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MODERNIST AESTHETICS AND EXISTENTIALIST THOUGHT IN J.M. COETZEE'S *THE CHILDHOOD OF JESUS*

Abstract: J.M. Coetzee's art is deeply rooted in European literary tradition and reflects the complicated relationships between two twentieth-century European avant-garde movements – modernism and postmodernism. This chapter aims to explore Coetzee's involvement with modernism in his novel *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), an elusive allegorical narrative, peopled by displaced characters and set in an indeterminate location, strongly evocative of disconcerting Kafkaesque and Beckettian spaces. In this novel, Coetzee employs a distinctly modernist aesthetics of minimalism to deal with such themes as dread, boredom, alienation, the absurd, freedom and commitment. Moreover, Coetzee's novel represents a continuation of modernist impulses to draw on existentialist thought in an attempt to grasp the human condition in specific historical circumstances. It is proposed in this chapter to read Coetzee's novel as an existential fable enacting the fundamental sense of disorientation and bewilderment that is associated with the postmodern condition and that is akin to the pervasive feeling of anxiety defined by Heidegger's term of *Geworfenheit* and expressed in Lukács's conception of "transcendental homelessness".

Key words: J.M. Coetzee, modernism, existentialism, philosophical novel, allegory

1. Introduction

The first decade of the twenty-first century was marked by the movement away from postmodernism as a dominant literary and aesthetic mode. In their overview of the literary scene in the 2000s, Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble and Leigh Wilson point out that as postmodern experiments in fiction lost their novelty and postmodernism became embedded in mainstream culture, novelists and cultural critics started to examine "the end, or indeed, ends of postmodernism."¹ According to Bentley, Hubble and Wilson, one of the most important factors that stimulated the desire to move beyond postmodernism, while recognizing its continuing importance, was the growing awareness of limits to postmodernism in a philosophical sense. As is well known, postmodernism is characterized by a radical skepticism towards all systems that claim totalizing narratives; however, many writers in the 2000s began to think beyond that limit. Some critics

1 Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble and Leigh Wilson, "Introduction: Fiction of the 2000s: Political Contexts, Seeing the Contemporary, and the End(s) of Postmodernism," in *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble and Leigh Wilson (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 14.

of postmodernism such as Fredric Jameson or bell hooks, see postmodernism not as a radical disruption of totalizing narratives but the aesthetic practice that is complicit with late capitalism and neo-imperialistic practices as pursued by Western nations. Consequently, the embracing of postmodernism in the academies and in popular culture can be regarded as “a component of cultural imperialism that exports ethical relativism to marginalized groups, making it difficult to ground an oppositional politics in any set of agreed ideologies such as class struggle, feminism or postcolonialism.”²

The wish to interrogate the legacies of postmodernism has intensified the theoretical debate concerning the relation between postmodernism and modernism. Thus, Michael D’Arcy and Mathias Nilges reject the traditional dichotomy of postmodernism versus modernism because, in their opinion, it constricts a historical development to the choice between two linear, chronological positions. Instead of confining modernism to a specific historical or geographic location, they emphasize the pervasiveness and contemporaneity of modernism, which came to signify a twentieth-century tradition of artistic seriousness and value:

[...] contemporary culture is returning to modernism – not only to celebrate it as a canon of aesthetic value or an exemplary tradition of innovation [...], but to consider the contemporary status of problems that have been seen as constitutive of modernism: art’s movement to self-referentiality and critical engagement, and the material conditions of this movement; the role of the aesthetic in preserving the thought of an interval of difference from the colonization of culture by the universality of the market; modernism’s challenge to historicism and inherited models of temporal development.³

The changing attitudes to postmodernist cultural practices are also manifest in the work of contemporary novelists. In the aftermath of postmodernism, there are writers who have turned to modernist or realist techniques as a way of returning to a pre-postmodernist aesthetics.⁴ There are also contemporary writers who demonstrate the complicated relationships between modernism and postmodernism in all of their oeuvre. One of such writers is J.M. Coetzee, whose ambivalent position in relation to these two movements has resulted in literary critics variously describing him as “a self-conscious postmodernist,”⁵ “a late modernist” or “a neo-modernist,”⁶ and as a writer whose works both extend and challenge modernism.⁷

2 *Ibidem.*

3 Michael D’Arcy and Mathias Nilges, “Introduction: The Contemporaneity of Modernism,” in *The Contemporaneity of Modernism: Literature, Media, Culture*, ed. Michael D’Arcy and Mathias Nilges (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 2.

