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## The World after Fiction

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**ABSTRACT:** Opponents of World Literature fear that its advent marks the end of the 'work of literature'. J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) presents a world in which the work of literature has indeed been forgotten. Migrants arrive in a new life 'washed clean' of the burden of the European tradition. Simón, who dimly recalls the old life, feels that something is missing in the new. He longs for something altogether 'other'. Might Simón learn from the exceptional child David to perceive the 'likeness' in this world? Are we to read Coetzee's novel like Simón or like David — and with what consequence for our understanding of the work of literature in a time of World Literature?

**KEYWORDS:** world literature; otherness; singularity; Don Quixote; Jacques Derrida

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# The World after Fiction

J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus*

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Fiction, being a serious affair, cannot accept prerequisites like (1) a desire to write, (2) something to write about, (3) something to say. There must be a place for a fiction of apathy toward the task of writing, toward the subject, toward the means.<sup>1</sup>

Coetzee's note dates from October 1973 and is the first of a collection of notes and drafts towards what would have been his second novel entitled *Burning the Books* — the novel was unrealized. This concern — call it a concern about *indifference to fiction* — remains, I would argue, a persistent preoccupation of Coetzee's literary production. His

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\* My thanks to J. M. Coetzee and the Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin, for permission to cite from the J. M. Coetzee Papers.

1 J. M. Coetzee, Draft of *Burning the Books* (unrealized), 19 October 1973, Manuscript Collection MS-0842, Container 33.1, Handwritten notes, and unfinished draft, 19 October 1973–4 July 1974, J. M. Coetzee Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

fiction is profoundly informed by a sense that fiction, and the institution of literature more broadly, cannot assume significance in contexts, specifically colonial/postcolonial contexts, in which the European or Eurocentric character of the literary tradition may with good reason be considered questionable, or even suspect. Speaking in 1987 upon receiving the Jerusalem Prize, Coetzee contrasted the South African situation with that of Cervantes, who in the figure of Don Quixote and at the beginning of the tradition of modern fiction 'leaves behind hot, dusty, tedious La Mancha and enters the realm of faery by what amounts to a willed act of the imagination.'<sup>2</sup> In South Africa such a Quixotic undertaking was not only impossible, but also unjustifiable: '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.'<sup>3</sup> His Australian writings, in contrast, are more directly, which is to say often metafictionally, concerned with figures and scenarios that would prefer not to have anything to do with fiction, least of all the fictions of which they find themselves a part. These fictions stage in different ways iterations of the indifference to fiction, which paradoxically turns out to present a profound provocation of fiction. It is as if Australia were the new La Mancha — and it is no coincidence that *Don Quixote* in one form or another is increasingly present in the Australian writings. *The Childhood of Jesus* is, among other things, an interpretive translation into a new time and a new place — into a new world, I am inclined to say — of *Don Quixote*. I'll return to this at the end of the essay.

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2 J. M. Coetzee, 'Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech', in his *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. by David Attwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 96–100 (p. 98).

3 Coetzee, 'Jerusalem Prize', p. 99.

In the sketches for *Burning the Books*, Coetzee imagined a censor in some future time of political oppression and civil unrest. Working in a glass tower, he reads and promptly incinerates the canon of Western literature, unmoved by the texts except to wonder why such things never happen to him. His work destroying works of literature and thought was to be interspersed with scenes of ‘real life’ in the city below that he observes through his binoculars. The conceit was, to quote from Coetzee’s notes:

A consciousness inhabiting a tower of glass in a burning city, reading the mind of the West and amusing itself by turning a pair of binoculars of magically high power on scenes of the street (violence) and bedroom (sex) about it — <sup>4</sup>

In Coetzee’s 2013 book, *The Childhood of Jesus*, a very different, but not altogether unrelated, scenario is played out: The figures in this book are transported on a boat and arrive in a new life ‘washed clean’, without histories, memories, or identities. They are washed clean, I would suggest, of the Western ‘tradition’ or rather, referring to the title of the book, of the Christian tradition insofar as this continues to inform modern Western culture.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, there is indication that the ‘old life’ the migrants are fleeing from is nothing other than the history of the West. There is a kind of inversion of contemporary geopolitics. If the migrants are not European (it is not clear where exactly they come from and they can’t remember), they are refugees from the idea of Europe, from a world defined by Europe.

