

Gender and Jesus as Allegory

Eugene de Klerk

Summary

This article contends that both Gender and Jesus can be seen as allegories through which we can observe the puzzle of incarnation as experienced by humans as subjects. The idea that Jesus may be seen as an allegory for the agonies of embodied consciousness and, ultimately, as a form of existential allegory is suggested by two novels by J.M. Coetzee that enigmatically deploy the name of Jesus in their titles, *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*. Gender as allegory is supported by the work of Jacques Lacan, Judith Butler, and Camille Paglia. These theorists' postulations also explore the intersection between corporeality and the socio-symbolic means that attempt to account for it. Special consideration is given to transgender individuals insofar as they might highlight the problematic nature of incarnated subjectivity. The paper further posits a parallel between trans subjects and Jesus in that both reveal the traumas and opportunities that occur along the frontier between being and meaning where an existential form of allegory can be said to take place.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel beweer dat beide Geslag en Jesus as allegorieë gesien kan word waardeur ons die legkaart van inkarnasie kan raaksien soos dit deur mense as subjekte ervaar word. Die idee dat Jesus beskou kan word as 'n allegorie vir die trauma van 'n beliggaaamde bewussyn en, op die ou einde as eksistensiële allegorie, is voorgestel deur twee romans deur J.M. Coetzee wat beide die naam van Jesus in hul titels raaiselagtig gebruik, *The Childhood of Jesus* en *The Schooldays of Jesus*. Geslag as allegorie word ondersteun deur die werk van Jacques Lacan, Judith Butler, en Camille Paglia. Hierdie teoretici se postulasies verken ook die kruising tussen korporaliteit en die sosio-simboliese middele wat dit probeer akkommodeer. Oorweging word ook gegee aan transgendere individue in soverre hulle die problematiese aard van geïnkarneerde subjektiwiteit beklemtoon. Die artikel bied verder 'n parallel tussen trans-subjekte en Jesus aangesien beide die traumas en geleenthede wat plaasvind op die grens tussen wese en sinvolheid, waar eksistensiële allegorie plaasvind, ontbloot.

Introduction

This article was motivated by reading the two novels by J.M. Coetzee which are seemingly intended to be reconsiderations of the myth of Christ. Coetzee is a philosophically-informed author and his works often take the form of open-ended philosophical parables (Mosca 2016). These novels, this article

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maintains, suggest that the myth of Christ is, ultimately, to be understood as a way of approaching the puzzle of incarnated subjectivity. Gender, both theorists and the novels suggest, is one poor attempt at solving this puzzle. Building on this assertion, this paper goes on to examine how trans subjectivities might be understood from the interpretation of the myth of Christ suggested by the novels.

J.M. Coetzee's novels entitled *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016) call attention to the allegorical potential of the figure of Jesus Christ. This article contends, however, that these novels (as open-ended allegories) ultimately allude to Christ because he serves as a representation of the imperative placed on all human subjects to account for their literal existence in a figurative socio-symbolic sphere; in other words, to engage in an act of unending allegory. This article further proposes a tentative parallel between the puzzle of incarnation represented by the figure of Jesus Christ and the quandary of mis-embodied gender as reported by trans subjects. This is because transgender phenomena starkly problematise "how bodies mean" (Stryker 2006: 8) and because "transgender studies makes a valuable contribution towards analysing and interpreting the unique situation of embodied human consciousness" (12). The article draws on the theoretical work of Jacques Lacan, Camille Pagila, and Judith Butler. All these theorists suggest that gender is part of an often-traumatic and always-inadequate attempt to make flesh mean. This attempt is the morality play which, I maintain, is enacted through the characters, conversations, and narrator's reflections in the above-mentioned novels. Finally, the article suggests, through a parallel with Alain Badiou's account of St. Paul's revolutionary Christian subjectivity, that trans subjectivity also opens onto new universal possibilities for allegorising being.

The article may incidentally present a theoretical framework for transgenderism but does not purposively do so. It is more interested in the subjective experience of being trans and how transgenderism is iconically depicted. There are also notable differences in the thought of the cultural theorists mentioned above; some differences may even be argued to amount to incompatibility. For example, Butler's poststructuralist analysis of gender sees the subjective experience of a sexed body and genital investment as a side effect of the socio-symbolic script concerning gender (Butler 1993; Prosser 2006). Paglia, on the other hand, considers biological sex and sexual acts to be chthonian forces which constantly undermine all socio-symbolic attempts at order. For Lacan, sexual difference constitutes an arbitrary logic through which the human organism attempts to locate and identify itself in the socio-symbolic realm. While this article wishes to acknowledge these differences, it is more interested in how the three thinkers might be said to overlap, which is through the contention that gender ultimately fails to make bodies meaningful. Furthermore, all three theorists are in some way concerned with the tension rendered inevitable by a subjectivity that is also embodied.

Coetzee's novels are a useful way to highlight the possible shared concerns of these theorists and also how they may fruitfully be tied to the cultural function of the figure of Christ. While there are overt and implied references to the effects of gender in both novels, this paper will examine but not preoccupy itself with the analysis of these. Instead, it will focus on what it will argue is the central concern of the novels, namely that human existence is always-already an uncomfortable re-presentation of literal being. This literal being encompasses biology and gender persists as a fundamental part of its symbolic or figurative re-presentation.

