

Stephen Mulhall. *In Other Words: Transpositions of Philosophy in J.M. Coetzee's Jesus Trilogy.* Oxford University Press 2023. 144 pp. \$69 USD (Hardcover 9780192869715)

Among contemporary writers of fiction, the Nobel-prize winning novelist J.M. Coetzee has been the subject of unusual interest from philosophers, with a steady stream of monographs and edited collections exploring his work. This is due in part to Coetzee's reciprocal interest in philosophy, and in the often very direct ways in which his work engages with philosophers and their ideas. Coetzee's most recent work, a trilogy of novels published between 2013 and 2019 known informally as the 'Jesus trilogy,' extends his dialogue with philosophy in important ways. As Stephen Mulhall shows in his recent slim volume, the Jesus trilogy abounds with tacit philosophical references—most noticeably to Plato and Wittgenstein—and provokes reflection on a wide range of philosophical issues.

The Jesus trilogy proceeds from a fantastical premise. In the world of the book, large numbers of people have been compelled by mysterious circumstances to travel to a distant, Spanish speaking country, in which they are obliged to start their lives anew, without any apparent prospect of returning to their places of origin. This of course is quite similar to the predicament that many refugees from political upheaval find themselves in today, and Coetzee no doubt intends us to hear this resonance. But the world of the Jesus trilogy differs from ours in a crucial respect. In the course of the journey, travelers' memories are 'washed clean.' They arrive in their new, unnamed country without any memories of their previous lives, even of their names.

Coetzee's protagonists are recent arrivals from this uncanny sea voyage. The first is a middle-aged man who is assigned the name Simón upon arrival; the second, a five-year old boy, David, who Simón has taken under his care during the voyage. Simón and David are eventually joined by Inés, whom Simón suspects might be David's mother, though of course none of them can be sure.

The first volume in the trilogy, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), is taken up largely with Simón's efforts to find his footing in Novilla, a city that is home to many other new arrivals. This becomes the occasion for lengthy and far-reaching philosophical discussions, as Simón encounters the practices and attitudes that have taken root in this young city. Several of these initial discussions concern romantic and sexual love. To his bewilderment, Simón's would-be romantic partners question not merely the purpose of such involvement, but even its basic coherence. Sexual love is supposed to involve both an appreciation of beauty and the satisfaction of appetite. But aren't these elements in tension? Can I appreciate someone's beauty and simultaneously desire them as an object of sexual consumption? Later, after Simón has found work as a stevedore at the docks, unloading sacks of grain for many hours a day, he finds himself involved in a similarly vexing discussion regarding the value of work. To Simón's suggestion that the stevedores adopt the use of a crane, making their work easier and more efficient, his colleagues respond by asking what they should be saving time and energy for. What is the fulfillment that they should be seeking beyond that provided by working together for a socially productive purpose?

The echoes of Plato here are quite overt. Simón seems to be engaged in a series of Socratic dialogues, in which he is obliged to defend his more or less unexamined views against one or another



persistent skeptic. The connection with Plato also extends to the setting in which these dialogues take place. Like the city that Socrates and his companions construct in *The Republic*, Novilla is drawn on a blank slate. Having no memories to draw on, the inhabitants of Novilla are obliged to build their city without reference to history or precedent. Crucially, this does not mean that we can read *The Childhood of Jesus* as a re-staging of *The Republic*, any more than we can read the Jesus trilogy as a whole as a retelling of the New Testament. While Coetzee clearly invites such comparisons, he also frustrates them. As Mulhall puts it, he maintains a ‘precisely skewed misalignment’ between the Jesus trilogy and the texts that it evokes (110).

The action of the trilogy’s second volume, *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), centers around a new objective—that of providing David with an education. This is challenging on a practical level, as the family navigates a series of unfamiliar administrative landscapes. But Simón and Inés face an even deeper challenge in David’s stubborn and often baffling resistance to learning. This resistance proves strongest in two areas. Where basic numeracy is concerned, David is unwilling to think of numbers as members of an ordered sequence. Thus, for David, the number 7 is a unique object that demands to be known as such. It is not simply the successor of 6 and the predecessor of 8. Where reading is concerned, David’s attitudes are no less perverse. Rather than an open-ended skill that can be applied to any piece of writing whatsoever, David understands reading as a matter of engaging with a single book—a battered children’s edition of *Don Quixote*. What’s more, he seems unable to grasp the status of *Don Quixote*, treating it as a ‘veritable history’ rather than a work of imagination.

