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A Rending and a Raising: Ecstatic Religiosity and Textual Renewal in J.M. Coetzee's *Jesus* Trilogy

Abstract

This essay will consider the abstract aesthetics of J.M. Coetzee's *Jesus* trilogy – *The Childhood of Jesus*, *The Schooldays of Jesus* and *The Death of Jesus* – as emphasizing the pertinence of the religious in terms of a rupturing of an ontotheological vision of the world. It will analyse Coetzee's employment of religious allegory in the trilogy as a commentary on the birth of religious consciousness that finds its ultimate meaning in an opening out of hermetic experience towards social community and unthematizable singularity. Using Jean-Luc Nancy's ideas of Christianity as deconstructive event and the ecstatic sense of the world, this essay will trace the thematic cohesion of the trilogy in terms of an understanding of divinity which provides an a-theological grounding of phenomenological sense. This reading will not only emphasize Coetzee's turn towards a "leaner" style in his late writing as the mark of a unique novelistic outlook towards the pertinence of transcendence in a post-secular world, but also engage with previous readings of allegory in Coetzee's work in order to posit a different understanding of allegory to be a conscious textual choice that both separates and ties together "fallen" temporality and the redemptive potentialities of literature, resulting in a sense of reality that stubbornly leads outside of it.

Keywords

J.M. Coetzee, Jean-Luc Nancy, Christianity, religion, literary aesthetics

In the pleasure of an artistic work, at the border of its language, a limit emerges whose function is to silence its language and bring the work to completion, and this is the limit which formed the work against all that was not itself. The shape of this balance is that of a precipitous cliff where the work finds completion only through those elements it subtracts from itself. The work is ruined by that which initially constituted it.

Michel Foucault, "The Father's 'No'"

Introduction: A Newer Fiction of Possibility?

The direct titular references to Christianity in J.M. Coetzee's *Jesus* trilogy demands a new critical sensibility which both imperfectly transposes the religious dimensions of transcendence into the framework of a defamiliarized allegorical narrative, and opens up the critical reading of this narrative framework towards a religious distension of sense which can only be sought *out*side of the world. That Coetzee (2013a: 97) views the mode of rhetorical plainness as ushering in a focus on questions of existential weight is evident in a statement made in refence to Edward Said's observations on late style:

> In the case of literature, late style, to me, starts with an ideal of a simple, subdued, unornamented language and a concentration on questions of real import, even questions of life and death.

Coetzee's utilization of an almost metaphysical register here suggests an aesthetic concern with the affective components of religiosity which, when taken as literary thematic, work towards implying "a sense of multi-dimensional reality that opens avenues or reframes the flattened plane of any given experience" (Wolosky 2018: 646). Critical readings of Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* (the first novel in the trilogy) proceed to unearth the pertinence of the religious in terms of the disclosure of the immanence of a world which cannot become sufficient unto itself: Maria Boletsi (2018: 152) observes that the novel "dares to imagine a

new world as an unfamiliar ground, on which the strangeness of our own relation to the world can be measured against the strange relations of others", and Shannon Forrest (2019: 154) argues that as the novel develops, the reader understands that the "unshakeable sense that the world 'stands for; something ungraspable, something that can only be glimpsed in the mystical". Both of these approaches animate the mapping of the religious onto the buried framework of allegory that Coetzee as much endorses as well as disavows. Indeed, commentary about Coetzee's latest novels has all but accepted Stephen Watson's (1996: 21) critique of Coetzee as being one of the "most ahistorical of writers", instead turning towards how the late fiction offers new philosophical possibilities and resources for thinking about life and a lived sense of the world. Marc Farrant's (2019: 176) article on the *Jesus* novels posits that Coetzee's representation of life forms shifts the focus away from biological dependency towards a marking of "the unconditional openness of any particular finite instance of life to change, to new spatio-temporal forms, opportunities and threats", and Ileana Dimitriu (2014: 70) notes that Coetzee's characters are directed by "a painful longing for something invisible, a yearning for a state of being that has not yet emerged". These readings all register the fact that Coetzee deliberately employs a novelistic strategy of indirection insofar as meaning is to be sought not so much within the boundaries of the text, but rather what the text gestures towards – a felt, but barely articulated sense of insufficiency regarding existential purpose in a world desaturated of transcendental moorings.

This essay will develop a reading of the trilogy which considers allegory as opening up a religious sensibility towards a non-sensible ground of the world that paradoxically informs the meaningful play of sense as it distends towards the infinite within existential finitude. I first unpack seminal critical approaches to Coetzee that evaluate the pertinence of allegory as hermeneutic overdetermination for stylistic ambiguity or insufficiency. This acknowledgment of insufficiency sets up the relevance of the religious, for I argue that it is in

Coetzee's contemplation of the contours of a world which must find its justificatory sense outside of it that allegorical interpretation can be sought as a structural template through which to read the trilogy. Next, I locate this necessary dis-appearance of sense in the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy, who provides a compelling framework that locates the dimensions of the religious in dis-location, or a place which interrupts our fundamental sense of place itself. This theoretical idea of existential displacement then supplies a crucial framework through which to read the main characters of the trilogy, who find themselves re-learning their places in a world "not made for our convenience" (Coetzee 2013b: 200). To read the image of the world in the trilogy as arena for soul-making is to trace how Coetzee frames existential facts – birth, family, disability and death – as stubbornly leading away from the world as objective totality. My analysis of the trilogy thereby pursues how this opening up of finitude towards the Infinite is demonstrative of an allegorical framework which puts disruption and incompletion at the heart of its structure.

Beyond Allegory and Towards the Religious as Self-Reflexive Insufficiency: Allegory and Modes of Coetzean Critique

By tracing the opening up of the world to a deep sense of community in the *Jesus* novels, I aim to show how Coetzee's alleged ahistoricism actually harnesses the force of religion in order to probe fundamental questions of belonging that in turn gives his late writing universal status. The critical divergence between the universalist tendency towards an allegorical reading[1] of the *Jesus* novels and a reading scrupulous towards the specificities of literary discourse has marked Derek Attridge's seminal approach to the question of the event as encoded through literature. Attridge (2006: 67) advocates what he calls a *literal* reading that "treats [the text] as something that comes into being only in the process of understanding and responding that I, as an individual reader in a specific time and place, conditioned by a specific history, go through". For Attridge, the critical blindness attendant with allegorical

readings of texts negates a sensitive openness towards the specificity of the "literary" as linguistic and conceptual event, resulting in an application of a critical framework "as a reminder of what we already know only too well" (Attridge 2006: 68). One might usefully deconstruct Attridge's bifurcation of allegorical and literalist (or as would be more likely the case, phenomenological) readings by asking how much of a reading sensitive to the temporal unfolding of readerly interpretation is already allegorical in nature, and how relevant Attridge's distinction is to the *Jesus* trilogy when the dominant interpretive paradigm seems inescapably allegorical. To be fair, Attridge (2006: 77) does acknowledge that "*the event of the allegorizing reading* may be part of the literary experience", included in the overall hermeneutics of the text without negating an authentic literary response to it.