Coetzee's Novels

Coetzee's two novels (about a make-shift family in a made-up country) were initially met with confusion and bewilderment, both by professional and lay reviewers. The first of the two books, *The Childhood of Jesus*, was published in 2013 and was called "really weird" in a review in *The New Republic*, with the reviewer especially puzzled as to the use of Jesus in the title: "(...) if you're looking for allegorical clarity or even a passing resemblance to the Gospels, *The Childhood of Jesus* will frustrate you at every turn. None of these characters seem especially Christian (...). Names and events are laced with allegorical possibility (...) but any this-for-that correspondence always collapses under examination" (Farago 2013: 2-4). Coetzee's second novel, continuing the story of the central characters in the first, received similar treatment with "I found it hard to grasp the novel's point" coming from one reviewer who concludes this after reflecting, "*The Childhood of Jesus* has been frequently described as an allegory, but it doesn't hang together tightly enough for that. Instead, Christ's life provides faint terrain for Coetzee's culturally and historically vague un-nuclear family" (Kidd 2016: 2-3). Elizabeth Lowry from *The Guardian* states in a nonplussed fashion: "No one in the novel is called Jesus" (2016: 2). A literary blogger echoes this in his review: "We still don't have any good answer to why these books are titled as they are. Is 'Jesus' David's [a character in the novel] real name? Does the biblical allusion allow Coetzee a comfort with allegory he has never had access to before?" (Cheney 2016). The primary source of befuddlement seems to be the titles that, despite being so richly suggestive, do not offer a sustained Christianity-inspired allegory or allegorical reading.

In terms of plot, the novels are about the narrator, Simón, who arrives in a nameless Spanish-speaking country with a young boy, David. He is not the father of the boy, but takes responsibility for his welfare. They are both refugees. Simón both enjoys but resists the role of nurturing caregiver. As a consequence he recruits a woman, Inés, to take on David as her own son, despite disagreeing with the way she chooses to raise him. He justifies his choice of Inés by imaging that there is destiny or serendipity in his meeting

her. He continues to look in on the boy and his adoptive mother; his relationship with the boy seems to be the most defining of his life. David is intellectually precocious and defiantly questions the accepted means of instruction, leading to him being dispatched by the authorities to some manner of reformatory. Convinced that the reformatory is a place of suffering and virtual imprisonment, Simón and Inés flee with David (this concludes *The Childhood of Jesus*).

The Schooldays of Jesus opens to find the “family” in a more remote village (ostensibly hiding from the authorities; however, it remains unclear if the so-called authorities are even pursuing them). In this rural village relations between the three begin to deteriorate. Eventually Simón and Inés separate and David is enrolled in a dance academy where he “calls down” numbers from the sky (he continues to resist traditional mathematics). The second novel ends with the ridiculous tableau of an aged Simón donning ill-fitting dancing shoes and taking to the dance floor of the academy.

Little seems to have been published on these two novels by way of literary analysis, suggesting that perhaps they have similarly left scholars and interpreters largely perplexed; at the time of writing, reviews still outnumbered articles. The eagerness for sustained commentary on the novels may be the reason why, in the space of completing this article, an unpublished thesis on *The Childhood of Jesus* has been published as a book. In this thesis, *Problematizing allegory and interpretation in J.M. Coetzee’s The Childhood of Jesus*, Kiah Tay also indicates that the title of the novel invites reading it as a biblical allegory, but that meta-fictional and damning commentary on the limitations of interpretation in the novel itself “act as anti-allegory that challenges this approach” (2015: 2). Tay’s contention, instead, is that:

[T]he problem (or opportunity) of reading allegorically is intrinsic in the narrative and foregrounded through the novel’s title, which sets up a deliberate and unmistakable parallel between the narrative and the gospels. However, allegory as a mode of reading is also problematized. The parallels between Coetzee’s novel and the gospels are inconsistent, which makes it difficult to attribute allegorical intent to the author. The perception of the novel as an allegory therefore depends to a large degree on the reader’s choice to read allegorically to bridge textual gaps (i.e. to engage in allegoresis) in order to achieve a sense of interpretative closure. The novel makes readers aware when they are imposing their desires onto the text, which undermines the certainty and resolution that allegory would provide.

(2015: 4)

In line with the suggestion that the novel both invites but resists allegorical readings (especially ones that may be biblically inspired), Tay concludes that the novel acts as a moral lesson about the impossibility and immorality of foreclosing the necessity of re-reading and re-interpreting experience and the world. She maintains that readings do not arise from fixed contexts, but rather actively bring contexts into being. Remaining open to alternative readings and

not seeking closure become for Tay a “matter of faith” (2015: 37); faith that the reader will be taken to unexpected places as a result. Here Tay echoes and quotes from Derek Attridge (a long-time Coetzee scholar) who suggests that Coetzee makes allegorical readings difficult to sustain in the interests of prolonging uncertainty and sustaining alterity. This, it is suggested, is ultimately an ethical preoccupation (on the part of Coetzee) in that certainty when it comes to meaning allows for the sort of conviction that leads to fascism, crusades, colonisation and terrorism.