According to Mulhall, David embodies a trope from the later Wittgenstein, that of the ‘deviant pupil,’ meaning the pupil who declines to follow well-trodden pedagogical paths towards the received understanding of a given topic (22-3). This in turn places his teachers in the challenging position of having to justify the received understanding, a task that often ends in a frustrated exclamation of ‘that’s just the way it is!’ As Mulhall notes, one of the lessons of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* is that explanations cannot proceed indefinitely (27). Eventually, the learner simply needs to accept certain ground truths in order to move forward.

Unfortunately for his adoptive parents, things are not as simple as a single deviant pupil. Several of the teachers enlisted in David’s education prove to be just as deviant as David himself. One of them, Señor Robles, insists that David needs to understand what numbers ‘really are’ before he can move on to counting. Seeming to channel Frege, he then proceeds to explain that a number is the name of a property shared by certain sets of objects in the world. Later, at the Academy of Dance, an arts-centered school, David is inducted into a far more esoteric doctrine. According to the School’s headmaster, Señor Arroyo, it is possible to gain access to the ‘realm of the numbers themselves’ through dancing. Thus, the pupils at the school receive instruction in the dance of the four, the dance of the seven, and so on.

The events of the third volume, *The Death of Jesus* (2019), begin five years after those of the first. Although David remains quite idiosyncratic, he has grown into a healthy, well-adjusted ten-year-old boy. This condition of normalcy soon crumbles, however, as David is afflicted with a mysterious illness and dies after a relatively short period of hospitalization. As its title suggests, this event is in many ways the narrative centerpiece of the novel. But there is also a sense in which it is

oddly de-centered. For one thing, it is not actually depicted. It happens ‘offstage’ (115). What’s more, David’s death produces surprisingly little impact in the world of the novel. Although in his life, David managed to inspire a considerable following—a group of children and adults who were intensely interested in his invented stories of Don Quixote’s continuing adventures and who maintained a reverent vigil during his time in the hospital—this following shows no signs of enduring beyond his death. Unlike Jesus Christ, in other words, David inspires little posthumous loyalty.

What should we make of the Jesus trilogy, at the same time Coetzee’s longest and most enigmatic work of fiction? According to Mulhall, the key that unlocks the Jesus trilogy is the concept of translation, understood in the broadest sense as an act of mapping something from one context into another. We can see this concept at work in various places throughout the trilogy: in the book’s premise, which involves the idea of translation from one life to another (12); in the invocation of Jesus, which suggests that we are reading a translation of the Christian narrative (13); and in the presence of Spanish throughout the book, which suggests that the events depicted have been translated from that language into English. According to Mulhall, the concept of translation also allows us to decipher what is surely the most puzzling aspect of the Jesus trilogy, its young protagonist, David. David’s story, Mulhall thinks, amounts to an attempt to translate an essentially ‘religious impulse’ into a context in which that impulse cannot find meaningful expression, that is, into the entirely secular world in which the novel unfolds (109). This helps to make sense of David’s relationship to reading and mathematics. In the absence of an alternative outlet, David invests both mundane activities with strange cosmic significance (109-110). This also helps to explain the curious non-event of David’s death. Since David did not truly fit within the world of the novel in the first place, his death does not produce a gap in that world. As Mulhall puts it, ‘his becoming absent absents itself’ (115).

For Mulhall, the idea of translation also becomes a way of thinking about Coetzee’s own situation as an author. Mulhall’s argument here is slightly hard to track, but seems to come down to the idea that the contemporary artist, like David, lacks a means of communicating ideas and intuitions. The vehicles through which they might have done so, the novel, the painting, etc., have come to look like so many bags of tricks—sets of strategies for generating absorption that are conspicuously visible as strategies. This allows us to explain the formal peculiarities of the Jesus trilogy, its erratically drawn characters, its abrupt, unmotivated plot developments, and its unstable narrative conceit. Since the novelist can no longer aspire to ‘totality, coherence, and frictionless synthesis’ (76), what Coetzee offers instead is an imaginative world that totters just at the brink of collapse. Instead of attempting to recover the lost power of his art form, in other words, Coetzee finds ways to dramatize its fractured state. It is a testament to his skill as an author that the disorienting fictional world that results still produces considerable dramatic and aesthetic interest.

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