4 Bentley, Hubble and Wilson, “Introduction,” 17.

5 Elizabeth Lowry, “Like a Dog,” review of *Disgrace*, by J.M. Coetzee, *London Review Bookshop*, October 14, 1999, www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n20/lowr01_.html

6 Derek Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 2-6.

7 Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to J.M. Coetzee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 34.

J.M. Coetzee's art is deeply rooted in European modernist tradition: Beckett and Kafka are two of his major influences. As a literary scholar, Coetzee explored their style of writing in a number of critical works; moreover, his doctoral dissertation was devoted to the style of Samuel Beckett's English fiction. Coetzee himself commented on Beckett's impact on his writing style:

He is a clear influence on my prose. Most writers absorb influence through their skin. With me there has also been a more conscious process of absorption. Or shall I say, my linguistic training enabled me to see the effects I was undergoing with a degree of consciousness. The essays I wrote on Beckett's style aren't only academic exercises, in the colloquial sense of that word. They are also attempts to get closer to a secret, a secret of Beckett's that I wanted to make my own. And discard, eventually, as it is with influences.⁸

He praises Beckett as “a master of restraint”⁹ and admires his minimalistic, “spare” prose, which serves as a model for his own technique: “I do believe in sparseness [...]. Spare prose and a spare, thrifty world [...].”¹⁰ Coetzee's description of “the late-Beckettian world” in which characters are “condemned to a purgatorial treadmill on which they rehearse again and again the great themes of Western philosophy”¹¹ can be applied to his own novels as well. Significantly, Joseph Brodsky was quoted as saying that Coetzee was “the only one who had the right to write prose in English after Beckett.”¹² As to Kafka's influence, it is, as Dominic Head observes, “the combined sense of nightmare and inscrutable authority [...] that Coetzee appropriates, and which resonates powerfully in his treatments of oppression and marginalization.”¹³ Obviously, the modernist writers' association with existentialism has found its reflection in Coetzee's work too.

Coetzee's minimalist, self-reflective prose, especially his post-millennial novels, has mounted “the discreet revolution” in fiction¹⁴ by radically re-defining and re-thinking the form of the novel. This chapter focuses on *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), whose elusive content has received controversial responses both from critics and readers. Some of the reviewers described the book as “obscure”¹⁵ and “bloodless,”¹⁶ while oth-

8 J.M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 25.

9 J.M. Coetzee, “Samuel Beckett, the Short Fiction,” in *Inner Workings: Essays 2000 – 2005* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), 169.

10 Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 20.

11 Coetzee, “Samuel Beckett,” 169.

12 Lev Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, trans. Jane Ann Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

13 Head, *Cambridge Introduction*, 33.

14 Neel Mukherjee, Review of *Slow Man*, by J.M. Coetzee, http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article2361536.ece

15 Hedley Twidle, Review of *The Childhood of Jesus*, by J.M. Coetzee, *The Financial Times*, March 8, 2013, <https://www.ft.com/content/151395ea-84e4-11e2-891d-00144feabdco>.