One compelling consequence of this new beginning in a new life is an utter indifference to the institution

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<sup>4</sup> Coetzee, Draft of *Burning the Books*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* (London: Vintage, 2014), p. 24. Subsequent citations in-text.

of literature and specifically to fiction. *The Childhood of Jesus* presents a world without fiction, with no need for fiction, without the least interest in fiction. If in 1973, Coetzee considered presenting the destruction of the Western tradition, but perhaps also its culmination, in scenes of political suppression, graphic violence, and censorship, in the 2013 book, the challenge to fiction is more thoroughgoing because less explicit. And this perhaps speaks to a change in fundamental mood in the forty years between 1973 and 2013 (and not just in Coetzee's writings). In the latest novel, there is no censorship, no political violence, no suppression, no discrimination, no injustice — just indifference.

And it is not a cold, calculating indifference. On the contrary: the new polity, Novilla, in which the novel is set, is characterized by a *benevolent* indifference. What is strangest about this strange land to which we are transported in Coetzee's fiction is that everyone is 'so decent, so kindly, so well-intentioned' (p. 36). One can speculate that the indifference exhibited by the inhabitants of Novilla, and perhaps also their benevolence, is the first outcome of the forgetting of the European tradition that is not mourned but simply missing in Coetzee's novel — if a novel about a world without literature, which has no interest in the sort of things that happen in literature and that get literature going, can remain itself recognizable as a work of literature at all.

The plot is quickly told: a man and a boy, strangers to each other, arrive in a strange land, where they have to learn a foreign language (Spanish) and begin their new lives with new birthdates and new names — the man, Simón, the boy, David. David has (supposedly) lost a note he was carrying from or to his parents during the passage and

Simón, at least as he remembers it, has committed himself to take care of the boy and to find his mother. Although the boy has no memory of her, Simón is convinced he will recognize David's mother. Early in the novel he does so in the figure of Inès (the chaste, the virgin), to whom he offers the child and who then assumes the role of or, alternatively, if we are to credit Simón's intuition, *becomes what she is*, David's doting and indulgent mother.

The boy and the man are bound by the lost message that fell, by accident, into the sea — 'The fishes ate it' (p. 34), says the boy. It was, so to speak, lost in translation between the old life and the new. Nonetheless, it is the memory of this lost communication across the seas that distinguishes the two new arrivals from the other migrants who populate Novilla, who 'have washed themselves clean of old ties' (p. 24). 'Why are we *here*?' asks David shortly after their arrival:

His gesture takes in the room, the Centre, the city of Novilla, everything.

'You are here to find your mother. I am here to help you.'

'But after we find her, what are we here for?'

'I don't know what to say. 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 live. It is the greatest thing of all.'

'But do we have to live here?'

'Here as opposed to where? There is nowhere else to be but here.' (p. 21)

Both Simón and David have questions of a 'metaphysical' sort that don't seem to trouble others in Novilla. But I want to suggest that their respective concerns are in fact of altogether different orders. Simón retains a relation to the 'old life'; he has what he calls 'shadows of memories'

(p. 77) that he cannot or will not let go. David, the child protagonist of *The Childhood of Jesus*, seems in contrast to be altogether new. He comes to present a perplexity to all those around him — and certainly to the reader of the book. If he is, as even the most pedantic of the adults he encounters are prepared to admit, an ‘exceptional child’ (p. 253), is he a true exception transcending the order of things in Novilla or is he just a child with a ‘lively imagination’ (p. 265) who is rather over-indulged?

