

J.M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* (Text Publishing, 2013)

I have always resisted reading Coetzee allegorically. I took to heart – possibly through wilful misunderstanding – his statement to David Attwell that ‘a critical practice whose climactic gesture is always a triumphant tearing-off, as it grows lazy (and every orthodoxy grows lazy), begins to confine its attentions to clothed subjects, and even to subjects whose clothes are easily torn off’; and ‘in the act of triumphantly tearing the clothes off its subject and displaying the nakedness beneath – (“Behold the truth!”) it exposes a naiveté of its own. For is the naked body really the truth?’¹ Bolstered by Susan Sontag’s essay ‘Against Interpretation’, I felt justified in resisting the search for meanings below the surface of Coetzee’s novels, or indeed anyone else’s.

But what is to be done with a novel titled *The Childhood of Jesus*? It’s not only tempting to read it as allegory: there seems to be no alternative. Not, of course, that it is simple to do so. The parallels with the New Testament, the novel’s most obvious intertext, are far from simple. A man and a young boy arrive in Novillo, a city in a Spanish-speaking country, and are confronted with a blandly courteous but indifferent bureaucracy which at first fails to provide basic necessities. They have been on the road for a week, from a camp called Belstar. So at first, one might think that this is an allegory of the appalling treatment meted out to refugees, always remembering that the child, as we must presume from the title, is a Christ figure.

But after a few initial inconveniences the man, to whom the authorities have assigned the name Simón, and the boy, David, find adequate shelter and means of sustenance, and make friends among the other residents of the city, all of whom appear to have arrived by the same route. Everyone in Novilla is newly-made, and everyone has forgotten their old life, except Simón, who alone, it seems, is unsatisfied, who alone has an ironic cast of mind – the others ‘see no doubleness in the world, any difference between the way things seem and the way things are’ (80). His fellow workers, however, do indulge in a sterile kind of philosophising which ‘just makes him impatient’ (144).

As I read, I tried out theories. Is Simón Joseph, the ‘stepfather’ of the Jesus figure? He is adamant that he is not a relative, and is only caring for the boy until he can find his mother. But when he finds the woman he intuits to be David’s mother (not literally, but in some vague but more important sense), he seems to play the part of Gabriel at the Annunciation. At other times I thought that this new world was the afterlife, though with rules unfamiliar in the Christian tradition: its inhabitants can die, but will then pass from this world to another. And if this is heaven, it is remarkably full of irritants, major and minor.

Naturally none of these theories work perfectly, or even well. The one that I was most convinced by overall was that this was the world that some might think is contemplated in the New Testament, where an anodyne kind of ‘goodwill to all’ is the rule, although what part the child has in bringing this about is unclear: he seems to be by his nature both upset by and bound to unsettle this new world, where ‘none of us has a past,’ where ‘we start anew’ (116).

In form, this novel is not a new departure for Coetzee. The narrative is focussed through the familiar third person character, a man in late middle age, with feelings and beliefs which are out of step with the world in which he finds himself. He is only subtly different

¹ J.M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* edited by David Attwell (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) 106.

from J.C. in *Diary of a Bad Year* or Paul Rayment in *Slow Man*. The scene-setting is sparse and never exceeds that which is strictly necessary for the action. In fact, the usual connective tissue of fiction is sometimes missing – the transitions from place to place, from situation to situation – pruned away, no doubt, to allow imaginative space for the reader. Or to create a dream-like state which does not have to conform to the rules of everyday life.

I admit that I found the experience of reading *The Childhood of Jesus* disappointing. After the astonishment of *Summertime*, and the intellectual excitement of *Diary of a Bad Year*, the simplicity of the narrative, the slightly drab precision of the voice, even the perversity of the main character, were less than compelling. And then the implicit insistence on making interpretations which were nevertheless doomed to failure was dispiriting. I think, though, that this is a book which even more than his previous works requires a continuing effort of comprehension, or perhaps assimilation (rather than interpretation). Its simplicity makes it memorable. There are not many characters, the plot is straightforward. But the demands on the reader are complex in inverse proportion, because so much is left unsaid. As always, one is forced to wonder what Coetzee is up to, and as always one realises that we will never know for sure.

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