Attridge warns strongly against allegory in his *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004). He argues that allegorical readings detract from literature as an “event”: “something that comes into being only in the process of understanding and responding (...) as an individual reader in a specific time and place, conditioned by a specific history (...)” (39). He contends that allegorical readings search for already-known referents that are external to the text and thereby shut down the “uncertain meanings and feelings that are being evoked” (40). Attridge does, however, suggest that Coetzee’s work may thematise or stage allegory: “Allegory, or the impulse to allegorize, is thus clearly a theme in Coetzee’s fiction” (35). For Attridge, Coetzee’s ruse is to tempt readers to allegorise yet frustrate them at the same time in order to engender an ethical awareness that to impose meaning (and end uncertainty) is an inauthentic response to the challenge to mean and a form of imposition: “Allegory, one might say, deals with the *already known*, whereas literature opens a space for the other. Allegory announces a moral code, literature invites an ethical response” (65). It is therefore important for Attridge that a reader resist the compulsion to allegorise, no matter how comforting it may be in the face of sustained uncertainty.

Not falling entirely foul of Attridge’s injunction is Theresa Dovey (he footnotes her as presenting a “rewarding reading” of Coetzee’s fiction). Dovey, in her *Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* (1988), offers a reading of Coetzee’s novels (up to *Foe*) as allegories for the “thematics of the Lacanian subject” (11). Dovey’s readings are indeed rewarding and see in Coetzee’s novels an innovative “incorporation of Lacanian theory” (12). She searches the texts for where and how they may intricately comment on the finer points of the Lacanian model of subjectivity. She is not, however, primarily concerned with the mechanism of allegory in the novels (for her the texts function as a form of psychoanalytic “redramatisation” that simultaneously critique psychoanalysis). Nor does she interpret, as this article does, Lacan’s model for subjectivity as broadly, yet essentially, a mode of allegory. Thus, while adjacent in terms of theoretical influence and author under analysis, Dovey’s project is distinct from that contained in or put forward by this article.

I concur with Attridge and Tay concerning Coetzee’s project in deploying allegory. However, I would go one step further to suggest that what Coetzee is suggesting is that human experience is intrinsically an open-ended

allegorical experience and that, in line with the thought of Jacques Lacan (see below), subjectivity is – in its most authentic ethical form – a way of actively “reading” being into meaning. In this way the frustrating experience of reading the novel is isomorphic with the central concern of the novel, namely the frustrating experience of trying to read being into meaning. This, in the view of this article, is the sense in which Coetzee’s novels are about “Jesus” in that Jesus is really a metaphorical (dare I say allegorical) manifestation of the anxiety pervading the act of existential allegorical reading (i.e. locating in the socio-symbolic sphere a figural signification to attach to literal being). Jesus is here, thus, an (possibly “the”) allegory of allegory. This may seem circular, but, to quote Attridge, “(...) there is to my knowledge, no generic rule that prohibits allegories from referring to allegories” (34).

Lacan and Butler on Subjectivity and Gender

It is through Lacan that we can also begin thinking about how scrutinising gender is a powerful way of engaging with the frontier between being and meaning. I will further suggest that transgenderism speaks openly to the troubled nature of embodied meaning-seeking consciousness. Such trouble is experienced universally by subjects, but usually papered over by conforming to standard significations for being (gender being dominant among these). Performatively adhering to even a tenuous alignment between gender and the literal body is an attempt to resolve the question of what being might mean.

According to Lacanian theory, the human organism is thrown into a pre-existent symbolic sphere, composed of socio-linguistic signifiers and discourse. There is neither sufficient cause nor room to explore the way in which the organism progressively experiences or enters this sphere here (for a comprehensive discussion of this author’s interpretation of the process as posited by Lacan see De Klerk 2009). What is of importance in terms of the current argument is that, for Lacan, meaning can never fully accommodate being; it is forever ill-fitting and any attempts to stitch being to meaning always lead to a gap where causality and meaning break down and become precarious.

Yet it is also the symbolic sphere which gives rise to subjectivity (both conscious and unconscious) in the human organism. Initially, however, subjectivity (for Lacan) corresponds solely with the gap created by the organism being thrown into the symbolic sphere and being expected to mean (see Figure 1). Nascent subjectivity is implicitly and explicitly instructed as to how and what it should use to append meaning to its biological existence. Lacan suggests that foremost among the ready-to-hand upholstering points used to affix meaning to being is sexual difference and the socio-discursive logic and script that accompany this compelling primary signifier. As Butler reflects, “the very injunction to be a given gender takes place through

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discursive routes: to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum, to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of different demands at once” (1990: 145).