Simón, for his part, feels that there is something missing in the new life. What is missing is a sense of yearning, desire, longing; he finds life in Novilla too anodyne (p. 76). Novilla is a state of benevolence. Everyone, he observes, is so decent, kindly, and well-intentioned, but as a result social relations seem to him strangely ‘bloodless’ (p. 36) and lacking in ‘passion’ (p. 75). Life in Novilla, he complains, ‘lacks the substantiality of animal flesh, with all the gravity of bloodletting and sacrifice behind it. Our very words lack weight, these Spanish words that do not come from our heart’ (p. 77). Everyone else, however, appears quite content in the new life. For them nothing is invisible, nothing missing, and not even irony, the minimal sense that things may be other than they seem, can be made out in the Spanish in which the inhabitants of Novilla communicate. As Simón remarks of two of his closest acquaintances:

Álvaro does not trade in irony. Nor does Elena. Elena is an intelligent woman but she does not see any doubleness in the world, any difference between the way things seem and the way things are. An intelligent woman and an admirable woman too, who out of the most exiguous of materials — seamstressing, music lessons, household chores — has put together a new life, a life from which she claims — with justice? — that nothing is missing. It is the same with Álvaro

and the stevedores: they have no secret yearnings  
he can detect, no hankerings after another kind of  
life. (pp. 76–77)

Only Simón is ‘the exception, the dissatisfied one, the misfit’ (p. 77). Because he finds this life to be lacking, Simón represents the ‘old life’ — as if this ‘lack’ is precisely what he dimly remembers of the old life.

So Simón presents the alienated figure of the ‘old life’ insofar as the essence of the old life consisted in the hankering for another kind of life. Whereas what is new about the new life is that there is no *other* life that has been lost or is longed for or is even possible. The new polity of Novilla is a community of migrants that operates on the basis of universal hospitality. But what is strange about this place is not that all strangers are welcome but that no one is interested in strangeness. Strangeness has no pull, no secret, no element of mystery; it generates no angst. Simón observes: ‘His fellow stevedores are friendly enough but strangely incurious. No one asks where they come from and where they are staying’ (p. 26). Strangers are welcomed because they are not treated as strange — they are simply expected to adapt to the language, the diet, and everyday regime of the new dispensation. There is no expectation of, no longing for, no hostility towards, and ultimately not even a sense of otherness in Novilla. Here: *every other is like the other*.

One consequence of this indifference to strangeness is that Novilla presents a world without literature, or more precisely a world without the ‘work of literature.’<sup>6</sup> It is not simply that ‘Spanish literature’ is not listed among the course offerings at the Institute and is not to be found

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6 See Derek Attridge, *The Work of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).



among the books — *Teach Yourself Carpentry*, *The Art of Crocheting*, *One Hundred and One Summer Recipes* — at the local library (p. 179), but the minimal and most innocuous, because fictional, ‘otherness’ of literary invention does not appear to pique the interest of the inhabitants of Novilla. I will not say they are *deprived* of the work of literature because for the most part, for most of its inhabitants, this lack is not experienced as a lack; they do not seem to register a cultural or spiritual impoverishment but live lives of collegiality and contentment. Nothing is missing — not another life, not the promise of another life, not even the fiction of other lives. The ‘work of literature’, insofar as it facilitates a pleasurable singular encounter with otherness, belongs to the ‘old life’. The implication is that literary fiction is more implicated in the metaphysics of the old world than readers and literary critics such as ourselves would like to acknowledge.

To reiterate: What is strange — perhaps uncanny — about Coetzee’s fictional presentation of Novilla is that nothing is experienced as strange. It is no coincidence that this fictional world resonates with a number of anxieties expressed by those who have reservations about the progress, if not the imperial procession, of World Literature as a catch-all and all-consuming discipline in literary studies. Already in his canonical 1952 essay, translated by Maire and Edward Said as ‘Philology and *Weltliteratur*’ in 1969, Erich Auerbach had speculated that world literature was threatened by the global standardization of language, culture, and forms of life with which, he writes, ‘the notion of *Weltliteratur* would be at once realized and destroyed.’<sup>7</sup> In writings following her *Death of a Discipline* (2003) Gayatri

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7 Erich Auerbach, ‘Philology and *Weltliteratur*’, trans. by Maire and Edward Said, *The Centennial Review*, 13.1 (1969), pp. 1–17 (p. 3).