16 Theo Tait, Review of *The Childhood of Jesus*, by J.M. Coetzee, *The Guardian*, February 27, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/feb/27/childhood-of-jesus-jm-coetzee-review>.

ers, on the contrary, hailed it as sophisticated and “thought-provoking.”¹⁷ Indeed, the multilayered and protean allegory of the novel opens up possibilities for different interpretations. For example, the book has been read as a Buddhist utopia representing the Buddhist-style afterlife as Buddhist ideals of non-attachment and serene imperiturbability are frequently invoked. Consequently, one of the main themes of the novel has been identified as that of spiritual discipline: self-denial versus sensualism, which has long been present in Coetzee’s writing.¹⁸ On the other hand, the contributors to the collection of essays entitled *J.M. Coetzee’s The Childhood of Jesus: The Ethics of Ideas and Things* variously approach the novel as a parable of the migrant and refugee experience and the assimilating drive of modern nation states; as the Cartesian fantasy of creating artificial human life; or as a narrative that explores the production of meaning in literature and in mathematical and theological representations. Besides, some authors in the collection focus on the theme of familial bonds and education as well as on the examination of the novel’s rich intertextuality (references to Cervantes, Borges, Plato, Bergson).¹⁹ In particular, Robert B. Pippin explores the novel’s dialogue with apocryphal infancy gospels excluded from the New Testament canon of the Bible, that record the strange nature of Jesus as a child.²⁰

This chapter aims to discuss Coetzee’s novel from the perspective of its involvement with modernism and existentialism. *The Childhood of Jesus*, an ambiguous narrative peopled by displaced characters and set in an unspecified location, is strongly evocative of disconcerting Kafkaesque and Beckettian spaces. In his novel, Coetzee employs a distinctly modernist aesthetics of minimalism to deal with such themes as dread, boredom, alienation, freedom and commitment. Moreover, Coetzee’s novel represents a continuation of modernist impulses to draw on existentialist thought in an attempt to grasp the human condition in specific historical circumstances. It is proposed in this chapter to read Coetzee’s novel as an existential fable enacting the fundamental sense of disorientation and bewilderment that is associated with the postmodern condition and that is akin to the pervasive feeling of anxiety analysed by such existentialist philosophers as Heidegger, Sartre and Lukács.

17 John Harding, Review of *The Childhood of Jesus*, by J.M. Coetzee, *Daily Mail Online*, February 28, 2013, www.dailymail.co.uk/home/books/article-2285956/J-M-Coetzee-THE-CHILDHOOD-OF-JESUS.html.

18 Tait, Review.

19 Anthony Uhlmann and Jennifer Rutherford, ed., *J.M. Coetzee’s The Childhood of Jesus: The Ethics of Ideas and Things* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

20 Robert B. Pippin, “What Does J.M. Coetzee’s Novel, *The Childhood of Jesus*, Have To Do With The Childhood Of Jesus?,” in *J.M. Coetzee’s The Childhood of Jesus: The Ethics of Ideas and Things*, ed. Anthony Uhlmann and Jennifer Rutherford (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 9-32.

2. Modernist poetics and existential allegory in *The Childhood of Jesus*

For his novel Coetzee creates a peculiar, indeterminate setting: it is an unnamed country, presumably somewhere in Latin America, with its own customs and laws. In this country, everyone is migrant from somewhere, a refugee from a past life. They have all come to this place “for the sake of a new life, a new beginning.”²¹ As one of the inhabitants, Elena, explains to the newcomer Simón: “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.”²² The main action of the novel takes place in Novilla, a port city where refugees arrive to start a new life. Before being allowed into Novilla, however, they have to stay at a camp in the desert called Belstar²³ where the newcomers are made to discard all traces of their former lives so that they arrive in their new country “washed clean of the past.”²⁴ They are taught Spanish (the universal language of communication in the country) and their new Hispanic names are issued to them by the authorities. In Novilla, they are provided with modest sustenance and accommodation in uniform housing blocks. Coetzee’s austere modernist aesthetics is especially effective in creating the atmosphere of a drab and vague place:

Some weeks after they first presented themselves at the Centre, a letter arrives from the office of the Ministerio de Reubicación in Novilla informing him that he and his family have been allocated an apartment in the East Village, occupation to be effected no later than noon on the coming Monday.