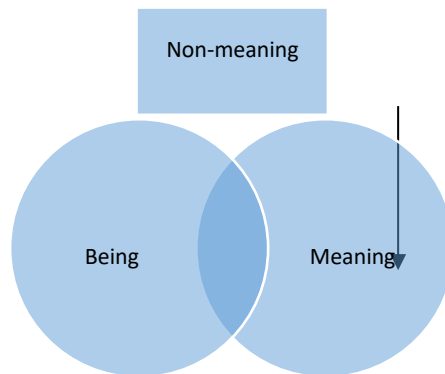


Figure 1: Where there is an attempted intersection between being and meaning, causality and sense tend to become unstable, requiring some sort of signification in an attempt to append one to the other (gender is such a signification). The subject arises as the function of this impossible intersection. (Lacan 1964: 211 adapted)

Gender is most commonly the predominant sense accorded to the inevitably non-sensical intersection between being and meaning (see Figure 1). While this may seem less a case of incarnation than “in-symbolisation”, in other words, more a case of flesh made word than word made flesh, it is the significations and the subjectivity that will become enthralled to such significations that will be experienced by the person as *his* or *her* core identity. Famously, for Lacan, signifiers (at least at an unconscious level) will come to determine how an individual experiences identity and desire. Psychoanalysis in his account becomes an ethical project that intends to free (as far as possible) the unconscious subject so that it may re-affix meaning to being by more authentically locating other primary significations.

I suggest that one way of looking at Lacan’s theory is to see subjectivity as an act of allegory; of reverse incarnation where the symbolic sphere is read with an ardent and compelling wish to retroactively establish a seemingly intrinsic/immanent (but figural) meaning for (literal) being. Gender is a primary allegorical reading of biological being predicated on the seeming biologic of sexual difference. This latter assertion echoes the work of Judith Butler (a seminal figure in terms of intertwining thought regarding gender and Lacanian theory):

I have argued (...) that, for instance, within the sex/gender distinction, sex poses as “the real” and the “factic”, the material or corporeal ground upon which gender operates as an act of cultural inscription The “real” and the

“sexually factic” are phantasmatic constructions – illusions of substance – that bodies are compelled to approximate, but never can.

(1990: 146)

Thus, the relationship between being and meaning is never an easy or stable one for the subject and subjectivity might be thought of as the sacrifice or pound of flesh-word required to make the co-existence even temporarily feasible. Certainly, for Lacan, subjectivity arises from the impossible demand that corporeal existence be accompanied by a seemingly immanent and cogent meaning will come to define identity and map the corporeal ground on which it is predicated.

Symbolic identity will, however, never fully align with physical beingness and this is an ongoing source of anxiety to the subject: a painful accommodation. This is powerfully expressed by Louis Althusser (a cultural theorist and adherent of Lacan) who writes that:

[P]sycho-analysis is concerned with another struggle, with the only war without memoirs or memorials, the war humanity pretends it has never declared, the war it always thinks it has won in advance, simply because humanity is nothing but surviving this war, living and bearing children as culture in human culture (...) the long forced march which makes mammiferous larvae into human children, masculine or feminine subjects

(1971: 190)

This quotation encapsulates and articulately expresses the traumatic nature of socialisation and of gendered identity. It further indicates the disconnection between culture and biological or corporeal existence. Lacan’s accounts of subjectivity and gender strongly suggest that the former can be seen as an allegorical enterprise and the latter as a failed attempt at existential allegory. This article contends that Coetzee’s novels imply a similar model of human subjectivity through their staging of allegory and that the allegorical Jesus hinted at by the novels is in fact nothing more than an allegory for such a universal model of human subjectivity; namely, one generated and necessitated by the trauma of embodied consciousness. Any attempt at allegorising the dumb fact of human beingness ultimately brings one back to the injunction to allegorise as the only thing that all human beings *qua* subjects share.

Of all the theorists under discussion, however, perhaps the one who most powerfully articulates the violence of the tension between the organism and culture is Camille Paglia.

Camille Paglia on Incarnation

Camille Paglia, a cultural theorist and commentator, gives a lot of attention to the problematic intersection between nature and culture and also powerfully expresses the painful nature of the attempt at integrating body and mind, describing incarnation as the “limitation of mind by matter” and suggesting that this is experienced as an “outrage to the imagination” (1995: 3). She suggests that “physicality is our torment” and actively compares the trauma of this universal experience of incarnation to that suffered by Christ: “our body [is] the tree of nature on which [we are] crucified”, adding for emphasis that “consciousness is a pitiful hostage of its flesh-envelope” (1995: 3).

For Paglia, it is sex and sex acts that threaten the social fabric and symbolic framework and these can never be “‘fixed’ [in both senses] by codes of social or moral convenience” (1995: 13). Similarly to Lacan, Paglia sees culture as a form of encircling the incompatibility between being and meaning; a means of veiling the absence of a quilting point between the two. Primary among the means of distracting us from the pain of confronting the lack of existential anchorage for Paglia is art (under which she includes religious and social rituals): “The blood that is shed will always be shed. Ritual in church or theatre is amoral fixation, dispelling anxiety by formalizing and freezing emotion. The ritual of art is the cruel law of pain made pleasure” (30). Lacan for his part borrows the notion of anamorphosis (see Seminar XI, 1964: 79-91) from the world of art and deploys it as a way of suggesting that art has a dual role of both distracting the viewer from the lack of transcendent or immanent meaning but also of reminding the viewer of the absence of an anchoring signifier. This is because, for Lacan, this absence exercises a gravitational – but identity threatening – pull (like a black hole) on human desire. It is, therefore, only by achieving both that a work of art is simultaneously placating and compelling; it is arresting precisely because it occupies the place of what is missing (temporarily) but also, at an unconscious level, references the prepossessing gap to which the subject corresponds.