Spivak speaks in positively apocalyptic tones of the loss, perhaps we could say, the forgetting of the 'ethics of alterity' for which the take-over of Comparative Literature by World Literature is symptomatic.<sup>8</sup> Emily Apter echoes such concerns in *Against World Literature* (2013), speaking of the 'oneworldness' attendant on the principle of universal translatability.<sup>9</sup> Such a project of translation is realized after a fashion in Coetzee's novel, which furthermore presents an ironic fulfilment of Aamir Mufti's claim in *Forget English!* (2016) that World Literature belongs to a broad and systematic effacement of the hegemony of English.<sup>10</sup> The novel, written in English by the South African now Australian Nobel Laureate, presents a world in which English has literally been forgotten but in which a single, universal language is nevertheless exclusively operative. In Novilla, 'Spanish' is the new English. Meanwhile, in *What Is a World?* (2016), Pheng Cheah worries that the world-making capacity of literature will be occluded by the attention to the *inner-worldly* production and circulation of what is called 'world literature'. If, as Cheah argues, the world as a standardized space defining all that is given risks superseding the 'other possible worlds' to which literature attests and in a certain sense brings forth,<sup>11</sup> then Coetzee has written a novel about a possible world (is it this one?)

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8 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

9 Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013).

10 Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016). In a more affirmative sense, Rebecca L. Walkowitz treats Coetzee's novel as exemplary of a novel 'born translated' in an 'age of world literature', see the Introduction to Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

11 Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 129.

in which the world exists oblivious to literature, that is to say, without the possible worlds or modes of worlding afforded by fiction.

For many literary critics, the advent of World Literature seems quite literally to be the end of the world! At the end of *Against World Literature*, Apter diagnoses a 'psychopolitics of planetary dysphoria' in our time, defined by what she calls the 'depression of the globe or the thymotic frustration of the world'.<sup>12</sup> This fundamental mood, characterized by a 'total evacuation of euphoria', is legible in a series of works of contemporary philosophy and criticism but epitomized in Lars von Tier's 2011 film *Melancholia*, in which the end of the world is the end of the film.<sup>13</sup> Insofar as it presents a world — perhaps the world after the end of the world and certainly the end of World Literature — emptied of *eros* and *thymos*, of passion and spiritedness, *The Childhood of Jesus* can be seen as contributing to, or reflecting on, this atmosphere of 'planetary dysphoria'. In this context, what is unsettling about Coetzee's novel is that Novilla is not so very far away. Novilla is the world that the depressed opponents of World Literature fear the world is becoming or has already become.

There is, I want to say, an 'old world' reading of *The Childhood of Jesus* — a reading that, like Simón, finds Novilla, if not the book about Novilla, to be somehow lacking. Exemplary in this regard would be Robert Pippin's reading of the text. For Pippin, an unabashed proponent of the Western canon, the dysphoria of the novel presents the contours of longing, of properly human longing 'for more than bodily satisfactions, for the beautiful, for philosophy, for self-knowledge' that is exhibited precisely in its

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12 Apter, *Against World Literature*, p. 8.

13 Ibid., p. 338.

absence: 'We can see such yearning and what it entails better, by virtue of its absence.'<sup>14</sup> Such a reading, however, fails to acknowledge that the serious and thoughtful inhabitants of the city show no symptoms of depression — quite the contrary. In any case, as we all know and as Simón keeps being told, there is much to be said for leaving the old life and its longings behind. As Elena remarks at one point: 'You may want more than goodwill; but is what you want better than goodwill?' (p. 67). The question thus arises: Is there a 'new world' reading of the novel? Is there a space in the 'new life' for something like a literature that does not correspond to the questionable longings of the old? This would be the question of a new world literature, absolved, if this were possible, from the tradition that it cites.