East Village, familiarly known as the East Blocks, is an estate to the east of the parklands, a cluster of apartment blocks separated by expanses of lawn. [...] The blocks making up the village are of identical pattern, four floors high. On each floor six apartments face upon a square that holds such communal amenities as a children’s playground, a paddle pool, a bicycle rack, and washing lines. East Village is generally held to be more desirable than West Village; they can count themselves lucky to be sent there.²⁵

Although the migrants are treated decently and their basic needs are satisfied, the sense of calm, furthered by Coetzee’s stark prose, is very disturbing; there is a growing

21 J.M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* (London: Harvill Secker, 2013), 79.

22 *Ibidem*, 107.

23 Belstar brings to mind the Australian immigration detention centres and internment camps (such as Baxter Detention Centre or Belsen), mentioned by Coetzee in *Diary of a Bad Year*. Essay 22 of the novel, “On Asylum in Australia,” contains a sharp critique of the immigration policy pursued by John Howard’s Liberal-National Coalition Government of incarcerating unwelcome refugees or asylum seekers in detention centres (where the conditions are, as Coetzee puts it, no better than in Guantanamo Bay) while their applications for legal entry are being processed for long periods. See: J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Vintage Books, 2008/first published 2007), 111-113.

24 Coetzee, *Childhood*, 80.

25 *Ibidem*, 51.

atmosphere of dread. As Simón and his protégé, the boy David, are trying to settle in Novilla, they discover a lot of incompetent bureaucracy while the city itself has certain “labyrinthine or Kafkaesque qualities”:²⁶

Partly because he is tired and disoriented, partly because the map the girl has sketched for him is not clear, partly because there are no signposts, it takes him a long time to find Building C and the office of señora Weiss. The door is closed. He knocks. There is no reply. [...] They make their way back to the Centro de Reubicación. The door is locked. He raps on the glass. There is no sign of life inside. He raps again.²⁷

Like Kafka, Coetzee shows his characters as being caught up in situations and systems that are well beyond their understanding and control. Simón experiences a sense of disorientation and anxiety in the new social and spatial milieu in which he finds himself – the strange society from which he feels alienated, the confusing urban space of Novilla, and the unknown territory of the hinterland, which though “lush and fertile,” has almost no human habitation and whose “emptiness strikes him as desolate rather than peaceful.”²⁸ His efforts to locate his position within this complex new milieu, to gain a concrete sense of place turn out to be futile. The protagonist’s sense of disorientation is highlighted by his unsuccessful attempts to use maps to find his bearings in the new country: maps are either misread or misrepresent space since what is shown in the map does not match what the protagonist sees (“either he has misread the map or the map itself is at fault”²⁹), or the maps are not available at all when most needed (as during the protagonists’ escape from Novilla: “He has no map. He has no idea what lies ahead on the road”³⁰). The characters are stranded in this strange country and they do not know where they are or what their purpose is, or their purpose lacks discernable meaning.

Coetzee’s novel seems to be a fictional embodiment of a situation denoted by Heidegger’s term *Geworfenheit*, which Coetzee himself has used to describe the atmosphere of Beckett’s novels: “being thrown without explanation into an existence governed by obscure rules.”³¹ This idea is also illustrated by a dialogue between David and Simón:

“[...] what are we here for?”

“I don’t know what to say. We are here for the same reason everyone else is. We have been given a chance to live and we have accepted that chance. It is a great thing, to live. It is the greatest thing of all.”³²

²⁶ Keith Miller, “The Saviour Abroad,” review of *The Childhood of Jesus*, by J.M. Coetzee, *Literary Review*, March 2013, <https://literaryreview.co.uk/the-saviour-abroad>.

²⁷ Coetzee, *Childhood*, 4.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, 67.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 68.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 262.

³¹ Coetzee, “Samuel Beckett,” 171.

³² Coetzee, *Childhood*, 17.

Coetzee's abstract, elusive narrative can be read as a postcolonial fable, a contemporary allegory dramatizing the process of uprooting and relocation in the present world with its increasing mobility and immigration. On the other hand, the novel can be interpreted in a broader sense, as an existential parable enacting our experience of being-in-the-world which frequently resembles the experience of being lost. This feeling of disorientation is akin to the pervasive feeling of anxiety expressed in Lukács's conception of "transcendental homelessness" or in Heidegger's *das Nicht-zuhausesein* ("not-being-at-home").³³ In Heidegger's view, the experience of being in the world is occasioned by an intense anxiety (*angst*) and a sense of the uncanny, which is fundamentally a sense of not being "at home" in the world.