I suggest below that images of Christ and the contemporary aestheticisation of trans individuals may be thought of as simultaneously laying bare and also arresting the anxiety concerning the lack of an anchor for being in meaning. Coetzee’s novels themselves (in being texts that allude to an ultimately missing allegorical anchor) can also be considered as following the pattern of anamorphosis outlined above; they are a form of art that encircles but which recalls lack through offering no allegorical anchor.

Transgendered Subjectivity

There has been psychoanalytic theoretical work done on transgendered subjectivity, including that of Judith Butler and a special issue of the journal *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* in 2011, where the editor sums up the views on transgenderism as the “bodymind” being “at war with itself” (Goldner 2011:

153). The term “bodymind” is used because it both acknowledges that transgenderism represents a perceived division between body and mind, but avoids what some would see as an archaic or unhelpful dualism that we (as a species) are meant to have theoretically moved beyond. Yet, as the empirical work of Josephine Ho for example demonstrates, trans subjects continue to characterise their experience in terms of a mis-alignment between body and mind or body and soul:

“A soul trapped in the wrong body” is a common description employed by trans subjects to explain their unusual condition. This self-characterisation includes two important premises: that the body and the soul (or identity, self-image, etc) are two separate and independent entities whose correct alignment makes up the effect of gender; and that the soul occupies a higher position than the body, to the extent that any mismatch between the two is to be resolved by modifying the body (through cross-dressing, hormonal therapy, SRS, or other procedures).

(2006: 228)

She has found that this characterisation of mis-incarnation, if you will, persists, even if unhelpful, despite various attempts by gender theorists to blur the lines of this binary. Although Ho neatly summarises such attempts in her article, it may further be useful to outline some of the debate in transgender studies around transsexual individuals who seek “re-incarnation”.

This debate results from what might be seen as a divide between those who use “trans identities to support constructivist arguments” and those who are increasingly critical of a purely constructivist account of gender (Whittle, 2006: xiii). On the one hand are those who suggest or imply that transsexuals (those seeking to change their bodies) are suffering from a “false sense of consciousness” in that they have “internalized outmoded masculine or feminine stereotypes and [done] harm to their bodies [often called mutilation] in order to appear as the men and women they considered themselves to be, but others did not” (Stryker 2006: 4). On the other hand there are those who “see [transsexuals’] gendered sense of self as ontologically inescapable and inalienable – and [that] to suggest otherwise to them is to risk a profound misrecognition of their personhood, of their specific mode of being” (Stryker 2006: 10). There are also those who seek to bridge the divide by arguing that transsexual narratives are always-already overtaken by medical or theoretical discourses which foreclose the complexity of the “multiple contradictions of lived experience” (Stone 2006: 231). Thus the empirical work of Ho may be said to simply be the result of listening to subjects who have been conditioned by particular discourses to talk about their “condition” in terms of being in the “wrong body”. What appears incontestable, however, is the fact that both transgender and transsexual individuals trouble the imagined mimetic relationship between “bodily sex, gender role, and subjective gender identity” (Stryker 2006: 9). This alone is sufficient, this article posits, to suggest that

transgender phenomena might be thought of as revealing a universal human condition of being and meaning have an open-ended allegorical relationship.

Among the work on transgender subjectivity, that of Shanna Carlson is of special interest to this article as it approaches such subjectivity from a specifically Lacanian perspective. Carlson argues that, while trans-subjects publicly play out the ill-fitting intersection between nature and culture bound up in the identity-defining signification that is gender, this intersection is common to all subjects *qua* subjects:

Inasmuch as the transsexual subject strives to pass and/or (for not all transsexuals strive to pass) identifies with one gender or another with an apparent degree of certainty, he or she is psychically no different than any other subject who lines up under one banner or another. Ostensibly “nontranssexual” subjects also strive to pass; they also identify with an apparent degree of certainty with one gender or another. In other words, “transsexuality” is not in and of itself any more extreme a type of symptom than is “man” or “woman”(…). Oftentimes, the upshot of this false monopoly [on the part of nontranssexual subjects] on a piecemeal “certainty” is that transsexual subjects (...) are excluded, objectified, exploited, scapegoated, and silenced.

(2010: 65)

In other words, all subjects experience the difficulty of trying to live up to the primary signification that is gender. Indeed, I would contend (and as the experience of trans subjects suggested by Carlson bears out), individuals are often “crucified” before the social altar of gender. Ho also details the ongoing physical and identity trauma suffered by those who seek some form of corporeal self-fashioning, even if they do “pass” for the target gender. All gender can be understood to be a form of “passing” that only ever consists of degrees of certainty; in other words, it is an unstable allegory for being attempted (under duress) by the majority human subjects.