I have yet to explicitly approach the significance of the title — *The Childhood of Jesus*. The old life as a longing for another life is a caricature of Christianity and recites a certain critique of Christianity — the account, for example, of how the 'true world became a fable'.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to his sensible and secular counterparts in Novilla, Simón turns out to be, on account of his longings, an unreconstructed 'Christian'. This presents one line of approach to the curious title of Coetzee's book. I have suggested that Coetzee's book presents an attempt to write a fiction of a world beyond or before and in any case freed from complicities with 'Christianity', where Christianity is understood to extend

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- 14 Robert Pippin, 'What does J. M. Coetzee's Novel *The Childhood of Jesus* Have to Do with the Childhood of Jesus?', in J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus: The Ethics of Ideas and Things*, ed. by Anthony Uhlmann and Jennifer Rutherford (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 9–32 (p. 26).
- 15 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophize with a Hammer* (1888), in his *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 171.

to and encompass the theological residues that continue to inform ostensibly post-Christian secular Western culture, not least literature. And perhaps it goes still further back. That literature is prefigured in scripture, that it inherits a theological tradition which it also disavows, that it exhibits despite itself a 'religious remainder', is at the centre of Derrida's various reflections on Kierkegaard's 'Christianized' reading of the episode of Abraham responding to the command to sacrifice Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*:

be it understood that literature surely inherits from a holy history within which the Abrahamic moment remains the essential secret (and who would deny that literature remains a religious remainder, a link to and relay for what is sacrosanct in a society without God?), while at the same time denying that history, appurtenance, and heritage. It denies that filiation. It betrays it in the double sense of the word: it is unfaithful to it, breaking with it at the very moment when it reveals its 'truth' and uncovers its secret.<sup>16</sup>

Kierkegaard's reading is too 'Christian' because he takes the absolute other to be the voice of a transcendent God, whereas as Derrida insists: '*tout autre est tout autre*' — every other is *altogether* other.<sup>17</sup> Every encounter with *an* other has therefore the form of a struggle, in Kierkegaard's terms, between the universal laws of the 'ethical' and the unspeakable singularity of the 'religious'. The secret kept and revealed in Abraham's silence, the silence that expresses the singular injunction of the altogether other, is structurally shared by literature, which unapologetically exhibits the

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16 Jacques Derrida, 'Literature in Secret', in his *The Gift of Death* (Second Edition) & *Literature in Secret*, trans. by David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 157.

17 Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 77–78.

secret as the very logic of its ironic operation. Literature is forever, rather frivolously, asking forgiveness for the secret significance it seems to promise, but withholds. To cite Derrida again, literature is always saying: 'Sorry for not meaning to say...' (Pardon de ne pas vouloir dire...) — or simply, with Bartleby, whose secretive formula Derrida takes to exhibit the paradigm of literature: 'I would prefer not to.'<sup>18</sup>

Coetzee's experiment, very much in the tradition of betrayal Derrida describes, involves producing a fiction that brackets the 'holy history', the very tradition upon which literature is supposed to rely for its efficacy. In Novilla, where the food is so bland and bloodless, there is no 'taste for a secret' — and also, significantly, no interest in sacrifice. A general law or norm (as it does not appear to be violently enforced) governed by the principle of goodwill seems to be the order of the day. In a benevolent world ruled by the universal imperatives of 'the ethical', how might the other, the absolutely other, appear? Would such a singularity be recognizable at all, and if so in what terms, by what means of expression? Or in words that would be altogether foreign to the inhabitants of Novilla: Were the messiah, were Jesus Christ himself to arrive, how would he be recognized? These are the sorts of questions prompted by the open secret betrayed in the title: *The Childhood of Jesus*.

How in this world does 'the other' appear in their singularity? One answer, and it is doubtless as slippery as Derrida's 'Sorry for not meaning to say...' or Bartleby's 'I would prefer not to', is: *like a fish*. At one point, Simón finds himself looking into David's eyes:

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18 Derrida, 'Literature in Secret', p. 119; also *Gift of Death* 77–78; and Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. by Giacomo Donis (Malden: Polity, 2001), pp. 26–27.

For the briefest of moments he sees something there. He has no name for it. *It is like* — that is what occurs to him in the moment. Like a fish that wriggles loose as you try to grasp it. But not like a fish — no, like *like a fish*. Or like *like like a fish*. On and on. Then the moment is over, and he is simply standing in silence, staring.

‘Did you see?’ says the boy.