My approach in this essay seeks a different calibration of the textual significance of allegory, one which modifies Attridge's claim that allegory supplies a paradigm that compensates for a critical insecurity about the text. In my reading of the trilogy, allegory allegorizes its own insufficiency and failure-to-mean. In other words, the critical examination of allegory as textual construct performs a necessary displacement, one which allows the religious as the ex-trinsic sense of the world to shine through. In effect, I wish to argue that the precise working of literary allegory in the *Jesus* trilogy is to be found in an existential or phenomenological understanding of the world.

My analysis then differs from overly psychological interpretations of allegory, the most famous of which is Dovey's (2007: 134) employment of Lacanian psychoanalysis to Coetzee's texts in order to argue that they function as "allegorical projections of their own loss of mastery". This framework proves to be ultimately inadequate in addressing what I take to be Coetzee's fundamental question in these texts, which is the existential issue of "*why we are here*" (Coetzee 2019: 189). In fact, Coetzee's use of allegory does more than to "advance a radical investigation of its own grounding" (Head 2009: 29), for by blurring the

distinction between the allegorical/symbolic and literal, the existential sense of the world opens up onto the religious as distension of meaning.

In other words, Coetzee's focus is nothing less than the Heideggerian question of Being, or that which grounds any philosophical or religious framework. The problem with applying a straightforwardly allegorical or literal reading to the trilogy is that both take up a settled position towards the world without the possibility of a fundamental interruption of understanding that opens up an a-theistic sense of that which grounds Being. As I will demonstrate, Coetzee's novels align interpretive insight with limit situations which dramatize an interruption of the religious into the ordinary in terms of an unbridgeable distance from the sense of the world that arises by virtue of our being-in the world. In this way, the religious is precisely the evacuation of the sense of the world.

Coetzee and the Sense of the World: Jean-Luc Nancy's Christianity as Performative Allegory of Interruption

The critical framing of Coetzee's aesthetics and his implicit religiosity acknowledges a desire for transcendence based on different modes of being-in the world than the outrightly practical and empirical. In recuperating the urgency of the religious in the *Jesus* novels, I wish to re-evaluate the centrality of Christianity to the trilogy through a reading of the Christian faith as the opening of sense to what is utterly extrinsic to it. In doing so, I argue for the relevance of religious faith in the trilogy not as belief in an ontotheological deity (i.e. one which partakes of the same substantiality as material reality), but as an opening out of language, the world, and indeed Being to the radical potentialities of *non*sense. This seems to me crucial not only in understanding the young boy David's (who functions as the allegorical representation of Jesus) idiosyncratic understanding of numbers as almost his "own language" (Coetzee 2013b:

221), but also Coetzee's emphasis that David's sense of the world is indelibly shaped by the death, or negation, of its sense.

Jean-Luc Nancy's writings on Christianity as the "distension of an opening" (Nancy 2008a: 148) will provide me with the necessary philosophical scaffolding in order to interpret Coetzee's tracing, through the trilogy, of how the arrival of David to Novilla brings an existential attunement to the world in focus, while showing how the fundamental ground of the world must lie outside of it. In this way, David's life and death can be read in an allegorical way in order to show how the incarnation of Godhood "leaves the world intact *and* touched by a strange gaping that is grace and wound at the same time" (Nancy 2008a: 78). As I will demonstrate, Coetzee's trilogy picks up on Christianity in precisely this way – the advent of the religious is affectively felt in the absent-ing of sense, which in turn demonstrates how the world is ceaselessly given over to radical otherness. As the philosopher Jacques Derrida (2008: 165) observes, the sense of the religious "already preceded the speech to which it has therefore never been present … [and] announces itself in advance as a *recall*".

My use of Nancy will thus map onto Coetzee in two significant ways. Firstly, I read a crucial congruence between Nancy's conception of the pedagogical potential of philosophy, and Coetzee's own depiction of it in the trilogy. In a very recent interview conducted with Artur R. Boelderl (2020: 363), Nancy succinctly describes philosophy as "learn[ing] that it only ever questioned [its own] principles (elements, being, thought) because it had a sense of their absence". As I interpret this, Nancy pursues a definition of philosophical thought which is self-reflexively open to its own lack of foundation. For Nancy, philosophy and religion equally partake of a deconstructive impulse, which necessitates an interruption of any normative claims to primordiality or finality. In a similar way, rather than seek an interpretation of allegory which is inherently strengthened or diminished by the modernist thrust towards quotidian experientiality, I aim to analyse Coetzee's trilogy in terms of a

disruption of allegory. As both Coetzee and Nancy demonstrate, the force of the religious arrives through the dismantling of both the occlusions of religious tradition and the philosophical sense of the world in which this tradition is embedded. In the words of Gary Banham (2013: 75), "such constant deconstruction of the 'image' of faith, by means of faith, is internal to the disputation concerning the very possibility of 'Christian art' or Christianity *as* art".

Secondly, reading Coetzee with Nancy reveals the way through which literature unfolds a religious dimension which manifests as an interpretive otherness. In a reading of Nancy's aesthetics of religion, Nikolas Deketelaere (2020: 12) points out that for Nancy, "'our world,' … 'is the world of literature,' for literature gives voice to the interruption and withdrawal of the origin and as such makes sense and forms world". Literature gives voice to the world-ling of the world, both in the sense of demonstrating that the world, and our collective births into it, presences as an event without any metaphysical foundations and that it opens up the possibility to imagine it otherwise (as changed *image* of the present towards the incalculable). It is this image of the world that Coetzee presents in the trilogy – present without memory, but brimming with excess – that I wish to delineate in what follows. To trace moments of rupture in the trilogy will therefore be to trace how the "nothing" that the characters feel they lack "when [they] are sufficient unto [themselves]" (Coetzee 2016: 192) is both an intimation of a desire for an opening into transcendence and an enactment of the literary for Coetzee and Nancy, which is "writing that points to and away from the world and itself" (Deppman 1997: 14). By putting Coetzee and Nancy into conversation, I seek to nuance Attridge's earlier polarization of allegorical and literalist readings of Coetzee, for Coetzee's unique deployment of allegory precisely allows an alterity to be read into well-worn religious figures. As I interpret it, the content of allegory is emptied out so as to bring to birth a disclosure of the world which is necessarily different from itself, as an *allegorizing* of

difference. Inasmuch as Coetzee attends to what Victoria Kahn (2020: 120) describes as "the strangeness of the world", faith arises from the understanding that "the life to come will be here on earth" (Coetzee 2019: 138).