3. Simón as an existential individual and a modernist hero

Although the protagonist, Simón, tries to adjust himself to the strange society of Novilla, he feels alienated from its atmosphere. Novilla is a society based on logic, rationality and impersonality while passion, imagination and individuality are suppressed. All is generic and universal in this society, which Joyce Carol Oates describes as a "quasi-socialist state in which conformity, mediocrity and anonymity are both the norm and the highest values."³⁴ Novilla seems to be run along utopian lines. As Hedley Twidle notes, the name Novilla captures the mixture of newness and nowhere that resides in literary utopias from Thomas More onwards. And as in More's commonwealth, we are left uncertain about whether this is a brave new world or else a worryingly centralized and even sinister dictatorship of the people.³⁵

In existentialist terms, Novilla can be described as a society in which "there is no place for the past as repentance or the future as obligation, defining features of the ethical sphere."³⁶ Repentance, obligation and commitment come into play as a result of an exercise of free choice and thus an individuating choice. Novilla's society illustrates the underlying theme of existentialists that "the pull in modern society is away from individualism and toward conformity."³⁷ The inhabitants of Novilla live inauthentic lives; they do not see "any doubleness in the world, any difference between the way things

33 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 233.

34 Joyce Carol Oates, "Saving Grace," review of *The Childhood of Jesus*, by J.M. Coetzee, *New York Times*, August 29, 2013, Sunday Book Review, www.nytimes.com/2013/09/01/books/review/j-m-coetzees-childhood-of-jesus.html.

35 Twidle, Review.

36 Thomas R. Flynn, *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 31.

37 Flynn, *Existentialism*, 24.

seem and the way things are”;³⁸ they do not understand irony and “they have no secret yearnings [...], no hankerings after another kind of life.”³⁹ It seems that only Simón is “the exception, the dissatisfied one, the misfit.”⁴⁰ Simón considers the nameless land “too placid for his taste, too lacking in ups and downs, in drama and tension.”⁴¹ As he confesses to his fellow worker Eugenio:

“Something is missing, Eugenio. I know it should not be so, but it is. The life I have is not enough for me. I wish someone, some saviour, would descend from the skies and wave a magic wand and say, *Behold, read this book and all your questions will be answered. Or, Behold, here is an entirely new life for you.*”⁴²

In a series of Platonic dialogues he conducts with various characters (Elena, Alvaro, Eugenio and other stevedores) he poses fundamental existential questions about the nature of humanity and the meaning of life. Thus, he addresses the problem of asceticism versus passion and ultimately what it means to be human: to desire “storms of passion”⁴³ or refusing desires: “If we had no appetites, no desires, how would we live?”⁴⁴ Questions concerning the meaning of life are central to Simón’s musings: “what are we here for?”, “what is it all for, in the end?”, Is there “a larger picture,” “a loftier design”? In other words, he wonders if there are external, transcendent, or eternal grounds for justifying one’s own existence or for finding some essence or meaning apart from the world (for example, God):

“Still, what is it all for, in the end? The ships bring the grain from across the seas and we haul it off the ships and someone else mills it and bakes it, and eventually it gets eaten and turned into – what shall I call it? – waste, and the waste flows back into the sea. [...] How does it fit into a larger picture? I don’t see any larger picture, any loftier design. It’s just consumption.”⁴⁵

According to existentialist thought, in the anxiety that causes one to feel disoriented or lost, one must have the freedom to create one’s own meaningful existence. Sartre, while acknowledging the real anguish that accompanies a person’s sense of being lost, demands that individuals develop projects by which to give our lives meaning, or to re-establish our sense of place and purpose in the world. Likewise, Kierkegaard in his *Journals*, mused: “the thing is to find a truth which is true *for me*, to find the idea for which I can live and die,” that is, a personal conviction for which one is willing to risk one’s life.⁴⁶

38 Coetzee, *Childhood*, 64.

39 *Ibidem*.