Christ and Incarnation

The contention of this article is not only that trans-subjects lay bare the insoluble dilemma of embodied consciousness (what may be seen as a form of incarnation), but that the reason the experience of Christ is so compelling is precisely because his story also plays out the same all-too-human condition. And what condition does Christ’s crucifixion allegorically represent, if not the suffering of an incarnated aspect of godhood, suffering precisely because of its incarnation? It is interesting that most professing to be Christian have chosen the crucifix and a crucified god as the symbol of their faith. It is the moment of stark incompatibility between a god and the flesh he inhabits that is frozen in the iconography of Christianity. Perhaps this is so because it is the

moment in which Christ most suffers like us. This image is thus an allegory for the suffering caused by the attempt to accommodate meaning in being (and vice-versa), which itself, I contend, can be considered a form of allegory. Thus, Christ may be thought of as an allegory of allegory, if one allows for a profound psychoanalytic or existential interpretation of allegory.

One ethicist, Todd Daly, very bravely, if somewhat awkwardly, tries to offer a Christian perspective on the ethics of gender reassignment surgery. He puts the blame for mind-soul dualism squarely on the shoulders of Romantic philosophy, suggesting that Christianity, by contrast, speaks to “ensouled bodies” as much as to “embodied souls” (2016: 41) – making him a strange bedfellow with the liberal theorists seeking to locate the “mindbody” in order to recover the body in the services of an enlightened holism. Yet, as Ho shows, none of this speaks to the subjective experience of trans-subjects or, according to Lacan, of subjects-in-general, no matter how intellectually compelling and comforting it may be. Daly, ultimately, plumbs for gender reassignment surgery as a form of mutilation, likening it to voluntary (or cosmetic) amputation. The best he can offer trans subjects (at least those who are Christian) is the isomorphism of the Eucharist: “[W]e might also consider the formative influence of a regular enactment of the Eucharist, where Jesus’ words, ‘this is my body broken for you’, might begin to mute the thoughts that ‘this is my broken [trans] body’, enabling a degree of ‘identity transformation’ in this life that will be perfected in the age to come” (2016: 47-48). Daly, to an unwitting degree, suggests a parallel between the experience of the crucified Christ and that of trans subjects, in that both are forced to inhabit what is experienced as an alien and broken body.

It may also be instructive to consider, in line with Paglia, how the crucifixion is depicted in art. If one looks at paintings like Rubens’s *Descent from the Cross*, for example, one can easily see the aestheticisation of pain, the encircling of the brute fact of corporeal suffering. At the same time, however, such images also have the potential to recall in us our own subjective struggle between being and meaning, in line with Lacan’s anamorphosis. It is even more intriguing to consider the contemporary cultural aestheticisation of trans figures like Caitlyn Jenner (see the *Vanity Fair* cover of 2015) and Laverne Cox (see the February 2018 cover of *Cosmopolitan* South Africa). Once again, “beauty” is used to mask, veil, or encircle the discomfort of what these individuals suggest about incarnated consciousness; it is uncanny (in the Freudian sense) how much like “women” they appear to be because they remind us that we too are only passing as “men” and “women” (see Carlson above).

There may also be an instance of such artistic encircling depicted in Coetzee’s novels. In *Schooldays* David attends the Academy of Dance, where he is introduced to a form of esoteric belief that involves dancing to call down the “transcendental words” of a “primal language” that evoke a “lost world” that has faded owing to habituation to “our new life” (68). This dance, it

seems, has the power to bring “body and soul together” and simultaneously lend the words “body” (68) or make them manifest. Yet the dance is not “graceless, carnal, or disorderly” (68) and is “sexless” (244). When Simón begins the dance at the end of the novel, he moves “in a slow circle” (260). This ritual it seems is a nostalgic dream of a primal correspondence between symbol and body (a form of transubstantiation), and of a space in which the body is not hampered by any sort of grossness or impulse (it communes with the spirit which cleanses it). The dance literally and figurative encircles, both recalling and erasing the disharmony between being and meaning. This is what makes it comforting and compelling. Yet outside the dance, the absence of correspondence remains and returns.

Coetzee’s Novels on Gender

In addition to the significance of their form, Coetzee’s novels do touch explicitly on gender and sexual desire. The narrator, Simón seems to be very much subjectively attached to normative gender narratives. In conversation with a future lover, Elena, in response to the fact that she feels she has moved beyond perceiving individuals primarily in terms of being men or women, Simón replies: “As for me, it is not a distinction I can give up” (2013: 65). Yet he can only express this resolve in terms of his own subjective conviction: “I still feel myself to be a man, and you to be a woman” (66 emphasis added). Elena only agrees that the distinction is valid to the extent that men and women have “different *roles* to play” (66 emphasis added). For Simón, gender seems to have internal signifying force, while for Elena it is simply (post birth) a socially policed and perpetuated division of labour. Later Elena objects to Simón’s willingness to surrender his role as primary caregiver to his ward, David, on the basis that he is a man. Simón argues that a father merely “provides the idea,” but a mother the substance: “Once the idea has been transmitted, the father is dispensable. And in this case I am not even the father” (124). Elena instead insists that once the child has left the womb, all it requires is “love and care, which a man can provide as well as any woman” (124). He subsequently reiterates his position concerning the relative substance of motherhood when claiming that the woman he has arbitrarily settled upon as a mother for David has “a natural relationship” with him, “that of mother and son”, whereas he does not share the same with the boy (148). In *Schooldays* he again echoes this stereotypical perception of parental roles when he reflects that children need the “soft odours of women and (...) the softness of a woman’s touch” in order to “flower” (2016: 203). Simón’s subjective belief in the meaningfulness of sexual difference, however, is continually undermined in the novel by the role he takes up vis-à-vis David and a succession of women who do not fulfil his stereotypes of being soft and nurturing.

