

A Bridging Fiction: The Migrant Subject in J.M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus*

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Summary

The article examines, with reference to J.M. Coetzee's novel, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), how the migrant is narrated into being as a subject over the divide between a previous life, which is being transformed into memory, and a future life, which has to be imagined before being realised. Drawing on Coetzee's own metaphor in *Elizabeth Costello* of writing fiction as constructing a bridge over a chasm between the real world and an imaginary one, as well as Calvino's similar metaphor in *If on a winter's night a traveller* (1979) of story being a bridge over a void, the article shows how the narrative in *The Childhood of Jesus* is located in, and constitutes a passage from, an unspecified past to an indeterminate future. The reader is reminded throughout the narrative of the void beneath the minimalist fictional bridge, and of the problem that the young protagonist, David, has with the logic of conventional numeracy – the hypotext for David's difficulty with numbers being Musil's novel, *The Confusions of Young Törless* (1906). Coetzee's novel expands the fictionality around the story of Jesus not only through the parodic resemblance of his young protagonist to the Biblical Jesus, but also through its intertextual use of works by Voltaire, Cervantes and Kafka, and especially the apocryphal *Infancy Gospels* with their miraculous and anecdotal stories about the childhood of Jesus. Coetzee's novel, with its essential simplicity of plot and character, gravity and meaning that resides in metaphor, may perhaps usefully be approached as a self-reflexive fictional parable – a novel about parables, Biblical, apocryphal and literary.

Opsomming

Die artikel ondersoek, met verwysing na J.M. Coetzee se roman, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), hoe die migrant tot subjek vertel word oor die kloof tussen 'n vorige lewe wat in herinnering verander, en 'n toekoms wat eers verbeeld moet word voordat dit verwesenlik kan word. Deur gebruik te maak van Coetzee se eie metafoor in *Elizabeth Costello* van fiksionele vertel as 'n brug oor die gaping tussen werklikheid en verbeelde wêreld, asook Calvino se soortgelyke metafoor in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979) van verhaal as brug oor die niet, toon die artikel hoe die vertelling in *The Childhood of Jesus* plaasvind in, en 'n oorgang skep tussen, 'n ongespesifiseerde verlede en 'n onbepaalde toekoms. Die leser se aandag word deurgaans gevestig op die kloof onder die minimalistiese fiksionele brug, en ook op die jong hooffiguur David se probleem met gewone syfers en rekenkunde – waarvoor

die hipoteks gevind kan word in Musil se roman, *The Confusions of Young Törless* (1906). Coetzee se roman dra verder by tot die fiksionaliteit rondom die verhaal van Jesus, nie alleen deur die parodiese ooreenkomste tussen sy jeugdige protagonis en die Bybelse Jesus nie, maar ook deur intertekste van Voltaire, Cervantes en Kafka, en veral die apokriewe *Kinderjare-Evangelies* met hulle wonderbaarlike anekdotes oor die kind Jesus. Coetzee se roman, met sy betreklik eenvoudige handeling en karakters dog ernstige metaforiese betekenis, kan miskien die beste benader word as a self-refleksiewe fiksionele gelykenis – 'n roman oor Bybelse, apokriewe en literêre gelykenisse.

Migrancy as a theme in the novels of J.M. Coetzee has featured in two recent critical works. David Attwell's *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* (2015) is a study of the self-reflexive development of Coetzee's fictional concerns, as revealed in the author's notebooks and manuscripts as well as the novels themselves. Early on in the book, Attwell refers to the "perpetual anxiety" (2015: 26) of the provincial subject, for whom happiness always lies elsewhere, in Coetzee's autobiographical trilogy, *Scenes from Provincial Life* (*Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*). The source of this anxiety, he says, can be related to "the fact that for the thirty years that Coetzee lived and wrote in Cape Town, he did so without being comfortably settled" (26), having been forced to return to South Africa in 1971 from voluntary exile and never having fully got over it until he emigrated again in 2002. Attwell returns to the topic of Coetzee's dislocatedness in Chapter 12, "Migrations", where he identifies the provenance of his Elizabeth Costello stories and also the novel *Disgrace* in "their author's global mobility" (214); as a result of his frequent and often extended visits abroad for academic appointments, festivals and awards during the 1990s, "his life and career were becoming unmoored from South Africa". In Attwell's final chapter, "The Third Stage", which deals with Coetzee's novels after his relocation to Australia, (*Slow Man*, *Diary of a Bad Year* and *The Childhood of Jesus*), he identifies *Slow Man*, when approached in realist terms, as being "appropriately about migration and belonging" (242), which he then goes on to qualify: "*Slow Man* is the novel of Coetzee's emigration, a work that conscientiously sets out to explore the question of belonging to a new country, at a time of life when, in most middle-class lives, the primary concern is superannuation and its consequences" (243).¹

