

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

J. M. Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus* (Text Publishing, 2016)

'When you travel across the ocean on a boat, all your memories are washed away and you start a completely new life. That is how it is. There is no before. There is no history. The boat docks at the harbour and we climb down the gangplank and we are plunged into the here and now. Time begins. The clock starts running...' (17)

J. M. Coetzee's latest novel makes for difficult reading. I have read *The Schooldays of Jesus* three times, and each time I pick up a new thread to follow, but am somehow unable to piece together the work's complete meaning (if there is 'one meaning'). On the one hand, it references both Russian and Spanish literature (Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and Cervantes' *Don Quixote*) whilst alluding to the son of God in its title, and on the other, it can be read on its own as a meditation on the concepts of passion and memory. Like in 2013's *The Childhood of Jesus*, we don't see Jesus at all and he isn't mentioned by name. In fact, we might as well be situated in a world where Jesus doesn't exist, as the characters' conversations lean toward the philosophical rather than the religious. There is not the slightest mention of religion or prayer. The elusiveness of the book's titular character leads one to an allegorical reading, rather than a literal one. What the allegory is, though, I cannot be sure. We are privy not to the childhood and schooldays of Jesus the son of God, but of a self-assured young boy named David, and his parents are not Joseph and The Virgin Mary, but two strangers: the boring middle-aged Simón and the sexless, perhaps virginal, Inés.

At the beginning of *The Schooldays*, the reader is reunited with this unlikely trio as they flee the fictional migrant town of Novilla, in hopes of securing appropriate education for their surrogate son. They arrive in Estrella (Spanish meaning 'star'), a city described by Simón as having no sensation and no feelings, and are soon directed to the city's Academy of Dancing. The Academy does not teach traditional maths or writing skills, but instead focuses on dancing as a way of calling down the stars and of embodying certain numbers. These dance lessons are taught by the philosopher-cum-musician Juan Sebastián Arroyo and his beautiful 'alabaster' wife señora Ana Magdalena Arroyo (presumably named after Johann Sebastian Bach and his second wife Ana Magdalena), and in different capacities, are accompanied by Dimitri and Alyosha (named after *The Brothers Karamazov*).

I recently heard Coetzee read two chapters of the novel at a conference in London, and was struck to hear that he pronounces the story's place names using traditional Spanish pronunciations: Novilla is 'No-vee-ya', whilst Estrella is pronounced 'Ess-tre-ya'. Without having read the book, a person could be forgiven for thinking that Coetzee was saying 'Straya' – a popular term Australians use to talk about the country we call home. As an Australian, it is very difficult for me to detangle Coetzee's novel from the time and place where it was written: Adelaide, Australia in the 2000s. I initially read the novels with an increased sensitivity to the fact that David and Simón came to Novilla by boat, whereas one can speculate that if the boat had been set for Australia it probably would have been turned away. According to the Refugee

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Council of Australia's website, 'Australia is the only country in the world that sends people who come by boat to tiny poor islands, where they are detained and, for some at least, seem to reside there for the rest of their lives'¹. Whilst David and Simón are not subjected to imprisonment on a small island, their arrival to Novilla is rife with problems, including not having enough money to buy food and having to sleep under a tarp in a government worker's backyard: it's a landscape where the government workers are not sympathetic to these new migrants. In this new place they are forced to learn a new language and are washed clean of their memories – so washed clean that when David is separated from his initial travelling companion on the boat, he cannot remember who it was.

Like its predecessor, *The Schooldays* is set during an unspecified place and time, which *Slate* writer Mark O'Connell speculates 'may or may not be the actual afterlife'.² In this incarnation of the world, its inhabitants are forced to learn Spanish – though one wonders how these characters did not lose their sense of language in crossing the water that washed their memories clean. Novilla is described by O'Connell as a 'Hispanophone socialist utopia' where Simón finds employment lifting and moving grains, whereas in Estrella, he earns money by delivering pamphlets advertising products that people don't need. It could be argued that we are to read the novel as if all the dialogue were actually spoken in Spanish. As for the novel's setting in time, Ron Charles, reviewing the novel for the *Washington Post*, notes that 'the technology – cars, radios – suggests the 1930s',³ somehow forgetting about David's previously expressed love of a cartoon mouse who 'has dog named Plato'.⁴ In a letter to Paul Auster Coetzee writes that

I too have, willy-nilly, become a twenty-first-century person, yet I write books in which people write (and read) letters, books in which the most up-to-date means of communication employed is (now and again) the telephone, which happens to be a nineteenth-century invention.⁵

So, it appears that it would be a fool's errand to try and situate the novel within a certain time period based on which technologies are prevalent. The most information we are given about Estrella is that it is bigger than Novilla, and has a marketplace, administrative buildings, a modest museum, and an art gallery (2).

Much of the novel's tension surrounds David's disavowal of his name, as he tells everyone that he meets that his real name is not David, and that Simón is not his real father. Juan Sebastián suggests that, unlike adults, 'the child ... still bears impresses of a former life, shadow recollections which he lacks words to express' (67). It is unclear here if, as O'Connell suggests,

¹ Refugee Council of Australia, 'State of the Nation 2017: Refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia', *Refugee Council of Australia Report* February 2017. Online. Accessed 20 September 2017.

² Mark O'Connell, 'A Dry Soul', *The Slate Book Review* February 2017. Online. Accessed 20 September 2017.

³ Ron Charles, 'J.M. Coetzee's *The Schooldays of Jesus* raises more questions than it answers', *The Washington Post* February 2017. Online. Accessed 20 September 2017.

⁴ J.M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* (Melbourne: Text Publishing 2013) 216.

⁵ Paul Auster and J.M. Coetzee, *Here and Now* (London: Vintage Publishing, 2014) 219.

the passing of an ocean by boat is a metaphor for the soul crossing into the afterlife. When one of the novel's characters is murdered in a crime of passion, Simón says that in the afterlife she 'will be able to start afresh, just as you and I did, washed clean of the past, without bad memories to weigh her down' (163). Much like travelling across water on a boat, the journey from life to afterlife leaves the memory blank. In what might be a tongue-in-cheek move, David – resident of Estrella – proclaims that he doesn't want to go to the next life, he wants to go to the stars (139).

In my reading and re-reading of J.M. Coetzee's *The Schooldays of Jesus* I have been provided with many different potential interpretations and a range of ideas to pursue, but am unsure of which tangent deserves more authority – or if any of the things I've picked up line up correctly with Coetzee's vision of his text. I anticipate that a challenge many first-time readers will face is to know what to make of the work, and they might need to go back and read it again. I'm also guessing that Coetzee probably doesn't care if his readers' visions of his work align with his own, and that the text's many possible interpretations are all part of a larger game. After having read it three times, I still don't know what I think of it. However, I am determined to solve its meaning (even if it doesn't have one).

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