‘I don’t know. Stop for a minute, I am feeling dizzy.’ (p. 222)

When something is like, like, like...and one cannot grasp what it is that it is like, one might say: it is like a fish. To do so, however, is to revert to a metonymy that relates to the *experience* (of failing to grasp) rather than standing for an intentional object. But what then does it mean to say it is like *like like a fish* — on and on? Is there a difference between *like a fish* and *like like like a fish*? Is the second formulation more ‘fishy’ than the first or is it rather the experience of *likeness* that is intensified? David would appear as absolute *likeness*.

Certainly, something of the vertigo of Simón’s experience is expressed in his grasping for words. Something is missing — he lacks the name, indeed, lacks so much as a metaphor for what he sees in David’s eyes. There is, however, a distinction between what he feels habitually to be *lacking* (the occasion of his ‘old world’ longing) and what he here experiences as *like*. If David presents someone *other*, who cannot be accounted for and ultimately accommodated in Novilla, he does not stand as an instance of transcendence (for another life, something other than this life), instead he is *like*, as if excavating an alterity *inside* of this life as it is given. Not coincidentally Señor León, David’s teacher, observes, ‘In all that time I have not had a like case’ (p. 271).

The *altogether other* (*tout autre*) is in fact not altogether *other*, as in the tradition of religion and of literature Derrida refers to, but absolutely *like*. Coetzee's experiment in presenting a fiction about a world indifferent to fiction — indifferent to fiction of the sort that belongs to the tradition that relates life to another life that is felt to be lost or longed for — exposes, in the figure of David, another principle by which otherness expresses itself in the world, which is also to say, another principle of fiction: *like-ness*. Ironically, in a novel that supposedly presents a 'new life', such fiction recovers or saves the strangeness of this life without reference to, in the suspension of, the longing for a new one. Alternatively, to distinguish these two types of fiction, 'old world' fiction from 'new world' fiction, one can say: there is no *secret* in *The Childhood of Jesus*, the form of the secret does not structure the reading experience, there is just an unfolding of an ungraspable *like-ness*. *The Childhood of Jesus* is *like* nothing I have ever seen before.

Like Simón, the boy too claims to remember, but his memory is of a different order altogether. For David remembers *every single thing*. This is in any case how it sometimes seems to the reader. He sees singularity. Ironically, the one thing he does not see, on account of this otherwise exceptional faculty, is *like*. For David, it would seem, because of the precision of his memory and perception, there is no basis for resemblance. And this is at the root of the cosmological and mathematical misunderstandings between him and Simón.

There is a lot of philosophical, perhaps even Platonic, dialogue in Coetzee's novel. Much of it, however, is, to quote a figure in the book, 'schoolboy philosophizing' (p. 296). And this is part of the challenge, also the irritation, of the book: are we to take the exchanges between Simón



and David as addressing, or at least indicating, serious philosophical questions, or are these simply discussions between a strong-willed infant with a 'lively imagination' and a well-meaning adult attempting, by the limited means available to him, to show the child how to make his way in the world? And this ambiguity of course has larger ramifications for the reading or readability of the novel. In short: is Simón responding to the needs and demands of a child or to the even more obscure communications of a god? Is David just a child, or is he also something else altogether? Or is perhaps *every* child a Jesus-child until — for better or worse? — the normalizing processes of education and upbringing set in?

In contrast to Simón, for whom 'something is missing', David, exceptional although everyone agrees he is, is usually described as lacking in some way. Señor León suggests he has a deficit, 'a specific deficit linked to symbolic activities' (p. 243). The expert called in by the school to assess his case relates this deficit to environmental factors, referring principally to the boy's uncertain parentage: 'The real, I want to suggest, is what David misses in his life' (p. 246). As a result, she proceeds, he feels special, even abnormal; this contributes to his insubordination, and she recommends that the boy be removed from the school, as well as from Simón and Inès, and taken into the care of a Special Learning Centre.