In *Diaspora and Identity in South African Fiction* (2016), in a chapter titled "An Uneasy Guest", J.U. Jacobs examines the ways in which "the main stages of the diasporic drama of belonging and not belonging are narratively enacted in J.M. Coetzee's fictional memoirs, *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*" (2016: 205), and how, especially when seen in relation to his first "Australian" novel, *Slow Man*, Coetzee engages more directly than in

1. Donald Powers (2010) also identifies the emigrant as a theme and the connection between emigration and writing in *Slow Man*.

any of his other works with the question of himself as a subject formed in the space of diaspora. Jacobs interprets *Summertime* as a biographical and fictional hall of mirrors, at the centre of which is the migrant figure of “John Coetzee”, whose story is reflected on, and also reflected in, the stories of five informants – three women with whom he was involved, a close friend and a favourite cousin – themselves immigrants who have all since relocated, to Brazil, France, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Somerset West.

Neither Attwell nor Jacobs, however, discusses *The Childhood of Jesus* in any detail in the context of migrancy, although Attwell concludes his book with a suggestive observation, as a kind of coda: “*Slow Man* writes the story of migration as an ending, while *The Childhood of Jesus* writes it as a beginning” (2015: 246). Nor is there in the critical reception of the novel any significant focus on migration as a central concern; besides identifying the protagonists as refugees of sorts, and describing their circumstances in their new country, reviewers have not pursued the topic of the migrant as salient figure, but have addressed mainly their various difficulties with the challenges presented by Coetzee’s perplexing novel.²

2. According to Benjamin Markovits, *The Childhood of Jesus* is “an odd book. And it gets odder” (2013). Julian Farago says that “Coetzee has never published a book as bizarre as *The Childhood of Jesus*, an unfathomable metafictional firecracker unlike any of his previous books and indeed unlike any other book I can name” (2013), and he concludes that it is “to some degree, an irresolvable tangle”. Roger Bellin also calls it a strange book, “stranger than any reader could wish or anticipate [...] The strongest sensation one has while reading is puzzlement, a sense that the story is a cipher whose key has been lost” (2013). Peter Craven says that *The Childhood of Jesus* “is like nothing on earth, and not much else in the history of literature. It is rhapsodic, didactic, episodic and – in ways that might signify a relapse or a reversion – dramatic” (2013). Joy Lo Dico refers to Coetzee’s “unsettling new parable” (2013), and Patrick Flanery describes it as an “acrobatically complex and curiously moving gospel”. For Anthony Cummins, the ending of the novel “supplies no answers, unless you count the novel itself as a riposte to those doubters who reckoned Coetzee’s recent phase of not-quite-autofiction would prove to be his final artistic resting place” (2013). David L. Ulin at least recognises that the protagonists’ arrival in a new country “provides the dramatic momentum of the novel” (2013), but argues that there is little meaning beyond “the image of a small group of wanderers, adrift in an uncharted universe, ‘[l]ooking for somewhere to stay’”. In her insightful essay on *The Childhood of Jesus*, Ileana Dimitriu identifies Simón as “a seeker (of asylum, of a new life) in an unnamed Spanish-speaking country” (2014: 70) and as “‘a refugee’ who cannot forsake his past identity as he wishes to embrace ‘a new life, a new name’” (71). Her main concern, however, is less with the subject as migrant than with bringing “a spiritual turn” to bear on her reading of the novel, and to consider the undercurrent of “a deep, non-conventional religious sensibility”

The migrant subject is formed in an ambivalent space between an uninhabitable home country and a contingent host country, between a previous life, which is being transformed into memory, and a future life, which has to be imagined before being realised. As Iain Chambers puts it, migrant subjects are all characterised by living between worlds, which means that they are “caught on a frontier that runs through [their] tongue, religion, music, dress, appearance and life. To come from elsewhere, from “there” and not “here”, and hence to be simultaneously “inside” and “outside” the situation at hand, is to live at the intersections of histories and memories, experiencing both their preliminary dispersal and their subsequent translation into new, more extensive, arrangements along emerging routes” (1994: 6). The migrant, I propose, is narrated into being as a subject over this divide. Coetzee expressed something of the liminality of the migrant when he formulated his own relocation to Australia in terms of a conundrum: he claimed that he “had not left South Africa ... but come to Australia” (Kannemeyer 2012: 541). In *The Childhood of Jesus*, this article will argue, the migrant subject is articulated in the break between home country and host country, in a precarious space between a fading past and an imagined future.³