40 *Ibidem*.

41 *Ibidem*.

42 *Ibidem*, 239. Original emphasis.

43 *Ibidem*, 32.

44 *Ibidem*, 29.

45 *Ibidem*, 108.

46 Quoted in Flynn, *Existentialism*, 3. Original emphasis.

According to Flynn, for existentialists, truth is not an “objectively” correct path to choose. Existential truth is more a matter of decision than discovery. The decisive move is not purely intellectual but a matter of will and feeling (it leads to fundamental turnings in a person’s life).⁴⁷ Sartre calls it initial or “fundamental Choice” that gives unity and direction to a person’s life. As Sartre famously stated, “man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.”⁴⁸

Simón, very much in the existentialist vein, examines the freedom and authenticity of his personal life and the life of the society in which he has found himself. He realizes that life does not follow a continuous flow of logical argument and that one often has to risk moving beyond the limits of the rational in order to live life to the fullest. He is searching for “a truth to die for,” establishing a sense of place and purpose in the world via a project through which it is possible to overcome “transcendental homelessness” or “not-at-home-ness,” by making sense of the world.

The response of Coetzee’s protagonist to the defamiliarized and uncanny space in which he lives is to set himself the task of helping David, the lonely boy he meets on the way to Novilla, through his project of searching for David’s mother. Simón believes that David “is no ordinary boy.”⁴⁹ The boy is upsetting the social order, allowing a space for fantasy, refusing to conform. After reading *Don Quixote*, the boy announces that he is going to be “a lifesaver.”⁵⁰ Asked by his teacher, senior León, to show that he can write, David writes, “I am the truth.”⁵¹ In his project, Simón establishes the boy as a kind of El Niño, the Child Christ: “And what if we, who so 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?”⁵² Simón can be compared to Joseph whereas Inés is the counterpart of the Virgin Mary. When Simón sees Inés for the first time, “it had burst on him like a star”⁵³ that the woman is the boy’s mother: “She has the boy. He came to her as a gift, out of the blue, a gift pure and simple. A gift like that ought to be enough for any woman.”⁵⁴ The three of them enact the holy family, forming a small pool of familial warmth and safety in an indifferent world. Towards the end of the book, David, Simón and Inés flee the authorities to save David, in an evocation of the Flight into Egypt. They pick up a hitchhiker who

47 Flynn, *Existentialism*, 11.

48 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 29.

49 Coetzee, *Childhood*, 124.

50 *Ibidem*, 172.

51 *Ibidem*, 225.

52 *Ibidem*, 250.

53 *Ibidem*, 77.

54 *Ibidem*, 189.

becomes the first disciple, and there is a sense that disciples are being gathered, and that the protagonists' existential journey is beginning.

Coetzee's novel can be seen as part of the rich literary tradition of Christ-related stories.⁵⁵ The diversity of responses to the figure of Jesus led Theodore Ziolkowski to define Christ-related narratives as a stand-alone genre.⁵⁶ Coetzee's twenty-first-century transformation of the biblical narrative is the author's response to the changing ideological and spiritual consciousness of his time. The protagonist of the novel, Simón, traumatized by displacement and the immigration experience, embodies an individual human's pursuit of meaning in a postcolonial and postindustrial age amidst the social and economic pressures for superficiality and conformism. Re-inventing the Nativity story and producing his own secular version of the tradition of venerating the Child Jesus, Coetzee's protagonist becomes an existential hero who is able to overcome the state of "transcendental homelessness" and create meaning in a world abandoned by God. As Joyce Carol Oates comments,

[...] it seemed likely that *The Childhood of Jesus* is a Kafka-inspired parable of the quest for meaning itself: for reasons to endure when (secular) life lacks passion and purpose. Only an arbitrary mission – searching for the mother of an orphaned child, believing in a savior who descends from the sky – can give focus to a life otherwise undefined and random.⁵⁷

From the literary perspective, Simón is a modernist hero, since modernist sensibility requires meaning and wholeness in contrast to postmodernism, which accepts fragmentation.⁵⁸ Like Vladimir and Estragon, Simón hankers for some deeper or "transcendent" reality. However, unlike Beckett's characters, who are waiting for some external force – Godot – to enter their life and transform it,⁵⁹ Coetzee's protagonist creates his own personal "metanarrative." Therefore, Simón represents a modernist attitude to the openness and uncertainty of the postmodern condition since he longs for a return to the lost fullness of purpose of the past.