David himself does not seem to feel anything missing in his life. He is instead preoccupied with the gaps or cracks that seem to traverse his world or seem to prevent it from cohering into a stable world of norms and conventions. When Simón impatiently tells the boy to keep his 'game' avoiding the cracks on the pavement for another day, the boy responds that he doesn't want to 'fall into a crack' —

not a visible crack but ‘another crack’, one that ‘nobody knows’ (p. 43). If one only sees singularity, there are no connections, or only contingent ones, between everything that is the case. David’s world, one can speculate, is a collection of discrete instances and events which are not bound by similarity or contiguity habitually constituted by the ‘normal’ forms of experience; instead phenomena are separated by yawning gaps.

When they return to this anxiety some time later, Simón attempts to draw a distinction between gaps, which are part of the ‘order of nature’ — and are therefore nothing to worry about — and cracks which break with it: ‘It [a crack] is like cutting yourself with a knife, or tearing a page in two. You keep saying we must watch out for cracks, but where are these cracks? Where do you see a crack between you and me? Show me’ (p. 209). The occasion of this second discussion is the constellation of stars known as the ‘twins’ — the space between them is a gap rather than a crack. In this regard, Simón ventures, they are *like* numbers. But David knows no ‘like’: “Are all the stars numbers?” he asks brushing off Simón’s attempts to correct him. Far from introducing the idea of lawfulness and continuity into David’s world by means of the comparison, the boy sees the stars just like he sees numbers — as absolutely discrete. For the boy claims to ‘know’ the numbers although he cannot count: “I know all the numbers. Do you want to hear them? I know 134 and I know 7 and I know” — he draws a deep breath — “4623551 and I know 888 and I know 92 and I know —” (p. 177). Does he just know the *names* for random numbers, or does he actually *see* the numbers he names? Later, asked by Señor León to do some basic arithmetic (adding fish as it happens), he will say, ‘I can’t see them’ before with much effort, or show of

effort, coming up with the right answer: 'This time...this time...it is...eight' (p. 266). In any case, the exchange regarding gaps and cracks ends with Simón stating: 'There is never any crack between the numbers. No number is ever missing', and the boy responding: 'There is! You don't understand! You don't remember anything!' (p. 211).

It is not only numbers that the child has trouble with — David also exhibits a peculiar relation to language. The day that Simón sees the 'like-ness' in his eyes, David had asked: 'Why do I have to speak Spanish all the time?' (p. 221). David's dissatisfaction with speaking Spanish is not the same as Simón's. Simón feels constrained by a foreign language in which he cannot authentically express himself and by a use of language that does not, even in the minimal form of irony, acknowledge that things may be other than they seem. David on the other hand, struggles in the Spanish language to express *the way he sees things*; he struggles, namely, to convey singularity in the generality of everyday language. He takes to expressing himself in a private language, speaking 'gibberish', while Simón patiently tries to explain the necessity of communication if he is not to be ostracized in the community (pp. 221–22). It is with his first encounter with reading, specifically reading fiction, that David begins to find ways to use the Spanish language in a new way. It is not the either/or of irony that he discovers — that what is meant can be other than what is said — but rather the errant adventure of signification — that what is expressed always means more than what is meant. In his reading, without fear of contradiction or incoherence, he perversely affirms the least likely interpretation.

In the local library, in which otherwise no literature is to be found, Simón uncovers *An Illustrated Children's Don Quixote* (p. 179) with which he proposes to begin to teach

the child to read. '*Don Quixote* is an unusual book', Simón explains to David after reading the first chapter to him:

'It presents the world to us through two 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.' (p. 182)

David, however, insists on reading the book through the eyes of Don Quixote: 'He's not a windmill, he's a giant! He's only a windmill in the picture' (p. 182). After all, he points out, 'It's not the adventures of Don Quixote and Sancho. It's the adventures of Don Quixote' (p. 183). What does it mean to read *Don Quixote*, not just in a manner sympathetic to what he stands for, for example the struggle between the bounty of the imagination and the barrenness of reality, but to read *Don Quixote* like Don Quixote?