One such woman is the first woman he attempts to make friends with. He expresses his sexual desire to her, claiming it is a tribute to a woman's beauty and that sex is a result of men and women finding each other beautiful – “The woman more beautiful than the man, usually” (2013: 9). Ana, the woman in question, responds “as a tribute to me – an offering, not an insult – you want to grip me tight and push a part of your body into me. As a tribute, you claim. To me the whole business seems absurd (...)” (39). We can hear echoes here of Paglia's suggestion that aesthetic considerations are used to encircle the nonsensical and disruptive nature (in terms of the socio-symbolic order) of sexual acts.

Alain Badiou is instructive in terms of understanding Lacan's position on sexual intercourse, especially his famous and provocative ejaculation: “there is no such thing as a sexual relationship” (1972-1973: 17). Badiou points out that, for Lacan, sex happens, but it does not constitute a relationship in that, during it, we are at the edges of subjectivity such that we lose sight of the subjectivity of our partner or partners. He indicates that for Lacan, “love is what comes to replace that non-relationship” (2012: 19). Love here compensates for the elision of subjectivity that occurs during any sex act. Love can thus be said to be an allegorical reading of the literal non-sense of sex.

The union of heterosexual coupling is similarly a sublimatory allegorical way of eluding the non-sense of being that persists at the core of meaning. This myth (of a plug and socket destined for one another) is powerfully evoked by the master of music and director of the Academy of Dance that David comes to attend, Senõr Arroyo:

But let me say a word about answers in general. In my opinion, question and answer go together like heaven and earth or like man and woman. A man goes out and scours the world for the answer to his one great question, What is it that I lack? Then one day, if he is lucky, he finds his answer: woman. Man and woman come together, they are one – let us resort to that expression – and out of their oneness, their union, comes a child. The child grows up until one day the question comes to him, What is it that I lack?, and so the cycle is resumed. The cycle resumes because in the question already lies the answer, like an unborn child.

(2016: 96)

Unbeknown to Senõr Arroyo, his wife is cheating on him with a brute of a man who eventually murders her. Certainly Simón finds no such union in the novels and David is the product of a symbolic self-elected non-biological relationship. The absurdity of contemplating any straight-forward determinism between biology and the choices made by self-reflective consciousness is laid bare when David asks if the man who murdered Senõra Arroyo was made to do so by his penis, concluding “If my penis grows big I am going to cut it off” (2016: 139). This is not to say that there is absolutely no interaction

between meaning and being, but it is always troubled and there is no such thing as direct causality for a subject.

Coetzee plays out the problematic intersection between being and meaning in multiple ways in his novels, but perhaps one of the most evident and amusing is when Simón attempts to fix a toilet. He explains to David that the boy cannot assist him because, while the boy is good at ideas, “toilets are not part of the realm of ideas, they are just brute things, and working with them is nothing but brute work” (2013: 156). When David asks why he can’t stay and observe, saying “It’s just poo” (156), Simón responds, comically and absurdly enough (as the selective symbolic investments of culture must appear to children), that although “[t]oilets are just toilets, poo is not just poo (...) There are certain things that are not just not themselves, not all the time. Poo is one of them” (156). Poo, like sex, is a site of cultural encirclement (we defecate segregated and also segregated by gender) because it is a reminder of our beingness. Simón informs David authoritatively, in response to myriad questions, “We partake of the ideal but we also make poo. This is because we have a double nature. I don’t know how to put it more simply” (157). The comic absurdity is heightened even more when, despite his high-minded categorisations, he does not experience this double nature when he undertakes the plumbing: “He feels like a man fishing for an obstruction in a sewage pipe (...)” (58). We are never either simply being or meaning.

Milan Kundera delightfully highlights the philosophical frenzies into which sex and poo have sent theology in his *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984). His narrator at an early age had spent time contemplating the intestines of god, later discovering that

The ancient Gnostics felt as I did at the age of five. In the second century, the great Gnostic master Valentinus resolved the damnable dilemma by claiming that Jesus “ate and drank, but did not defecate” Shit is a more onerous theological problem than is evil. Since God gave man freedom, we can, if need be, accept the idea that He is not responsible for man’s crimes. The responsibility for shit, however, rests entirely with Him, the Creator of man.
(1984: 245-246)

Incarnated consciousness remains a dilemma for human organisms immersed in a socio-symbolic realm (i.e. subjects). Any allegorical account for literal being is always interrupted by that same being and, even within the symbolic realm, by competing accounts (“incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated” [Butler 1990: 145]).