The "Sense" of the Religious: Jean-Luc Nancy and Christianity as Opening

Nancy's poststructuralist understanding of Christianity as religion profoundly *without foundation* will provide me with a compelling framework through which to analyse Coetzee's indirect employment of allegory in the *Jesus* novels. In particular, I wish to focus on how Coetzee intimates an opening out of the world towards an unnameable transcendence which reanimates the pertinence of an allegorical interpretation. As I make clear in what follows, this necessary absence is what is at stake not only in David's almost recalcitrant mode of otherworldliness, but also in Coetzee's abstract portrayal of Novilla as a place without "the historical sense" (Forrest 2019: 154). Nancy's attempt to fuse a Heideggerian existential phenomenology with a Derridean critique of the metaphysics of presence represents a renewed consideration of the philosophical singularity of Christianity which is canny about its own deconstructive impulse – presenting, as Nancy (2008a: 145) puts it, "a ground without ground of indefinite opening". In this section, I concentrate on the Nancean themes of *sense* and *community* in order to argue for Nancy's position on Christianity as an intellectual and spiritual tradition profoundly attuned to existential finitude and the destruction of any assured ontotheological foundation of the world. Indeed, Nancy insists that Christianity disrupts any metaphysical sense of plenitude in order to open up a response to that which escapes ontological closure.

For Nancy (2008a: 17), the traditional debate between theism and atheism rests on a common misunderstanding about the essence of the religious. If Christianity deconstructs its own theological claims, it requires us to perform "a strictly anetiological (acausal) and

ateleological thinking". To unpack this statement, what Nancy argues for is a thinking about the immanence of the world which is pre-given to us without a metaphysical foundation and eschatological narrative. For Nancy, the philosophical stakes behind a re-consideration of religion as the discourse without foundation is the destruction of a mythical understanding of the world. Inasmuch as mythology represents a collective desire to ground the incessant passing of time upon an ahistorical beginning, the modern condition signals an interminable interruption of mythic frameworks. As Nancy (1991: 46) elaborates,

> Concentrated within the idea of myth is perhaps the entire pretension on the part of the West to appropriate its own origin, or to take away its secret, so that it can at last identify itself, absolutely, around its own pronouncement and its own birth. The idea of myth alone perhaps presents the very idea of the West, with its perpetual representation of the compulsion to return to its own sources in order to re-engender itself from them as the destiny of humanity. In this sense, I repeat, we no longer have anything to do with myth.

As Nancy implies, mythology imposes upon us an artificial understanding of the world in terms of a beginning and an end which escapes the pressing need to account for our lived experiences in the world and with others. In contrast, the "truths" of Christian belief, according to Nancy (2008a: 37), reminds us about our collective finitude and dependency upon one another: "Christianity has a self-interpretive history in which it understands itself in a way that is less and less religious in the sense in which religion implies a mythology … It translates itself in terms that are no longer those of a foundational and exemplary narrative … but in terms of a symbolics deciphered within the human condition". This perspective seems to me particularly useful in illuminating the dialectics of Coetzee's trilogy, which can be defined by the tension between living in the world as it is, and the step away from the world. Coetzee's sceptical treatment of religious faith as refracted in the novels cannot countenance

an otherworldly possibility of the divine; rather, as Boletsi (2018: 147) argues, "the unknowingness of the origin of the divine redirects us from a metaphysical, transcendent vision to an immanent vision that situates the divine, the magical, the poetic, only within this world". In other words, both Coetzee and Nancy locate the opening out of the divine in terms of an altered sense of existentiality – as Nancy (2008b: 47-8) writes, "the "divine" henceforth no longer has a place either in the world or outside it, for there is no other world. What "is not of the world" is not elsewhere: it is the opening in the world, the separation, the parting and the raising". Extending this argument to Coetzee's use of allegorical resonance, I argue that Coetzee performs a meta-textual interruption of allegory in order to shift the focus away from full textual correspondence towards a defamiliarization of sense. To put it more plainly, the oblique employment of religious motifs in the novels suggests the testing of religious sensibilities and accustomed modes of reading. In contrast to Dovey's (1996: 149) reading of Coetzean allegory which she suggests is deployed in order to make "his novels less vulnerable to critique", I argue that Coetzee renovates our vision precisely through a search for the sense animating allegory.

It is therefore a crucial Nancean paradox that the sense of the world is given to us only through its ab-sence from us. More radically, the sense of immanent presence which phenomenology uncovers cannot become a theme for philosophical objectification. As Nancy (2008a: 76) argues, "presence is to the world in not being in that world. It stands before and in withdrawal from itself". As Nancy conceives it, Christianity is structured as *rupture*: the "presence" of the divine comes to our awareness not as a thematic, but as touch. In touching our sensibilities, the sense of the world exceeds any totalizing grasp that would reduce it to the order of ontology. Rather, touch appropriates us through ex-appropriating us: it solicits us to believe in an opening beyond the world. For Nancy, Christian faith is defined by adoration, or devotion towards that which announces itself in the form of a promise. In other words, it is

in longing for the im-possible that Christianity fulfils itself. At the same time, reason effects its own deconstruction by opening itself up to an encounter with this impossibility (or groundlessness) at the core of its foundation: as Nancy (2008a: 25) argues, "reason does not suffice unto itself: *for itself* it is not a *sufficient reason* … it recognises, not a lack or flaw for which it should expect reparations from an other, but rather the following: the logic of sufficiency and/or lack is not the logic appropriate to it". Following this, my reading of the trilogy traces the way Coetzee stages the confrontation between reason (or a rational justification for a state of affairs) and its own sterile limitations. Indeed, an increasingly comical development in the novels is seen through Simón (David's self-appointed guardian) as he attempts to educate the young boy about rules. In defiant opposition to Simón's insistence that "the universe is a universe of rules" which cannot be questioned, David effects his own *reductio ad absurdum* by asking him why there is "no *why* for the universe" (Coetzee 2016: 206). As I read it, Coetzee not only subverts the tradition of the *Bildungsroman* by portraying a young protagonist who just will not learn the rules of his social world, but also points out the spiritual insufficiencies which lie at the core of a worldview transmitted by a "rational elucidation of why things are the way they are" (Coetzee 2016: 207). As the trilogy progresses, Coetzee presents the reader with the fracturing of a world which has taken equality to an extreme in its erasure of memory and its denial of "impulses and hungers and desires" (Coetzee 2013b: 37). And yet, it is precisely the opening up of ordinary perception to a sense which is radically incommensurable with the world that the extraordinary singularity of David's life and death can be validated.