55 Some of twentieth-century rewritings of the New Testament include George Moore's *The Brook Kerith* (1916), Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (1928-1940, not published until 1966-7), Sholem Asch's *The Nazarene* (1939), Robert Graves's *King Jesus* (1946), Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1960), Anthony Burgess's *Man of Nazareth* (1979), José Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991), Gore Vidal's *Live from Golgotha* (1992), Norman Mailer's *The Gospel According to the Son* (1997), Jim Crace's *Quarantine* (1997), to mention only a few best-known names.

56 Theodore Ziolkowski, *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

57 Oates, "Saving Grace."

58 Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 1995), 83-84.

59 Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 92.

4. Imaginative literature as a response to "transcendental homelessness"

A considerable part of the novel is devoted to Simón and David's reading and discussion of the story of Don Quixote, which becomes an important subtext of Coetzee's narrative. Cervantes' *Don Quixote* occupies a special place in the history of European literature. Georg Lukács saw the book as a turning point in the movement from the age of the epic to the age of the novel. In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács argues that the modern world, in which the novel is the representative literary form, is typified by fragmentation and open-endedness. Lukács described the novel as "the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God."⁶⁰ In Lukács's view the novel is a response to a condition of "transcendental homelessness,"⁶¹ in which the individual or collective subject must now create a cosmos in order to make his own existence intelligible and meaningful. Thus, a fictional story is a writer's existential project, a way of giving form to the world. Literature and imagination can help us preserve our humanity and individuality, against commercialism and conformism.

According to Leo Robson, because Coetzee's book focuses on Cervantes's novel, it is tempting to see Novilla not as a reconfigured version of the industrial or postindustrial city but as an outpost of the republic of letters with its own customs, laws and logic – Novel-land.⁶² Therefore, the self-referential aspect of the novel serves to express Coetzee's concern about the role of imaginative literature in contemporary society. Earlier, Sartre developed the concept of "committed literature," with its basic premise that writing is a form of action for which responsibility must be taken, but that responsibility carries over into the content and not just the form of what is communicated.⁶³ In a similar vein, pondering on the role of fantasy and imagination, Coetzee emphasizes the necessity for the author to take an ethical responsibility for his work – this idea runs through many of his novels. As Dominic Head puts it, "Coetzee expresses something about the limits of fiction and of the writer's authority, and yet also demonstrates the enduring power or value of fiction."⁶⁴

60 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. by Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971/first published 1920), 88.

61 *Ibidem*, 121.

62 Leo Robson, "Across the Boundary," review of *The Childhood of Jesus*, by J.M. Coetzee and *Harvest*, by Jim Crace, *New Statesman*, March 7, 2013, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2013/03/reviewed-childhood-jesus-j-m-coetzee-and-harvest-jim-crace>.

63 Flynn, *Existentialism*, 12-13.

64 Head, *Cambridge Introduction*, 85.

5. Conclusion

Coetzee's novel *The Childhood of Jesus* demonstrates the persistence of modernism in contemporary literary discourse and the effectiveness of the austere modernist aesthetics as a means to represent the individual's search for meaning in a globalized and standardized world. As a philosophical allegory *The Childhood of Jesus* confirms the continued relevance of existential philosophy today, emphasizing the idea that the world in which we are situated is not of our own making, but our very existence requires us to shape this world. Coetzee's protagonist, Simón, emerges as an existential individuality, who accepts responsibility for his actions and makes a choice which involves risk, commitment and individuation. Moreover, imaginative literature is seen as a way of overcoming existential *angst* and making sense of the world.

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