When David claims later that he can read, Simón berates him:

'No, you can't. You can look at the page and move your lips and make up stories in your head, but that is not reading. For real reading you have to submit to what is written on the page. You have to give up your own fantasies. You have to stop being silly. You have to stop being a baby.' (p. 196)

The boy does not practice the discipline of reading fiction, but does that mean he cannot read? What does it mean after all to do justice to a book like *Don Quixote*? If the point of the novel, as many readers would agree, is precisely the opposite of the one stated by the narrator of the novel, namely, to show the dangers of reading fiction, if it presents rather an extended plea for the powerlessness of fiction against the domination of reality, then what could be more

appropriate than a fictional reading of fiction? David is to be sent to a Special Learning Centre because he would rather persist with the fiction, than submit to the discipline of reading, to reading as a discipline. When Simón takes him to see Señor León in a last-ditch attempt to save him from the special school, the teacher interviews him on the meaning of the story of *Don Quixote*. The parallels between Don Quixote's fate at the hands of his benevolent companions and David's at those of the well-meaning authorities of Novilla could not be more explicit:

[David] 'They lock him up in a cage and he makes poo in his pants.'

'And why do they do that—lock him up?'

'Because they won't believe he is Don Quixote.'

'No. They do it because there is no such person as Don Quixote. Because Don Quixote is a made-up name. They want to take him home so that he can recover his senses.' (p. 265)

Later the boy expresses perplexity at Señor León's reaction, after all Don Quixote exists. To which Simón replies: 'True, 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' (p. 268). For someone like Señor León, Don Quixote upsets the social order, 'He likes order in the world. There is nothing wrong with that' (p. 268).

In Coetzee's text, *Don Quixote* stands for two possible comportments to fiction: there is a disenchanted reading of fiction that brings one back to one's senses, back home to reality, restoring one's sense of order in the world; and there is an enchanted reading of fiction that sends one on a laughable quest to save oneself from reality (from what is called 'reality'), a necessarily futile quest insofar

as it inevitably runs up against the compulsions of said reality. One could also say, there is a reading of fiction that understands the *institution* of literature, that it consists in a certain suspension of reality; and there is a reading of fiction, which is actually not a reading of *fiction* at all, for the fiction is taken to be more real than reality. There is a world-preserving reading of fiction and a world-upsetting one, a universal and a singular, or, with Kierkegaard, an ethical and a religious, or finally a sensible and a mad reading. While, to be sure, a world consisting only of the second kind of readers would descend into sheer chaos; would a world without some of the madness of reading *really* be a world? Is that ultimately the difference (the source of the strange like-ness) between the fictional Novilla and the world we still inhabit? We may be no better prepared to entertain the arrival of the messiah than the inhabitants of Novilla, but it is still possible to be entertained by *The Childhood of Jesus*.

When David shows Simón that he can read and write, he transcribes the following line from Don Quixote: '*Deos [sic] sabe si hay Dulcinea o no en el mundo*' — 'God knows whether there is a Dulcinea in this world or not' (p. 259). Is Don Quixote here betraying a first trace of doubt regarding his entire fictional enterprise? Or is his undertaking in fact sustained by such ambivalence? Reality or fiction? — that is a matter not for a mere man, or knight errant, but for a god. Or alternatively, reading the 'god knows' in the more colloquial sense: Reality or fiction, no one knows. It would not, in other words, be the absolute conviction in the reality of his enchantments that makes Don Quixote Don Quixote, but a readiness to concede the fictionality of all reality. In Coetzee's novel, the line takes on a further ambiguity: not even a god could save us from such confu-

sion. For if David is indeed divine, then what he knows, is precisely not communicable, at least not in a sensible way, in the life and times of Novilla. He appears like an 'exceptional' child with a 'lively imagination', like a child with special needs, like an infantile Don Quixote, like like like a fish. Señor León tells him to write on the board: '*Conviene que yo diga la verdad*, I must tell the truth.' David writes: '*Yo soy la verdad*, I am the truth' (p. 266). Is he telling the truth or is he just being silly? *Deos sabe*.

Benjamin Lewis Robinson, 'The World after Fiction: J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus*', in *The Work of World Literature*, ed. by Francesco Giusti and Benjamin Lewis Robinson, *Cultural Inquiry*, 19 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2021), pp. 105–26 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-19\\_05](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-19_05)>

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