If sense exposes the self to what lies outside of it, then the deepest truth of sense is that it can be shared. Nancy's important concept of community lies at the heart of his idea of the openness of the world. As he (1991: 29) writes, "singular being [can only be single] through its extension, through the areality that above all extroverts it in its very being—

whatever the degree or the desire of its 'egoism'—and that makes it exist only by *exposing it to an outside*". Community is nothing other than the exposure of singular beings towards one another. The open "totality" of sense cannot be divorced from the primordiality of sociality. As I interpret Nancy, our understanding of the world is fundamentally shareable because it is extrinsic to our being. In this way, authenticity is not to be located, as Heidegger understands it, in a determined standing apart from others, nor is it primarily to be found in the asocial relationship with the face (*visage*) of the Other that Levinas foregrounds. Instead, the breaking apart of any ontotheological conception of the world forms the necessary prelude to a dissemination of sense which defines community. As I demonstrate, David's status as an orphan is represented by Coetzee as indicative of an existential stance towards the world. As the caretaker of the orphanage in Estrella makes clear, "to be an orphan, at the deepest level, is to be alone in the world" (Coetzee 2019: 5). David's important transition from the care of Simón and Inés to the orphanage where he will live out his last days signals an intuitive understanding of belonging not to his makeshift family, but to the world of others. As I will read it, David's death (and the circumstances surrounding it) allows his life to be turned into a text (specifically, a theatrical performance) which can be shared by all who in turn become participants in an unfolding of a life. For Nancy (1991: 66), it is literature and art that mark the moment of community: "literature inscribes being-in-common, being for others and through others. It inscribes us as exposed to one another and to our respective deaths in which we reach one another … mutually".

The Question and Possibility of a World in *The Childhood of Jesus*

The first novel of the trilogy centres on the relationship between Simón, a man who assumes the role of guardian for David, a young boy who Simón assumes must require a maternal figure in order to fully assimilate into a "new life" in Novilla. Critical readings of Coetzee's novel have centred around the question of what Mehigan (2017: 182) terms as the "image of

the world" that Simón and David travel to. Devoid of all recognizable qualities and situated in a space which suggests an erstwhile unfathomable step beyond a threshold (the first image of the novel recalling Kafka's parable of the gatekeeper in *The Trial* who never allows the protagonist of the parable access to the Law), Novilla has been read as an ambiguous *topos* which grants its residents a chance at a new life at the cost of denying them some basic aspects of their humanity. Yoshiki Tajiri (2016: 75) argues that Novilla seemingly contains many indications of a "vaguely socialist" utopia, while Forrest (2019: 154) wages that Novilla represents "a kind of humanist heaven" which has negated any marks of historical trauma. I wish to offer a different reading of the significance of the world as presented in Novilla, one that suggests the opening up of an affective sense of the divine. I argue that *Childhood* engineers a momentum which recognizes the importance of the conditions of existentiality to a fully lived human experience. Simón focalizes this need in terms of "desires" (Coetzee 2013b: 36) which seem to be denied to the residents of Novilla; in philosophical terms, this desire for the body of another person must be read, on Coetzee's terms, not so much as the sign of a "fallen" consciousness as it is a yearning for an ecstatic sense of significance. In other words, desire is positioned as an exposure of the self towards otherness. To read the novel this way is not to imply primarily that Coetzee offers an analysis of desire which forms the basis for an aesthetics of the body

[2]; it is to note the coming-into-being of a mode of sensibility which ruptures the veneer of plenitude that characterizes social interaction in Novilla.

It is then in the blankness, or inscrutability of the image of the world presented in Novilla that Coetzee intimates the possibility of disruption. Attentive readers will have seized upon the image of the gate, which also alludes back to the final movement of *Elizabeth Costello*, in order to probe intertextual links with Kafka. Attridge's (2018: 268) reading of Coetzee and Kafka argues that in *Childhood*, Coetzee is "able to at last achieve a neutrality of

style and characterization that equals Kafka's", and in so doing, present a commentary involving a world-picture outside of South Africa. This "world-ing" naturally raises the question of Coetzee as an author of world literature. Elleke Boehmer, Lynda Ng and Paul Sheehan (2016: 203) read this blankness and neutrality as inserting Coetzee into a transnational space, arguing that "the acultural landscape and dialect of Coetzee's writing … creates an elasticity … that enables it to be applied across various national frames". For Boehmer, Ng and Sheehan however, this inherent transnational sensibility cannot be separated from an untranslatability and the necessary incompatibility between cultural traditions and histories. I argue that this uneasy conjunction defines the reading experience in *Childhood* by performatively extending the Kafkaesque image of the impenetrability of the gate. As Robert Stockhammer (2018: 168) notes, *Childhood "*undermine[s] any consistent reconstruction of a linguistic landscape *within* the text", with reference to the clash between spoken Spanish, written Spanish and English that erects barriers and more importantly, frustrates the readerly desire for closure. For the purposes of this essay, I follow Boehmer, Ng and Sheehan in seeing Coetzee as continuing to work in a mode outside of the mainstream European tradition, but modify their focus on "worlding" in order to examine how the issue of world becomes significant in the trilogy in terms of a fundamental disruption. In other words, the importance of that which resists translation intimates an excess of meaning that is to be read in religious terms. To put the world up for question is thus to implicitly gesture towards transcendence. If a tradition of Coetzean scholarship has emphasized the sites of "textual resistance" (Canepari-Labib 2000: 119) which both solicits and relativizes interpretive access, the trilogy turns its attention to nothing less than the mystery of the world that is at once opaque and luminescent.

As I have noted above, the dialectic underpinning Coetzee's novels (evinced already in *Childhood*) is the dialectic between the need to understand the world *as it is*, and

dissatisfaction with how it has come to be this way. Simón is at pains multiple times in the novel to point out to David that "there is nowhere else to be but here" (Coetzee 2013b: 21), thereby focusing the child's attention on the existential limits of his philosophical questioning. However, as Simón participates in work as a stevedore and senses the inadequate social and mental lives of the other manual labourers whose only concern is proportioning their work amongst themselves as absolute equality, he is struck the sense that this may not be "the best of all possible worlds" (Coetzee 2013b: 50) to be in. In this ironic echo of Leibnizian optimism, Coetzee targets this bloodless vision of a utopia which cannot allow for the spacing and distance required for sociality to occur. In other words, Novilla represents a place where faith for the impossible is negated because "nothing is invisible" (Coetzee 2013b: 35). In fact, Coetzee presents a negative form of sociality through these workers who forge a community through a form of equality which is unfree because (as Hegel puts it) it is undifferentiated and undetermined. Eugenio voices this sentiment when he replies Simón that "without labour, and the sharing of labour, comradeship is not possible, it is no longer substantial" (Coetzee 2013b: 130).

