. The *crudity* of life in South Africa, the naked force of its appeals, not only at the physical level but at the moral level too, its callousness and its brutalities, its hungers and its rages, its greed and its lies, make it as irresistible as it is unlovable. The story of Alfonso Quixano, or Don Quixote – though not, I add, Cervantes' subtle and enigmatic book – end with the capitulation of the imagination to reality, with a return to La Mancha and death. We have art, said Nietzsche, so that we shall not die of the truth. In South Africa there is now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination. (Attwell 1999: 98-99)

In light of Coetzee's reflection on Don Quixote, I am tempted to see *The Childhood of Jesus* as "a living play of feeling and ideas," a pure "act of imagination," and a celebration of its liberation and power; most importantly, as its triumph over reality, not capitulation to it. Taking Coetzee's work "as a whole, I consider this book to be Coetzee's farewell to what he calls "pathological attachments and abstract forces." A farewell to his previous works written in the shadow of South Africa. With *The Childhood of Jesus*, a tribute to Miguel Cervantes, the first of all novelists, J.M. Coetzee – I am bound to conclude – ceased to be a South African writer. This is my intuition, my conviction, which, to quote one of the characters of *The Childhood of Jesus*, may also be a delusion.

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