The first of the “Eight Lessons” in Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*, titled “Realism”, begins with the implied author/narrator self-reflexively addressing “the problem of the opening” (2003: 1). He offers the reader an image of fictional narrative as a bridge over the divide between the real world and an imaginary one, “to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge”. He then goes on to illustrate how he builds a fictional bridge from the as yet undescribed world (“the territory in which we were”) on this side of a chasm, or void, to the as yet unrealised other side (“the far territory, where we want to be”). He self-reflexively interrupts his narrative from time to time with pointers as to how the narrative bridge might best be constructed. When describing Elizabeth Costello’s appearance, for example, he tells the reader that he chooses to include only essential details: it is best to “[s]upply the particulars, allow the significations to emerge of themselves” (4). He also alerts the reader to what can be omitted from his narrative, and says that he has decided to skip a scene in a restaurant, which is “mainly dialogue” (7). Further on, he inserts into the narrative a brief

(70) in the work, and how, “[w]hile the novel considers the ‘reality’ of material life without transcendence or consolation, the novel at the same time presents its characters as longing for an element beyond themselves: a longing for an irreducible, or radical alterity (or god?)”.

3. For example, the young immigrant speaker in Carol Ann Duffy’s poem, “Originally”, describes herself as someone who has lost her “river, culture, speech, sense of first space and the right place” (2004: 65).

digression about fictional realism not being “comfortable with ideas” (9), since ideas cannot float free but need to be embodied, “tied to the speakers by whom they are enounced, and generated from the matrix of individual interests out of which their speakers act in the world”. Later, however, he cautions himself against interrupting his fictional narrative too often, “since storytelling works by lulling the reader or listener into a dreamlike state in which the time and space of the real world fade away, superseded by the time and space of the fiction. Breaking into the dream draws attention to the constructedness of the story, and plays havoc with the realist illusion” (16).

Coetzee’s metaphor of the bridge recalls the one by Italo Calvino in his novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveller* (1979). The chapter titled “*Without fear of wind or vertigo*” similarly begins with the problem of defining the space from which his protagonists’ “story can emerge from nothingness, find a point of departure, a direction, a plot” (1981: 80). Amidst throngs of people fleeing across an iron bridge from the chaos of civil war to safety in an unnamed city, the narrator comes to the assistance of a young woman who suffers from vertigo and is panic-stricken at the thought of “[t]he void, the void down below” (82). Looking through the spaces between the steps of the bridge at the river below, he begins to understand what she feels: “that every void continues in the void, every gap, even a short one, opens onto another gap, every chasm empties into the infinite abyss” (82). The situation suggests a self-reflexive metaphor to him: “Perhaps it is this story that is a bridge over the void, and as it advances it flings forward news and sensations and emotions to create a ground of upsets both collective and individual in the midst of which a path can be opened while we remain in the dark about many circumstances both historical and geographical”. The only stability and security available to both author and reader is the narrative bridge being constructed underfoot. The story, Calvino’s narrator says as he continues with his narrative, “must also work hard to keep up with us, to report a dialogue constructed on the void, speech by speech. For the story, the bridge is not finished: beneath every word there is nothingness” (83).

In Coetzee’s *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), the narrative is located in and constitutes a passage from an unspecified past to an indeterminate future in a host country. The middle-aged protagonist, Simón, and the five-year-old boy, David, arrive as new immigrants in the port city of Novilla in an unnamed Spanish-speaking country. Simón is friend, guardian and godfather to David after he was separated from his mother and lost his documents during the ocean crossing. Their entry into this new world is described in the language of dislocation and relocation, but also of rebirth or translation into an afterlife. Like all the other arrivals, they have “no past, none that counts” (97); all “start anew here [...] with a blank slate, a virgin slate” (103); all have come “from nowhere, from nothing” (103). Nor have they brought any history with them, since they have been washed clean not only of their past but also of their memories of it. Although Simón recognises that he is “a

new man in a new land” (114), he nevertheless perceives their state as of being in a kind of “limbo” (19). The officials at the Belstar transit camp and the Relocation Centre where he and David are processed as new arrivals are apathetic and uninterested, and there seems to be a general absence of passion, irony and any secret yearnings in the people he encounters afterwards. The memory of passion is still strong in Simón, however, and life in the new country is too anodyne for his taste: “too lacking in ups and downs, in drama and tension” (64). Here, where everything seems to have little weight or substance, he is reluctant to give up “the feel of residence in a body with a past” (143). His friend and occasional sexual partner, Elena, reminds him that “[a] new life is a new life ... not an old life all over again in new surroundings”. Although as adults from elsewhere she and Simón might not always feel fully at home in their new country and its language, they are there for the sake of the future of the children, David and her son, Fidel, who represent the next generation and for whom Spanish will be their mother tongue. Elena further reminds Simón of his dependent state, in a veritable text-book definition of the refugee:

You arrived in this country naked, with nothing to offer but the labour of your hands. You could have been turned away, but you were not: you were made welcome. You could have been abandoned under the stars, but you were not: you were given a roof over your head. You have a great deal to be thankful for.

(107)

Simón is also brought face to face with the double displacement of the immigrant when he visits the Salón Confort, or “Leisure and Recreational Centre” (137), as the state brothel is euphemistically called, and where, in order to gain access to a “Personal Therapist”, he has first to negotiate the bureaucracy of its application forms and appointment schedules. The receptionist tells him that the Salón is not a facility for transients, explaining, with perfect seriousness: “But being a transient is itself a transient state. Someone who is a transient here will be at home where he comes from, just as someone whose home is here would be a transient elsewhere” (140).

Although the backstories of Simón and David form no part of the narrative, their life in the in-between gradually acquires some substance and detail in narration. The narrative bridge that Coetzee constructs in *The Childhood of Jesus* includes, in pared back prose, little more than essential details about their immigrant experience:⁴ Simón and David have had to

4. Critics are unanimous in their impressions of the minimalist design and style of the narrative, if not in their verdicts. Considering the *The Childhood of Jesus* in terms of late style, Fintan O’Toole describes Coetzee as “a consummate withholder, one of the great masters of the unsaid and the inexplicit” (2013: 59), and says: “What is on the page, what Coetzee chooses

learn Spanish; they are provided with basic accommodation in one of the state housing blocks; Simón is given a passbook and a work permit, which enables him to find employment as a stevedore, and he begins to form a few social contacts with his fellow dockworkers – he and David are invited along to a (free) football match, and on one occasion Simón also joins the young men at the socialist-style Institute for Further Studies where they attend courses in philosophy, “improving themselves. Everyone is busy becoming a better citizen, a better person” (121).

The reader is reminded throughout of the void beneath this minimalist fictional bridge, however. Simón suffers an attack of vertigo at work on the docks, which makes him feel that he is “going to slip and fall” (39); and he is later accidentally knocked over the side and falls into the gap between the quay and the hull of the ship. David suffers from a child’s anxiety about falling into the cracks in the pavement when he walks, which turns into an obsession about falling into gaps. When asked why he is handling the copy of *Don Quixote* that he is reading so roughly, he replies that if he doesn’t hurry, “a hole will open ... [b]etween the pages ... inside the page” (166). When he later again repeats his fear that “We can fall down the gap. Down

to tell us, is severely limited. It does not include time and place” (58). Peter Craven says of the world of the novel that it “is as lean as its style, skeletal beyond the mimetic dreams of naturalism” (2013), and that it “is written with an absolute deliberateness of design and sureness of pace in the face of a conception which sounds almost ludicrously sketchy and portentously parabolic”. According to him, the narrative consciously teases the reader with its “threadbareness”. Joyce Carol Oates speaks of the “uniformly plain, flat, unadorned prose, in which nothing so luxurious as a metaphor emerges, or a striking employment of syntax, or a word of more than a few syllables” (2013), and says of the world of Novilla that “All is generic, universal, impersonal”. Jason Farago also describes Novilla as “a hazy and barely detailed limbo” (2013), and says of the novel: “A strange graft of Socratic dialogue, biblical exegesis, socialist realist workers’ play, and road movie, it pares back the fundamentals of fiction; characters are deliberately two-dimensional, settings drawn in only the faintest outlines”. Benjamin Markovits also matches the setting of the novel to Coetzee’s style: “The setting is like a theatre stage. Because it’s not a real place, the only parts of it we can imagine are the ones he mentions. Little details have to stand in for much larger arrangements. But the bareness of the stage suits Coetzee’s prose ...” (2013). On the other hand, Yoshiki Tajiri finds that the novel’s “very simple style and relatively straightforward story line” (2016: 72) finally lead to “a tinge of flatness or even dullness” (74) and result in “a kind of hollowed-out utopian or dystopian narrative” (75). David L. Ulin concludes that despite *The Childhood of Jesus* being “compelling – eerie, tautly written – it ultimately falls prey to the emptiness it describes” (2013), whereas Simon Akam finds that because of its “refusal to acknowledge place, together with such flat, banal language” (2013), the novel “appears to be set inside a train set or diorama rather than the world”.