In contrast, Simón seeks a different mode of connection, one that not only recognizes, but also incarnates the other in the act of opening. That he approaches sexual intimacy with Elena with this in mind is clear from his intention of "bringing back to life a female body that for all practical purposes has died" (Coetzee 2013b: 72). Coetzee's rendering of the religious ideas of incarnation and resurrection aims to validate a mode of existentiality in which corporeal desire marks the extrinsic nature of sense. Insofar as desire leans the self towards the other as admission that the self is incomplete without the sharing of existence with the other, it succeeds in opening that self towards the world as *immanent sense*. As if to drive home this point, Simón complains to Elena that

> Things do not have their due weight here … The music we hear lacks weight. Our lovemaking lacks weight. The food we eat, our dreary diet of bread, lacks substance – lacks the substantiality of animal flesh, with all the gravity of bloodletting and sacrifice behind it (Coetzee 2013b: 77).

In Simón's formulation, "it is the nature of desire to reach for what lies beyond its grasp" (Coetzee 2013b: 167) – it ceaselessly opens up and enables a response to alterity. In essence, desire confirms the presence of the world as a limitless horizon of meaning. It is in this way that Coetzee sketches an ethics and a politics of connection, thereby signalling a necessary rupture of the timeless limbo which is Novilla. In contrast to critics who label Novilla as a sort of secular utopia, I am in agreement with Vincent Pecora (2015: 123) who observes that no "sort of salvation" is possible in Novilla without a crucial reckoning of existential finitude. The critical mistake is thus to read Novilla as either an otherworldly realm or a version of the afterlife, for what Coetzee demonstrates is how the religious sense of the world must allow us to understand the world *other* than what it is. The desire of the body thus forms a compelling correlate for the way the proximal presence of the divine breaks into this world by leading us beyond it. In other words, what is at stake is precisely our relationship with an unthematizable out-side of/in the world. As Nancy (2013: 101-2) elsewhere writes, this relationship is "a *self-ex-porting* outside oneself before even being constituted as a "self," and therefore a being ex-posed and a being in relation that precedes and opens in advance all possible "being" and "becoming".

What my argument here emphasizes is that there is no relationship with the divine without a *gap* or *absence* in the fabric of Being which wrenches reality away from the quotidian and empirical. No better demonstration of this is present in the novel than in David's idiosyncratic (mis)understanding of mathematics. Coetzee's portrayal of David's inability to add numbers not only functions as yet another subversion of the *Bildungsroman*

narrative, but also presents a mode of considering reality shot through with ontological singularities. In other words, David's failure to add is indicative of his countenancing of discontinuities which become almost threatening to his sense of self. Simón realizes this truth about his young charge as such:

> While I was in hospital with nothing else to do, I tried, as a mental exercise, to see the world through David's eyes. Put an apple before him and what does he see? An apple: not *one* apple, just *an* apple. 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 … and demands: *How many apples, child?* What is the answer? What are *apples*? What is the singular of which *apples* are the plural? (Coetzee 2013b: 295)

Earlier on, Simón had balked at David's recalcitrant questioning of the rules of "the human condition" (Coetzee 2013b: 204); part of his pedagogical inadequacy towards the young boy is his kneejerk reply that there is no "why" to the world. In this way, the "image of the world" Simón offers him is one of pre-established abstract laws which countenance no "cracks" (Coetzee 2013b: 209). However, the way Simón illustrates the concept of cracks to David becomes interesting. As Simón explains, a crack would metaphorically be like "cutting yourself with a knife, or tearing a page in two" (Coetzee 2013b: 209). Seen as such, a crack would be a self-opening, or an emptying out – read in terms of the argument I have been pursuing, it would be the deconstructive event itself that comes from the absolute outside. If David can be read as an allegorical representation of Jesus, then this analysis cannot be separated from his sense of the possible manifestation of *non*sense within the ordinary. David's epistemology is radically different because it is characterized by discontinuity and an almost Bergsonian sense of time as continual creation: as Simón observes, it requires "a miracle each time" (Coetzee 2013b: 296) for David to enact a Kantian synthesis across space

and time. I thus follow Charlotte Elmgren's (2019: 174) recent article mapping David's understanding of numbers to Walter Benjamin's notion of "messianic time" as time which can *at any moment* be other than what it is. For Benjamin, the futural possibility of messianic redemption not only blasts the empty temporal continuum of history wide open, but also charges each moment of time with utopian significance. David's sense of the gaps between numbers which make synthesis impossible is thereby illustrative of the importance of fissure and rupture to Coetzee's overall aesthetic design in the trilogy. Mehigan (2017: 182) therefore underestimates the significance of the religious when he argues human life in *Childhood* "depends on the absence of gaps" – for Coetzee, the religious breaks into the ordinary as the advent of an unforeseeable event. This momentum will be further concretized in the shadowy figure of Dimitri who haunts the pages of the next novel.

Evil, Violence and the Eruption of Singularity in *The Schooldays of Jesus*

Coetzee's second novel presents the pertinence of the religious in the form of an affront to morality: how should one welcome and forgive the absolutely evil? This question will allow me to re-position the well-known ethical orientation towards Coetzee's work on a new basis, one that emphasizes the religious dimensions of otherness as a radical break into the phenomenal world. More concretely, a spiritual tension opens up in David between the staid morality of Simón, and the amoral charisma of Dimitri, a caretaker in the dance school David attends. As I hope to demonstrate through the figure of Dimitri, this otherness profoundly disrupts questions of justice and the measure implied by versions of the social contract, calling into question the worldly basis for a responsible relationship with the Other. However, the necessary contamination of the ethical by the social always remains a powerful risk for valuing an ethical orientation towards alterity which negates the claims of what philosopher Emmanuel Levinas calls "the third man", or others who are other to this Other who solicits our attention. Maintaining this tension between the ethical and the political seems to me to be

critical in understanding the infinite dimensions of otherness as a logic uncontainable within the world; in other words, it preserves the scandalous dimensions of religiosity.