Coetzee’s novels, both in form and content, lay bare both the injunction to, and the absurdity of, seeking straightforward correspondences between being and meaning. He implodes biological determinism and also reveals the persistent difficulty of accommodating biology fully within meaning. Gender, toilets, and marriage encircle the lack of adhesion or cohesion between

organism and meaning; all, however, fail ultimately to cover over the incompatibility.

What hope is there then for this pitiable human creature forced to contemplate its potential godhood (imaginative meaning-making consciousness) on the cross of embodied existence?

Trans-Subjects and Incarnation

In answer to this, this article would like to propose a further consideration of trans subjects, this time through the lens of Alain Badiou's thoughts regarding the way in which St. Paul generated, through his Christianity, a new subjective orientation in the world. Alain Badiou seems a natural choice for this purpose as his work has been strongly influenced by the thought of Lacan and also offers a theoretical analysis of Christianity. For Badiou, the necessity of allegory outlined in this article would be an opportunity for uncovering new ways of signifying being and thus of experiencing subjectivity; for Badiou these could be also be made available universally because they would traverse established differences and dislodge the conformist identifications that underwrite such differences (such as gender). For him, insofar as the subject corresponds to a gap in the symbolic order, it is capable of naming "the universe-yet-to-come that is obtained from the fact that an indiscernible truth supplements the situation" (1991: 32). Initially this naming will seem incomprehensible within the current socio-symbolic order and the subjectivity that articulates and accompanies it will be disregarded or violently suppressed. To arrive at and speak this universal and universalising truth requires "maintaining a nonconformity with regard to that which is always conforming us" (2003: 110). Thus the subject through which this truth comes to be in the socio-symbolic sphere will appear as a madman or prophet.

The revolutionary nature for Badiou of Pauline Christianity was that it created a discourse capable of "structuring a subject devoid of all identity" (2003: 5) in that it cut across all differences to which subjectivities had become attached in seeking to define being and locate identity. He suggests that Paul broke with identitarian protocols in proclaiming a subjectivity universally available to anyone: "A truly stupefying statement when one knows the rules of the ancient world: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female' (Galatians 3.28)" (2003: 9). Might there not be a similar opportunity in the non-conformism of trans subjects in terms of identitarian protocols? May it not be that an alternative existential reading (allegory) could bring about a more compassionate point of identification for human subjects?

Both Carlson and Ho see the potential of trans subjectivity to effect a new allegorical potentiality that may be made available to all subjects because as subjects we all, in truth, suffer the same injunction to find an allegorical fit

between being and meaning. For Carlson, it is the way in which trans people publically demonstrate the constructedness of gender which could resonate with the

unconsciously bisexual subject for whom sexual difference is only ever an incomplete, unsatisfactory solution to the failure of sexual relation. In this way, transgenderism would figure as a solutionless solution to the impasses of sexual difference, a sort of unconscious scene of undecideability fundamentally shared by all human subjects, no matter their seeming “gender”.

(2010: 65)

However, it is debatable whether or not such a subjectivity based on self-aware undecidability would be sustainable at a conscious level; it would certainly require an expansion of current socio-symbolic protocols. For Ho, it is in their “self-reflexive project of doing gender” that trans subjects are constantly “‘trans’-gressing/’trans’-forming existing gender/sexuality categories” and “embodying new contents and possible meanings for gender imagination” (2006: 239). As public witnesses to the problem of incarnation, trans subjects hold open an allegorical space that Christ also speaks to, but with fresher voices and in ways that are perhaps more challenging to what persists as one of the most cherished symbolic co-ordinates of being, namely, gender. Sandy Stone considers transsexuals a new *genre* (in view of how they, as subjects, traverse and transgress discourses) – “a set of embodied texts whose potential for *productive* disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored” (2006: 231). She sees transsexual subjects as representing the power of “continual transformation” (230). Trans subjects could offer a variety of ways of puzzling through the (lack of) relationship between flesh and word.

And where do we find Simón, at the end of Coetzee’s novels? An aging man, in a pair of ill-fitting dancing slippers stumbling along to music at the academy his son attends, trying to commune with the stars to bring soul and body together; an experience that requires that he become “sexless” to mirror a transcendental order which loves and conjugates “beyond our comprehension” (2016: 244). It seems, in the end, that Simón may have found a degree of ecstatic bliss beyond incarnation, at the very edges of subjectivity and beyond gendered subjectivity.

Or it may be that he is simply an old man, shuffling awkwardly because of a worn-out body and the wrong size footwear, deluded, and out of step. The insoluble double register at the heart of incarnation remains intact at the close of the second novel and will always demand a double take.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has explored the theme of incarnation in terms of subjectivity, gender and trans-subjectivity. It has suggested that embodied consciousness is a form of allegory and has elaborated on a parallel between the myth of Christ and the trauma of incarnation suggested by two novels by J.M. Coetzee. The contention of the article is that trans-subjects, like Christ, are able to lay bare the struggle of incarnation that all humans (as subjects) experience. Furthermore, it suggests that in publically opening the dialectic between being and meaning, trans subjects might allow all subjects the possibility of rearticulating being.

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Eugene de Klerk
University of Mpumalanga
Eugene.deklerk@ump.ac.za