the crack” (176), Simón refers to the gaps between stars to make him understand the differences between gaps and cracks and holes, and explains: “A gap is not the same thing as a crack [...] Gaps are part of nature, part of the way things are. You can’t fall down a gap and disappear. It just doesn’t happen. A crack is quite different. A crack is a break in the order of nature”.

David’s obsession underlies his inability to learn the logic of conventional numeracy, to accept that numbers are not isolated but sequential, and that two and two equals four. This, Simón’s friend Eugenio says, is “a universal rule, independent of us, not man-made at all” (248); the alternative way of thinking, in which two and two equals three, would belong to “another universe, with other physical laws”, and would result in chaos. Simón, however, tries to explain to Eugenio David’s radically different way of understanding numbers, which are nonetheless very real to him, by trying to see them through the boy’s eyes:

Put an apple before him and what does he see? An apple: not *one* apple, just *an* apple. Put two apples before him. What does he see? An apple and an apple: not two apples, not the same apple twice, just an apple and an apple. Now along comes señor León (señor León is his class teacher) and demands: *How many apples, child?* What is the answer? What are *apples*? What is the singular of which *apples* is the plural?

(248-249)

Sympathising with Eugenio’s exasperation, Simón elaborates further on David’s alternative epistemology, and ontology:

David won’t follow us. He won’t take the steps we take when we count: *one* step *two* step *three*. It is as if the numbers were islands floating in a great black sea of nothingness, and he were each time being asked to close his eyes and launch himself across the void. *What if I fall?* – that is what he asks himself. *What if I fall and then keep falling for ever?* Lying in bed in the middle of the night, I could sometimes swear that I too was falling – falling under the same spell that grips the boy. *If getting from one to two is so hard*, I asked myself, *how shall I ever get from zero to one?* From nowhere to somewhere: it seemed to demand a miracle each time.

(249)

The hypotext for David’s difficulty with numbers is, of course, Robert Musil’s *The Confusions of Young Törless* (1906), for which Coetzee wrote an introduction to the 2001 Penguin edition. Musil’s young Törless, like Coetzee’s young David, is obsessed with gaps in surface reality that open into a void. The motif of the void or abyss recurs throughout Musil’s narrative. We are told, for example, that the value of a Gymnasium education (which Törless does not have) lies in the pupils’ exposure to the classical works of Goethe, Schiller and Shakespeare, which, however ill-digested and badly reproduced, enable them to come to terms with

themselves and carry them over the void of their transitional years. Törless is constantly anxious about a trapdoor suddenly opening under him and his falling through it. And as a young adolescent he has not yet acquired an adult sense of time in which “days join up into months and years without his so much as noticing” (Musil 2001: 35); for him, each new day is a separate experience, “[e]very night was for him a void, a grave, an extinction ...” (36). His education brings him to an awareness that, as he puts it: “my thoughts are like clouds, and when I come to particular points there’s something like a hole in between and you can see through it into an infinite, indefinable expanse” (91).

Furthermore, like Coetzee’s young David, young Törless, too, is bemused by conventional mathematical reasoning whereby “imaginary or otherwise impossible values” (82) can be used to calculate towards “a tangible result in the end”:

Just think about it for a moment: in that kind of calculation you have very solid figures at the beginning, which can represent metres or weights or something similarly tangible, and which are at least real numbers. And there are real numbers at the end of the calculation as well. But they’re connected to one another by something that doesn’t exist. Isn’t it like a bridge consisting only of the first and last pillars, and yet you walk over it as securely as though it was all there. For me there’s something dizzying about a calculation like that; as if it goes off God knows where for part of the way. But the really uncanny thing about it is the strength that exists in such a calculation, holding you so firmly that you land safely in the end.

(82)

His mathematics master tries to reassure him that “mathematics is a whole world in itself” (91), and that understanding will come with experience; for the time being, though, he must just “believe”. His fellow student, Beineberg, extrapolates from the example of what he describes as Törless’s “little mathematical curiosity” (132) the general conclusion that “our thinking doesn’t walk on solid, secure, even ground, but rather ... it walks over holes. It closes its eyes, it ceases for a moment to exist, and is then transferred safely over to the other side ... every area of our thinking is riddled with such crevasses, nothing but fragments drifting in an unfathomable ocean”. It is the adult ability to bring together the domains of the real and the imaginary that Coetzee in his introduction to Musil’s novel says is “vertiginously unimaginable” (2001: xii) for the young Törless.