The Schooldays of Jesus introduces the contours of the Medieval morality play through the tussle between Simón and Dimitri. This pointed allusion to a character in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brother Karamazov* continues Coetzee's intertextual relationship with the Russian writer seen earlier in *The Master of Petersburg*. In the clash between the rational Simón and the sybaritic Dimitri which the novel offers to David as competing visions of fatherhood, Coetzee may be seen as appropriating Mikhail Bakhtin's famous theories about Dostoevsky's singular achievement as the polyphonic writer, one who does not aim to provide an overarching intellectual and aesthetic framework within the novel. Instead, Dostoevsky's characters enter into dialogic relationships with one another and the author as equal beings. That Coetzee valorizes the dialogic contestation played out in *The Brothers Karamazov* is attested to in his noting of how Dostoevsky creates "a 'battle pitched on the highest ground'" (Head 2009: 20) by dramatizing Ivan Karamazov's rejection of religion despite his deeply Christian worldview. If *The Master of Petersburg* and *The Death of Jesus* pivot around the possibility of ethics in a deeply imperfect world defined by needless suffering, then entering into intense dialogue with others, even with an amoral otherness as represented by Dimitri, might be an ethically necessary way individuals are socialized. Coetzee reflects this understanding with the gradual maturing of David, and the attendant realization that Simón may not be able to answer his pressing questions about the metaphysical foundations of reality. In a moment of despair, Simón reflects that "he would like to believe that he is guiding the child through the maze of the moral life … But where is there any evidence that the child absorbs his guidance or even listens to what he says?" (Coetzee 2016: 51). In scenes which very loosely echo Christ's temptation by the Devil,

Coetzee depicts the incomprehensible force of seduction Dimitri exerts upon David. Simón ruefully acknowledges Dimitri's influence over David as such:

> He keeps warning the child against Dimitri. If you want a model in life, look to me, he says: look to Simón, the exemplary stepfather, the man of reason, the dullard … But if the child really wants an education, who better is there to study than the man who could inspire such an unsuitable, such an incomprehensible love? (Coetzee 2016: 229)

David's "love" for Dimitri seems to set up an ideal relationship with the Other that confirms the pertinence of ethical criticism to Coetzee. Undoubtedly, the paradigm for this is provided by Attridge's (2004: xii) influential application of Levinasian ethics to Coetzee's fiction. Underpinning his reading of Coetzee is an understanding that "Coetzee's works … stage … irruptions of otherness into our familiar worlds" and that they ask the irrational question of "our responsibility towards the other". To elaborately briefly, Levinas positions the subject's relationship with the Other as an ethical one which comes before ontology (or the question of who or what the Other is). For Levinas, ethics becomes first philosophy by shattering the complacency of ontology which is concerned with thematizing the Other by reducing him/her to a concept. This ethics transpires as a stance of absolute welcome, wherein the Other disrupts the ego-centricity of the self in order to share the world with the self. In his later writing, Levinas goes even further as to delineate this ethical relationship as one of unconditional responsibility towards the Other: the self is responsible towards the Other to the extent of being "hostage" to the Other's needs. For Levinas, ethics opens up the self in unlimited response for the Other. It is not difficult to understand how Levinasian ethics accrues a religious dimension, for the relationship between the self and the Other is irreducibly asymmetric. Indeed, the Other breaks in upon the self from a dimension of height. For Levinas, the trace of the Infinite comes into presence through the opening of the self towards what cannot be contained within it. As Jeffrey Bloechl (2020: 9) usefully puts it,

> The shock that is the face of the other person opens the immanence of being oneself to a transcendence that has the character of a height … and elevation that he does not hesitate to associate with the notion of divinity and the word "God." This is not to say that the other person is God, but only that insofar as her presence disabuses the subject of any pretense to place itself at the center of the world, she resembles the God who cannot be comprehended by the finite subject.

However, it is my contention that Coetzee challenges the limits of ethical reading in *Schooldays*. In other words, Coetzee opens up the question of the extent of a collective responsibility for unforgivable evil. In my view, the audacity of this questioning reaffirms my argument that the religious comes to pass as intolerable interruption and disruption. This provocation arrives in the form of Dimitri's gratuitous murder of Ana Magdalena, the director of the dance school (and Dimitri's secret lover). As Coetzee is at pains to make clear, Dimitri's crime is gratuitous in the purest sense of the word – it is completely unjustifiable and unexplainable. Dimitri himself makes this clear as such:

> Why did I do it? I have no idea. Not only do I have no idea why I did it, I cannot believe I did it. That is the truth, the naked truth. I swear to it. It's incomprehensible – incomprehensible from the outside and incomprehensible from the inside too (Coetzee 2016: 249).

Dimitri's act therefore opens up a consideration of absolute evil which cannot be grounded in any rational understanding of the world. As Simón opines, "his imagination fails him" (Coetzee 2016: 250) when trying to enter into Dimitri's subject-position. If Attridge and proponents of ethical reading focus their attention on the ways Coetzee solicits "hospitality to an unknown other" (Elmgren 2019: 169) as the preferred mode of relationality, then Coetzee brings this understanding to an extreme here – can we welcome the absolutely *inhuman*

other? As critics of Levinas have argued, Levinas unfortunately limits the force of his critique of ontology by prioritizing the human face as the *sine qua non* of ethical relationality. In other words, Levinas betrays his insistence on welcoming alterity by implicitly drawing a distinction between human and non-human others.

It is this problematic that Coetzee draws upon in Dimitri's trial. Before pronouncing sentence upon the murderer, the judge of the case asks a crucial rhetorical question which implies the sheer abnormality of his crime:

> Are you an erring human being, Dimitri, or do you belong to some other species, without a soul, without a conscience? (Coetzee 2016: 154)

In my view, an ethical criticism taken to its extreme ultimately deconstructs itself because there would be no way to understand relationality – in some way, to be absolutely responsible and hospitable to the Other would be *in*hospitable towards others who are other to the Other, if only because we cannot discriminate between competing ethical claims. Coetzee's dialectic in *Schooldays* indicates the necessary conflict between the ethical and political in terms of the demand for justice. This is highlighted in an address by the philosopher Moreno which comes at the end of the novel. In the guise of propounding an esoteric doctrine based on a figure called Metros, Moreno describes a cosmic system of parity wherein "we have measured ourselves and found we are all equal … No longer should anyone be above the law" (Coetzee 2016: 247). In this form of legalistic thinking, the equality of measure leaves no room for recognition of singularity and alterity; the "sovereignty of measure" (Coetzee 2016: 247) must be maintained if there is to be any rational means of securing justice. What Levinasian readings of Coetzee miss, in their obsessive focus on welcoming the absolute other, is the point that we cannot locate the groundlessness of the ethical *within* the world – the ethical can only transpire as an incalculable event. As Derrida (1978: 147) astutely observes about

Levinas, his "thought would not only propose an ethics without law … but also a language without speech". Once the unconditional openness towards otherness is conceptualized as relationality, it must be compromised by what Levinas recognizes as the "third man", or the weight of the political which must take into account the self's relationships with other Others. To return to *Schooldays*, Coetzee demands just such a difficult, almost aporetic thinking which admits the necessity of egalitarian systems of justice while being animated by a religious sense of otherness as infinite singularity. The ethical relationship must therefore be guided by an impossible possibility – this audacious opening is the opening of the Levinasian Infinite. Indeed, just as David intimates that numbers cannot be reduced to homogenous units within any abstract system, he is drawn towards the "mystery" (Coetzee 2016: 250) of Dimitri's being that seems to emanate from an*other* opening.