What Törless calls “dizzying” and “uncanny”, and what Simón describes to Eugenio as the miracle of launching oneself in calculation or thought across a void, from nowhere to somewhere, is equally the miracle of narrative, of storytelling. And Simón also understands, through David’s eyes, its contingency. What, he asks Eugenio, if they are wrong and David is right: “What if between one and one there is no bridge at all, only empty

space? And what if we, who confidently take the step, are in fact falling through space, only we don't know it because we insist on keeping our blindfold on? What if this boy is the only one among us with eyes to see?" (250). Notwithstanding Simón's later reassurances to David that they are "safe with the numbers" (227) and that the "numbers are what hold the universe together", and that he need not fear that they will give way beneath his feet, in *The Childhood of Jesus* Coetzee appears to be questioning his own faith in the efficacy of the fictionality that his narrator in *Elizabeth Costello* proposes as a way of overcoming an ontological divide.⁵ Or, of providing a bridge over what Calvino's narrator in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* refers to as the "nothingness" that is "beneath every word" (1981: 83).

Why, one might ask, would Coetzee turn at all to the architext of the story of Jesus? In Yann Martel's recent novel, *The High Mountains of Portugal* (2016), a character who is an "amateur theologian" (Martel 2016: 139) discusses and categorises the miracles of Jesus. The overwhelming majority of his miraculous work consists of what she calls "*medical miracles*" (145), those that benefit the human body, such as making "the blind see, deaf hear, the dumb speak, the lame walk". The single "*miracle of interpretation*" (147), when Jesus walks on water, she argues, "means little when taken at face value" (149) but, when taken as *allegory*, "then the miracle opens up". The miracle of Jesus walking on the water provides us with "a guide to how we must read Scripture as a whole" (150): if we understand the Gospels as "written in a language of metaphors and myths, then they open up with moral depth and truth". The one miracle that "stands true and literal, the pillar of our faith", Martel's amateur theologian continues, is Jesus' resurrection: "That is Christianity at heart: a single miracle surrounded and sustained by stories, like an island surrounded by the sea" (151).

At the heart of this storytelling, she explains, is the figure of Jesus himself, who spoke in parables: "A parable is an allegory in the form of a simple story" (150). In order to convey his truth, Jesus chose to use the language of metaphor and myth – "*the tools of fiction*" (152), to "tell stories and let himself be presented through stories" (152). The fictional dimension of Christian discourse is further compounded, Martel's amateur theologian reminds us, by the extraordinary fact that there are "no significant *historical* accounts of Jesus of Nazareth" (153). Jesus represents a historiographical void, especially his childhood: "The entire historical record on Jesus of Nazareth from non-Christian sources fits into a handful of pages, and it's all

5. Attwell explains the phrase that serves as the sub-title of his book, *Face to Face with Time* (a quotation from a draft of *Life & Times of Michael K*): it "conveys the way Coetzee puts fiction between himself and history, between himself and his mortality. It does this in highly self-conscious ways, with the result that Coetzee criticism is filled with commentaries on the novels' metafictional qualities – the writing about writing" (2015: 26).

second hand. None of it tells us anything we don't already know from Christian sources" (154). Everything that we know about the flesh-and-blood Jesus, she says, "comes down to four *allegorists*" (154), the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, who did not themselves know Jesus nor were they eyewitnesses, but were "inspired scribes who recorded and arranged oral tales that had been circulating for decades". The figure of Jesus, Martel's theologian concludes, "told stories and lived through stories. Our faith is faith in his story, and there is very little beyond that story-faith. The holy word is story, and story is the holy word" (155).⁶