To tie in Coetzee, Dostoevsky and Levinas (who holds *The Brothers Karamazov* in high regard as the novel about infinite responsibility), Patrick Hayes (2010: 188) intriguingly cites Michael Holquist's religious reading of *Brothers* which argues that Dostoevsky's novel "revolves around the capacity of different characters to place trust in the freedom of the 'time of Christ'". This asynchronous "time" redeems the violent death of the Freudian primal patriarch by replacing vindictive reprisal with the law of an otherworldly Kingdom. To the extent that *Schooldays* dramatizes the working out of incompatible notions of "justice", it is concerned with a similar rupture in the fabric of the world. In sum, what I have been outlining so far (as a thematic thread in *Childhood* and *Schooldays*) is the development of a sensibility animated by a sense of the world that can only be found outside of it. For Coetzee, the religious must necessarily precipitate an ontological dehiscence, resulting in an absenting of sense that opens up the profane to the divine. The full truth of this argument (setting the stage for the culmination of Coetzee's trilogy) will be demonstrated through the death of David, an absence which materializes itself before being sublated as text.

The Gap in Being as Birth of Text in *The Death of Jesus*

Coetzee's trilogy concludes with another dialectic of death and rebirth. I trace this momentum in *The Death of Jesus* in order to demonstrate how Coetzee's religious sensibility is presented in terms of the absence which paradoxically gives birth to relationality. In more concrete terms, David's death, like many other events in the trilogy which lack rational foundation, exceeds the sterile ontological foundations of Simón's thought. Stricken by a mysterious debilitating ailment which baffles all doctors, David's slow descent into paralysis and death is posited? Placed? between the Kafkaesque absurdity of dying like an undignified animal, and the sacrality bestowed upon such an event invoked by Bataillean notions of absolute sacrifice which breaks up the economy of meaning. It is only in the last part of the trilogy that Simón understands that the very basis of David's questioning of "the great mystery that confronts us all" (Coetzee 2019: 78) cannot be founded in the world at all. To the extent that David's death *is* an event, it demonstrates the utter incommensurability of signification, leading the rest of the characters to speak in terms of a gap which nevertheless has ontological weight. Having elaborated upon the significance of death, I will emphasize how this death comes to have communal importance through the sharing of David's life story in theatrical form. I argue that this moment signals nothing less than Coetzee's regeneration of the sense of the world that has already been an implicit thematic in the trilogy. In other words, David's death *raises* a community in Nancy's sense of the word: the primordial openness between incommensurable singularities who nevertheless share an untotalizable sense of their social world.

The tragic portrayal of David's unexplainable slide into debilitation and ultimately death raises the stakes of existential questions that David has been concerned with from the start of the trilogy. Indeed, the tonal urgency and frequency of his repeated query as to "why am I *here*" (Coetzee 2019: 77) reaches a fever pitch in the hospital where he is confined to

following his mysterious infection. Simón's anguished explanation to the child implicitly outlines his belief in an ontological foundation of the world:

> 'I don't understand. Here is here.' He waves a hand to encompass not only the room, with its blank white walls and the pot plant on the windowsill, but the hospital and the hospital grounds and beyond them *the whole wide world*. 'Here is where we are. Here is where we find ourselves. Wherever I am is my here, here for me …' (Coetzee 2019: 78, emphasis mine)

For Simón, the world is bounded by absolute presence, one that (as we have seen throughout the trilogy) cannot be broken into and changed. If for Simón, being is presence, then absence partakes of the same ontological substance as presence. This well-worn philosophical tenet is emphasized by Simón himself later on as such: "As for not waking up, if we do not wake up at all, ever, then – nothing, nothing, nothing. That is what I mean by philosophy" (Coetzee 2019: 109).

However, if I am right to argue that David constantly offers an alternative to Simón's worldly wisdom that must be termed religious, it is because his "philosophy" seeks to undermine the dyadic structure of Being and Nothing. As the philosopher Martin Heidegger puts it, the ground of Being cannot be sought and answered positively, for Being cannot be reduced to any ontological concept. As I have emphasized earlier, Nancy mines the religious significance of this argument in terms of an a-theological deconstruction of theism and atheism. To briefly recapitulate, both theistic and atheistic thinking unknowingly share a mistaken assumption that God can be represented as a substantial being in itself. David's questioning is thereby imbued with a deeply religious sensibility because he reaches for a non-metaphysical answer to the question of the Being of the world which can never be portrayed positively, but only *enacted* through his life and death. Accordingly, David's death

precipitates as a rupture and an affront to ontological duality. Coetzee makes this clear in Simón's own changed phenomenological awareness of absence. While trying to distract himself with work, Simón attempts to stave off "the *hole that has opened up* in the texture of being" (Coetzee 2019: 142, emphasis mine), the precise imagery here implying both a break and an emptying out. In terms of the argument I have been pursuing thus far, this wound is the entrance of the sense of the divine into the phenomenal world. Coetzee further echoes this sentiment through the words of señor Arroyo (the director of the Academy David attends) when he says that "something has occurred … that is not nothing" (Coetzee 2019: 151). It is then this sense of spiritual comfort that Simón brings to Inés in her pain when he states that "the world may be as it was before, but it is also different. We must hold tightly to that difference, you and I, even if for the present we cannot see it" (Coetzee 2019: 162). In contrast to the dominant mode of visibility that characterizes the inert transparency of Novilla, Simón finally acknowledges an invisible and unthematizable difference which reflects a renewed image of the world. In this way, the dimension of the religious manifests as an understanding that the world is never sufficient onto itself – it is a heterogenous opening which creates and sustains the world. As Nancy (2008a: 72) writes, "this divine is always a way of naming, in regard to the world, the constitutive alterity of its opening. Divine is the division that creates a world".

Coetzee's imbricating of the Christian tropes of death and the resurrection with the conditions of existentiality finally bring out his metatextual concerns with the hermeneutic power of allegory, and indeed, narrative. Towards the end of the novel, David's life and death are refracted and re-presented in the form of a loosely-constructed pageant titled "The Deeds of David". Split into two segments which encompass a theatrical skit, dance and musical recital, the performance utilizes a folk aesthetic that brings together David's unique theory of numbers and his love for the idealistic knight-errant Don Quixote. However, in presenting

this narrative-within-a-narrative which cannot pretend to depict the events of the trilogy in any "realistic" way, Coetzee emphasizes that the importance of the story lies in its *universal* import, rather than any spiritual "*message of the book*" (Coetzee 2019: 196) which can be clearly conveyed. What is therefore significant in the formal employment of theatre to tell David's story is its participatory *ethos*. Indeed, before this point in the novel, Coetzee implies that David's fate is linked to the fate of all his fellow orphans in the Academy. Arroyo tells Simón that David "feels a certain duty towards Fabricante's orphans" (Coetzee 2019: 32), and Dimitri exclaims to Simón that David "belonged to all of us" (Coetzee 2019: 134). What is thereby involved in the re-telling of David's story (and by extension, Coetzee's use of the formal qualities of the allegorical narrative as a hermeneutical mode of dialectical thought which constantly relates particular signifiers to universal themes) is a sharing between individuals of the feelings of fragility and isolation that comes with an awareness of being "alone in the world" (Coetzee 2019: 5). This sharing once again implies that the yearning after what the philosopher of religion Charles Taylor (2007: 6) describes as "the place of fullness" must necessarily open up the self towards ecstatic relations with the world and one another. In this way, Coetzee reinvigorates the pertinence of religious allegory to speak to our collective condition in a post-secular age, not by implying that religion offers an ontotheological explanation of the world, its origins and final destination, but by emphasizing how religion locates us in response to both the *immanence* and *insufficiency* of the world. In a word, if the spectators of the pageant (who in turn reflect Coetzee's readerly audience) are affected by David's narrative, it is primarily because of their witnessing of somebody who, by all accounts, is *other*worldly:

> Suddenly in their midst arrives a child with strange ideas and fantastic stories, a child who has never been schooled, never been tamed, who is scared of no one, certainly not his teachers, who is as beautiful as a girl yet has the flair for football – who arrives

> in their midst like an apparition, then before they can get used to him falls prey to a mysterious illness and is whisked away … No wonder they have turned him into a martyr and a legend (Coetzee 2019: 175).

Conclusion

In his closing remarks to a series of dialogues with the psychoanalyst Arabella Kurtz, Coetzee (2015: 191) makes the striking assertion that "as a genre the novel seems to have a constitutional stake in the claim that things are not as they seem to be, that our seeming lives are not our real lives". While this can be interpreted as a statement of how novels constantly expose their statuses as constructed fictions, I argue that this can also be read as a statement of fiction's power to lead us *beyond* the real. As much as David depends on Simón's care throughout the course of his life, it becomes apparent in the end that Simón needs David's "*fiery word*" (Coetzee 2019: 189) in order to transcend existential futility. Dimitri's compelling image of the world "*as a prison in which you decay into crook-backedness and incontinence and eventually death*" (Coetzee 2019: 189) intimates a fear of closure which needs to be answered by the proximity of an absolute alterity which opens up the world to its otherness.

It has therefore been my argument that by viewing the novels in the trilogy as a coherent whole, Coetzee forges a new spiritual direction that locates absence and abstraction at the heart of a fictional strategy given over to what has yet to come into being. My focus on allegory as an integral part of this process is therefore closely interwoven with the strategy of reading pursued. In other words, if Frederic Jameson (1981: 10) makes the point that all interpretation is "essentially allegorical" in nature, then the disruption of the allegorical sense leads criticism to intimate an image of the world in excess, but absolutely necessary to, what the text *does not say*. This religiosity necessarily differs from negative theology in that it does

not seek to theorize a God beyond words. Instead, interpretation discovers a mode of textual expression that redeems the world which is *both* literal-existential and allegorical-symbolic. The event of reading cuts across both plains because of Coetzee's opening up of empty temporality to spirit. Coetzee succeeds in providing an image of the world which has not only exhausted its capacity for thinking, but is also in need of urgent renewal. That this renewal is religious in nature aptly returns narrative its power to incarnate realities which are both material and transcendent. If as Hayes (2015: 167) argues, Coetzee's fictions disavow any "privileged relation to the truth or … access to higher values", then the insufficiency of thought's image to itself (as presented by the disruption of allegory) might gain a political inflection by nature of the recognition of an epistemic gap through which intervention is possible. In this way, utopia is (as Walter Benjamin theorizes) both immanent and extrinsic to our sense of reality. Reading Coetzee's investments in the "world" through the trilogy might precipitate a new thinking of an imagined collective sensitive to postmodern "flows" yet cognisant of a community which has yet, but which always has the potential-to-be.

NOTES

[1] To be clear, the structural relevance of allegory to Coetzee's aesthetics has been explored before – Teresa Dovey (1996: 148) makes the case that the novels "encourage us to make our own allegorical interpretations, interpretations which are inevitably subject to the same failures as those articulated by the novel[s] [themselves]". This might raise the question of the extent the trilogy can be read as Christian allegory. In a sceptical reading of the Christian references in the trilogy, Tim Mehigan (2017: 172) points out that "there is no assumption that anything unseen or indirect can be a factor lending justification for actions or beliefs". Likewise, Valeria Mosca (2016: 136) argues that "religion … does not bring along any form of answer, resolution or salvation". My attention to the novels as allegorical posits that it is precisely the sense of the religious as leading away from the empirical and profane which supplies the central trope of interruption. This interruption is thereby closely linked to the transcendent as *other*worldly, or as otherwise to Being. To put it simply, Coetzee destabilizes allegory from *within* by depicting the densities of particular experiences which mark secular embeddedness in the world, resulting in a diminished reading of the form which nevertheless offers resources for an imaginative appropriation of religious images and tropes.

[2] For readings of Coetzee's novels that hinge on the transgressive potentialities of bodily desire, see for instance Rosemary Jolly's (2009: 101) book chapter on how in Coetzee, "desire … for the body of the other … is closely associated with the desire to produce artistic creations", and Brian May's (2001: 404) article on bodily desire in Coetzee targets "the long Western tradition of transcendent vision, a tradition that too often deals with the body … either as obstacle or means".

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