In *The Childhood of Jesus* Coetzee expands the fictionality around the story of Jesus even further by developing his own metafictional and philosophical themes in a narrative in which the story of his child-protagonist, David, bears at best a parodic resemblance to that of the Biblical Jesus. To cite only some of these "iconoclastic refractions of New Testament figures and archetypes" (2016: 76), or allusions "in the deflationary mode" (77), as Ileana Dimitriu calls them: in a strange annunciation, Simón wishes the boy on the woman Inés, who accepts the charge to become his mother, although David insists that Simón and Inés are not his biological parents. David is constantly moved by a desire to save people, and attempts to raise the old carthorse El Rey from the dead, as well as a duckling that has been crushed underfoot. He challenges the authority of Señor León, who is no longer prepared to tolerate him in his class, and when tested to write "*Conviene que yo diga la verdad*, I must tell the truth" (225) on the blackboard, writes instead, "*Yo soy la verdad*, I am the truth". On another occasion, when told by Simón that he should protect the poor, save the oppressed, and honour his mother, he replies: "No! My mother must honour me" (246). In addition to his difficulty in learning how to read and write conventionally, David is also in the habit of writing stories for himself in a private script. Other parodic parallels with the story of Jesus are their eventual flight to safety from Novilla, as well as David's propensity for gathering companions, if not quite disciples, along the way.

It is, however, not to holy writ that Coetzee chiefly turns to engage with the issues of a previous life and an afterlife, and reality and imagination, but to other, *literary* works. *The Childhood of Jesus* makes extensive use of intertextuality in the construction of its narrative. Besides Musil's *Young Törless*, the most obvious intertexts are the Kafkaesque bureaucracy in the *Centro de Reubicación* where Simón and David first arrive to be processed as immigrants, and *Don Quixote* which Simón reads to David as the basis of his education. There are also references to Voltaire's *Candide* ("All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds", Simón remarks sarcastically

6. One is inevitably reminded here of Elizabeth Costello's profession of her ultimate belief in the storytelling imagination, despite its limitations, to the judges in the story "At the Gate" in *Elizabeth Costello*.

about their work on the docks, 41), and to Coetzee's own *Slow Man* (when Simón has delivered David to Inés, he says that it is "like waking after surgery to find a limb has been cut off", 90).

But most significantly, although Coetzee does not turn in the first place to the authority of the canonical scriptures in building his narrative bridge across the void, he does turn to the fictionality of the popular apocryphal texts with their miraculous and anecdotal stories about the childhood of Jesus. The second-century *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (or *The Childhood of the Saviour*) presents the child Jesus from the age of five to twelve as something of a brat, bringing clay birds and dried fish to life, cursing other children who displease him and causing them to wither and die, striking people blind, and failing to be taught by his teachers and wanting to teach them instead. The source of David's exchanges with Señor León about the number and nature of apples in *The Childhood of Jesus* is obvious from Jesus's response to a teacher's reading lesson in *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*: when instructed, "Say, *alpha*", Jesus is said to have replied to him: "First tell me what is the *beta* and I will tell you what *alpha* is". The teacher, becoming irritated, strikes the young Jesus, whereupon Jesus curses him and the teacher falls down dead. The second-century *Infancy Gospel of James* (or *Protevangelium of James*) tells the story of the birth and upbringing of Mary herself, the nativity of Jesus, and of hiding him from Herod the Great. The seventh-century *Infancy Gospel of Matthew* (which is also known as the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*) provides a fuller account of the flight into Egypt, and of the infant John the Baptist joining the Holy Family in Egypt. In *The Childhood of Jesus* the "Holy Family" of Simón, Inés and David flee from the educational authorities after David has escaped from the remedial institution at Punto Arenas to which he was committed for being disruptive at school, and on their journey to a new life in Estrellita del Norte they are joined by a hitchhiker who, tellingly, is called Juan. In Coetzee's narrative Estrellita would appear to be more than just a Biblical guiding star to the newborn infant Jesus; for the refugees from the now inhospitable Novilla it represents a provisional next step in the fictional bridge to a safe haven on the far side of the void.

Like Calvino's, Coetzee's novels finally uphold a belief in fiction – storytelling – that is aware of its own contingency as the way of getting across the divide between one and two, and between alpha and beta. In *The Childhood of Jesus*, the migrant subjects are narrated into being, step by step, in the bridge of fiction over the void between a past homeland and a future home country, between a previous life and an afterlife.

The question that needs to be addressed, however, is what *kind* of fictional structure Coetzee has devised in *The Childhood of Jesus* to write his migrant subjects into being. The critical consensus is that the novel may be read allegorically, but not unproblematically so. In her review, Joyce Carol Oates states that "*The Childhood of Jesus* is clearly an allegory" (2013) – but then

goes on to qualify this by saying that “it isn’t an allegory with the transparency of Plato’s allegory of the cave, Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* or Orwell’s *Animal Farm*”, nor does it have “the emotional, psychological and visceral density” of Coetzee’s earlier, major allegorical works of fiction that are set in a recognisably real South Africa during and after apartheid. She suggests that *The Childhood of Jesus* might more plausibly be seen as “a Kafka-inspired parable of the quest for meaning itself: for reasons to endure when (secular) life lacks passion and purpose”. Along similar lines, in terms of her interest in its religious dimension Ileana Dimitriu argues that the novel can be regarded as a “postmodern allegory” in that it “plays deconstructively on allegorical forms as it reconstructs a tenuous hold on idealism” (2014: 75). Yoshiki Tajiri, on the other hand, maintains that the allegorical mode is deceptive and leads nowhere: “It is as though the allegorical mode were simply offered as a trap” (2016: 73). Rather, he says, the most conspicuous features of the novel are “postmodern pastiche and self-quotation” (86), and he disparages it as a kind of Coetzeean “literary theme park”. David L. Ulin also questions an approach to the novel as allegory; it is, he says, “an allegory that is oddly concrete” (2013) and that “never extends beyond itself”. Joy Lo Dico remains undecided “whether Coetzee has written another great allegorical piece, or something too elusive to provide satisfaction” (2013). For Roger Bellin the uncertainty around viewing the novel in terms of allegory results from the book being “in some weak sense haunted by Christian allegory” (2013) but being also “crafted to frustrate other forms of allegorical reading, other reductions to a single problem or idea or topic”. He concludes that *The Childhood of Jesus* needs to be seen as “a work of speculative fiction – that is, in reading it we must discover a world quite unlike our own and try to understand how it works” (2013). It is not, he says, a novel but “a book of puzzles, a Socratic cipher for political philosophers and a riddle for allegorists”.

Critics have also considered the novel in terms of the various sub-categories of allegory. Fintan O’Toole wonders whether it might be regarded as a fable, but concludes that it does not comply with the two main requirements of fable: it is not internally consistent (there are puzzling contradictions), nor does Coetzee keep faith with his narrative, that is, “retain an air of utter conviction about the ‘reality’ he creates” (2013: 59). While O’Toole’s assessment that “[i]n its general form, the novel can be seen as a kind of fantasy of artistic escape – from poetry, for the seductions of storytelling, from memory, from place, from the past” (60), may be questionable, he does make an important point in recognising its improvisatory nature and describing *The Childhood of Jesus* as “a blank slate gradually filled with whatever marks Coetzee feels like making” (emphasis added). Peter Craven, too, identifies an element of the fable in the narrative’s “wonderful tact and gravity, a childlike quality that partakes of the nature of fable ... yet it seems in the end a wholly original vision full of

grace and truth” (2013). As a piece of fiction, Craven regards *The Childhood of Jesus* as “a breathtaking performance” and “almost a guide book to the meaning of life”; but, more importantly for the purposes of the argument in this article, he describes it as one which “*dramatises its own faltering steps, at the edge of ridiculousness, at the cliff of solipsism, with a breathtaking originality that refreshes the mind*” (emphasis added). Finally, it is Benjamin Markovits who most graphically describes the ongoing, self-reflexive process of narrative invention and solution in *The Childhood of Jesus*:

The whole novel is a kind of escape act, an elaborate rope trick. Coetzee has tied himself up in a number of narrative problems and has to find a way to wriggle out of them. The world he describes isn’t real; the main characters have no relation to each other; their quest is implausible. *He invents new predicaments, chapter by chapter, and resolves them. There’s something magical about his ability to keep going. You get the sense, as you read, of details filling in around you, as he turns to look at them. Which isn’t quite the same thing as a world that’s already there, which you find out more about.*

(2013, emphasis added)

To sum up: instead of narrativising existing reality, in *The Childhood of Jesus*, Coetzee begins with “a blank slate” that is “gradually filled with whatever marks Coetzee feels like making” (O’Toole), in a dizzying narrative that “dramatises its own faltering steps, at the edge of ridiculousness, at the cliff of solipsism” (Craven), and in which there is something magical about the way “you get the sense, as you read, of details filling in around you, as [Coetzee] turns to look at them” (Markovits). Or, to return to the trope that serves as the main vehicle for the argument in this article, Coetzee constructs, word by word, a contingent fictional bridge across the void to bring his migrants as subjects to the far side. And the mode of allegory, I would suggest, that best describes this fictional bridge is parable, with its essential simplicity of plot and character, gravity, and meaning that resides in metaphor. *The Childhood of Jesus* may perhaps usefully be approached as a self-reflexive fictional parable – a novel as a parable about parables, Biblical, apocryphal and literary – that is constructed over the nothingness beneath, to show how migrant subjects are narrated into being.

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